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# The Criterion of Quality: A Paratextual Analysis of the Criterion Collection in the Age of Digital Distribution

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The Criterion of Quality  
A Paratextual Analysis of the Criterion Collection in the Age of Digital Distribution

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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A handwritten signature in brown ink, appearing to read "Nam Lee", written above a horizontal line.

Nam Lee, Ph.D.

A handwritten signature in brown ink, appearing to read "Robert T. Buerkle", written above a horizontal line.

Robert T. Buerkle, Ph.D.

April 2014

The Criterion of Quality  
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by

Jonathan Charles Hyatt

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Also E, F, and S.

## ABSTRACT

### The Criterion of Quality

#### A Paratextual Analysis of the Criterion Collection in the Age of Digital Distribution

By Jonathan Charles Hyatt

In 2011, home-video distribution company, The Criterion Collection, teamed up with streaming-content provider Hulu, extending their business model to include online streaming to subscribers through Hulu Plus. With the rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) media distribution services into the at-home market, the question that Criterion now faces is: how will the company survive as the market shifts away from Criterion's established values? And, more pertinently, how does Criterion, by rebranding their image to compete in the streaming market, hope to attract new users without alienating their established fan base or sacrificing their brand identity? This thesis examines the Criterion Collection's brand identity, business model, and history, focusing on its packaging and promotion, distribution channels (physical and streaming), and the formation of a self-established cinephile community through their website, *Criterion.com*. In my examination of Criterion's attempts to branch out into new markets and adapt to alternative modes of media consumption, I argue that Criterion is taking strides to attract new audiences and build a tightly knit online fan community around their brand.

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## **Introduction**

Since 1984, New York-based video distribution company, The Criterion Collection, has remained at the forefront of the at-home viewing market, committing itself to providing “important classic and contemporary films” to consumers in premier, fully-loaded packages. With over 700 films now listed in the expanded Criterion library, the collection of titles under the company’s umbrella encompasses a prolific array of classic and contemporary films from around the world. However, the Criterion brand stands for more than simply a vessel for great films: it represents a promise for the “Criterion Experience.” As suggested by Criterion president, Peter Becker, the question posed in the development of any Criterion package is: “What would enable you to see more in the film than you saw the first time?” (Parker 72). From LaserDisc to DVD to Blu-Ray, the Criterion brand has come to be associated with the highest quality in packaged digital distribution for at-home viewing, pioneering and perfecting many special features now considered commonplace, such as commentary tracks, original cover art, production notes/stills, and re-mastered visuals and sound. The company's high standards for quality have gained international recognition, and drawn a loyal fan base of cinephiles who have come to regard Criterion DVD/Blu-Ray packages as more than simple consumer products, but as collectors’ items, educational tools, and objects of cult obsession.

With the steady decline of the DVD format over the past decade, and the rise of Video-on-Demand (VOD) services and Over-The-Top (OTT) content available through media distribution outlets such as Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon Prime into the at-home market, the Criterion brand is being forced to come to terms with a rapidly changing media environment, as physical formats are slowly abandoned for the immaterial. To face this



challenge head-on, Criterion teamed up with streaming-content provider Hulu (at the time owned by NBC Universal, News Corp., and the Walt Disney company) in February of 2011, extending their business model to include online streaming to subscribers through Hulu Plus, providing a large number of their films to a wider home audience. However, most of the films they have made available are film-only versions, and due to this, Criterion appears to be abandoning what has come to define them—top-of-the-line visuals, special features, and package collectability—in order to cater to On-Demand consumers, promoting mass-accessibility over quality and experience. Is Criterion facing an identity crisis due to changes in consumer interests and media formats? Does the Criterion Collection’s alignment with OTT content provider Hulu jeopardize the brand identity upon which the company has come to be associated? And does it pose the risk of alienating its established fan base?

Criterion’s decision to align themselves with OTT provider Hulu is evidence of the company making intentional strides to adapt to the changing tide of consumer culture, and embracing the online cinephile community at large. Just as Criterion slowly acclimated to changes in format from Laserdisc to DVD to Blu-ray, Criterion's involvement with Hulu is not suggestive of a kind of "identity crisis," but rather part of an intentional business decision aimed at advertising their primary product line—physical, collectable packages—to the growing Millennial (and Post-Millennial) audience. Utilizing the streaming environment provided by Hulu, along with their website, *Criterion.com*, the Criterion Collection is utilizing advances in web-based technology to promote and extend their brand outreach, and gain a larger and stronger fan base, successfully re-creating the high-quality “Criterion Experience” to fit changes in format and consumer interest.

This thesis examines the Criterion Collection's attempt to redefine itself in the online streaming environment, in terms of brand equity and consumer expectations, by focusing on the paratexts presented through packaging and promotion, distribution channels (physical versus streaming), and the fan-based participatory culture (on the Criterion website, blogs, and through fan art) which surrounds the Criterion brand image in an increasingly web-based/streaming environment. As such, this work can be viewed as both a brand analysis and a paratextual study, as the two are inherently inseparable from one another. In order to demonstrate the ways in which Criterion is developing a stronger, participatory, online community through the company's website and streaming on the Hulu platform, the focus of this thesis is on Criterion's paratextual aspects rather than the films they distribute.

### **The Cult of Criterion**

Over the past 30 years, the Criterion Collection has been established as the premier distributor of packaged films for the home theatre experience, not only by cinephiles or DVD collectors, but by the general public. With bi-yearly sales on *Amazon.com*, the Criterion Collection films—typically premium-priced packages—are sold at half price, and an entire section of book and DVD retailer, Barnes & Noble, is set aside exclusively for Criterion products. Much like major brands in other markets, such as Nike, BMW, or Bose, the Criterion Collection brand name has garnered a level of brand equity wherein consumers come to believe and trust that a product with a well-known name is of greater value than those with less renown. This has come to define the company's reputation and

the films released under the brand name, as an indicator of what the public should consider a classic and/or important film.

With this, Criterion has also fostered a cult-like following of supporters and fans. Similar to how avid and devoted buyers of Apple products or Nike shoes often come to align themselves with these brands, so too do devotees of the Criterion brand. Criterion has garnered a reputation amongst ardent cinephiles which gives the films released under the company's name immediate "cult" appeal, with the company becoming a Mecca for intense fan adoration.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Criterion brand name has become so indistinguishable from the image of the modern cinephile that the company has become synonymous with the interests of the global cinephile community. Further, the supplement-rich packages released by Criterion allow the possibility for each title to become imbued with cult appreciation and appropriation, opening the doorway for consumers to drill deep into each title to discover and attain new reading strategies for each text. And, while the in-store or online price for Criterion titles is already sold at a premium (costing on average thirty to forty dollars per DVD/Blu-ray release), out-of-print titles garner even greater value and monetary worth within Criterion's fan community, viewing each release as fleeting treasures worth collecting and revering.

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<sup>1</sup> A discussion of Cult is beyond the scope of this thesis. I am using the term "Cult" and "Film Cult" here in two ways: 1. As a metaphor for the pseudo-religious fervor / interest of Criterion Fans in the construction of a Criterion "Film Cult." To quote Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik in the introduction to *The Cult Film Reader*, "Film Cults [...] hover between negative and positive cults, sometimes referring to strategies of exhibition (celebrating fan behavior), and sometimes to strategies of exclusion (guarding niche tastes). They also oscillate between perspectives of collectivity and individuality, sometimes referring to the quantities of people that make up a cult following, and sometimes to the qualities of the kind of worship that characterize it" (17). 2. In reference to Criterion film texts as Cult objects with Cult value, in order to describe "Cult" film texts as, using the definition provided by Henry Jenkins (paraphrasing the work of Umberto Eco), "films that provide opportunities for fan exploration and mastery" (Jenkins 323).

If we consider the Criterion Collection a producer of valuable objects within a fan economy, what aspects can we determine that identify the cult status of a given “Criterion” text? Unlike the “ultra-violent” or “foreign” cinema that has become (fairly or unfairly) associated with distribution label Tartan: Asia Extreme, Criterion Collection film texts themselves cannot be canonized into any particular grouping or logic pattern. For every *La Belle et la Bête* (Cocteau 1946) there’s a *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Gilliam 1998); for every *Sans Soleil* (Marker 1986) there’s a *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Anderson 2009); for every *12 Angry Men* (Lumet 1957) there’s a *Fiend Without a Face* (Crabtree 1958). Titles seem to transcend eras, styles, genres, and even taste, becoming an ever-growing amalgamation of films both classic and cult, spanning from the turn-of-the-century to just-released in theatres.

The Criterion Collection has come to be seen both domestically and internationally for its ability to legitimize a film as “important” or a “great film.” When director Lee Chang-dong’s *Secret Sunshine* (2007) became the first South Korean film adopted under the Criterion label in 2011, for example, an article written in the Korean Herald Business titled *Lee Chang-don’s Secret Sunshine--Selected by Criterion--Recognized as a masterpiece in the U.S.* [sic] read: “Despite their high price, Criterion Collection is the most coveted item for film manias [sic]. And being selected as one of their titles means that the film has earned the recognition as a classic or a masterpiece” (Hyung-seok). Conversely, when the company released Michael Bay’s mega-budget blockbuster *Armageddon* (1998) on DVD in 1999, debate arose as to whether the company was inappropriately raising the status of the film, suggesting it should be considered on-par with other established “masterpieces” within the collection. Peter Becker, in response to

public outcry, suggested that Bay's film possessed value and merit as an indicator of what films were popular in our culture during the mid-90s. "While it may be that there are some who feel it's uncomfortable to see *'Armageddon'* on the shelf next to *'Amarcord,'*" writes Becker, "they're both great discs for different reasons. I think there's an honorable place for *'Armageddon'* in our collection. It may help us bring in a whole new audience. If we climb too proudly to the top of the ivory tower where we screen only Fellini and Bergman, Godard and Truffaut, Kurosawa, Tarkovski and Pabst, we will find ourselves very soon preaching only to the choir" ("Criterion's Beker Defends 'Armageddon'"). Notably, Becker openly admits here that a factor in Criterion's decision-making is ultimately financially driven, with interest in reaching out to and discovering new audiences.

Discussing Criterion's legitimizing effect in his essay "What is the Criterion? The Criterion Collection as an Archive of Film as Culture," James Kendrick suggests that the Criterion Collection, by choosing to combine a mix of seemingly disparate film texts under the same label, acts less as an archive of high-brow or high-art films and rather as an "archive of film as culture." As Kendrick writes:

By removing restraints of politics, taste, geography, and time, the Criterion Collection opens an archival space that positions "film as culture," rather than just "the film as art." Criterion has developed a legitimizing power by first embracing previously accepted films that were widely agreed upon (as much as that is possible). And then extending their legitimacy by association to other films that might not seem as readily identifiable as being important. However, it is crucial to note that the Criterion Collection legitimizing disreputable texts, not in the sense that it redefines them as great aesthetic achievements, but rather by positioning them as important cultural artifacts that are necessary for understanding the functioning of cinema in broader historical contexts. (138)

As with Becker's defense of *Armageddon*, by accepting both high and low brow films within their oeuvre, Criterion is able to focus more on films which possess cultural value rather than merits within high-art tastes and sensibilities. In doing so, Criterion is able to

focus less on adhering to expectations of high-brow sensibilities, and more time on producing top-tier restorations and packages, allowing a fan following to be formed around their packaged product, rather than the films themselves. The question, then, that supports interest in the Criterion label is not so much “Is it the best film?” but rather, “Is it the best version of it?”

For the cinephile interested in extending their home-video archive, ensuring the best possible transfer and restoration is another major concern, and for those collectors within the cult of Criterion, top-of-the-line transfers and restorations is a major factor supporting the top-tier quality of the Criterion package. Thus, there is little surprise that in-depth details on the audio/visual transfer are prominently outlined on packaging for each individual Criterion release, from the scanners and machines used to perform a restoration, to the condition of film stocks used in the transfer.

Collectability has played a crucial role in establishing Criterion products as objects of cult interest as well. Each Criterion release is stamped with a spine number, for example, and each release is produced in limited quantities. One needs only look on eBay to note the fanaticism that Criterion fans possess over out-of-print titles. A mint condition copy of the Criterion release of Rob Reiner’s 1984 film *This is Spinal Tap*, for example, can be found routinely costing around 100 dollars, while the 2008 Blu-ray release of director Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949), found in “factory sealed” or “perfect” condition, can be found with price tags well over 400 dollars. This concept of fan economy—in which fans of a particular product or brand determine its value within the community based on perceived desirability—combined with collectors interested in possessing the complete Criterion library, only aids in the company’s cult reputation.

The establishment of an international cinephile community is a relatively recent trend, due in no small part to technological advances for the at-home theatrical experience. Prior to 1970s, while it was not impossible for the resolute collector to come across or access a film print of one of their favorite films, the vast majority of audiences and cinemagoers had little ability to re-watch or re-examine a film after its initial theatrical run. This all changed once the VHS cassette tape became widely available in the late-1970s, allowing for the rise of the video-store cinephile. Not only were a wide array of films—which ran the gamut between Hollywood “classics” to B-picture schlock—now available to re-watch whenever fans wanted, they could also now pause, fast-forward, and rewind a film with ease, providing the viewer control of the presentation of the text and the grounds for enhanced film analysis.

While the VHS tape provided fans the economic ability to own, re-watch, and re-analyze a film text, the LaserDisc (LD) format took things one step further, providing the growing community of at-home cinephiles the ability to move forward or backwards frame-by-frame. However, as suitable as the LaserDisc format was for the cinephile community, it was ultimately unsuitable for mass audience appeal. Large in size, cumbersome in use, and highly expensive, the LD format—despite the enhanced visual and audio quality—ultimately failed to grasp public favor over the VHS format and was all but abandoned commercially by the late 1990s with the rise of the DVD. Still, the technology that had gone into the LD had paved the way for the DVD and Blu-ray disc formats, and, more importantly, had provided the grounds for the supplemental experience that has come to define the formats. As Thomas Doherty writes: “Once happy to marvel at a big screen, then to watch on television, next to control the means of fast forward and

freeze frame via videotape, cinephiles now demand more than mere flickering imagery” (78), and the LD or DVD formats offer cinephiles a means of storage for features that append the film itself. These supplemental materials (making-of documentaries, production photos, trailers, or commentary tracks) enhance and expand a viewer’s understanding of the primary text. These paratextual components, as provided in Criterion packages, greatly enhance the individual’s experience with a film text, instilling a sense of artistic aura to a Criterion DVD/Blu-ray package. As film scholar Jonathan Gray writes on DVD Special Editions: “In an impressive act of alchemy, numerous paratexts create an author figure, surround the text with aura, and insist on its uniqueness, value, and authenticity in an otherwise standardized media environment, thereby taking a heretofore industrial entity and rendering it a work of art” (82). In the case of Criterion box sets, these paratextual elements extend far beyond the primary film text, which for many fans epitomizes the Criterion experience. A Criterion package, then, becomes more than simply another DVD—it is a work of art.

The term “paratext” was conceived by French literary theorist, Gerard Genette, in his textual study *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. In his examination of novels and literature, Genette uses the word “paratext” to describe all those aspects of a novel that were not the text itself: the book’s cover, the font choice, the prefaces and afterwords, or the photo of the author on the back cover. Further, paratexts also consisted of promotions for, and reviews of, a literary work; of intertextuality about the novel in other sources, or information within the text which alluded to other sources. For Genette, all of these aspects influenced how a reader approached, experienced, interpreted and digested a text, and these aspects ultimately provided added meaning to the text itself.



Re-focusing on the a filmic or televisual program as the given “text,” Jonathan Gray, uses the term paratext to describe the tangible (posters, trailers, ads, reviews, etc.) and the intangible (personal experiences, word of mouth, etc.) aspects that surround a text. They act as introductions, enhancements, and synergistic support for the central text, and fill in the gaps between where a text, the industry, and the audience connect. However, Gray does not consider paratexts to be simply peripherals: paratexts, writes Gray, “are not simply add-on’s, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them [...] a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text” (6).

For the Criterion Collection, the paratextual experience—or Criterion Experience—found in a Criterion package at times eclipses the film texts themselves. As Criterion President, Peter Becker, notes during his interview with historian, Gary Crowdus: “We’ve seen our mission from the get-go as that of providing a film archive for the home viewer. If you had this film on your shelf, what would enhance your understanding of it and encourage repeat viewing? What would enable you to see [more in the film than you saw the first time you looked at it?” (Crowdus). What we can distinguish is that Criterion represents more than a list of highly regarded movies ready to be streamed digitally at a moment’s notice: its value is in providing a participatory experience for fans to expand their knowledge, uncover a filmmaker’s intentions, and provide multiple interpretations to film texts.

For the company, interests in the paratextual prospects now found in Criterion packages can be routed back to the company’s beginnings. In 1983, Criterion founder Bob Stein, a computer CD-ROM pioneer in Santa Monica, California, became intrigued by the

multi-layered possibilities of the LaserDisc format. Along with his wife, Aileen, the Steins formed The Criterion Collection with the help of co-founder, Roger Smith—a former senior vice president at Warner Brothers—who was enticed by the entrepreneurial prospects of the emergent LaserDisc technology. As Mark and Deborah Parker write, the “Steins had the ideas, and Smith the means and business connections to finance the making of the company’s first two titles” (47): *King Kong* (Cooper 1933) and *Citizen Kane* (Wells 1941). Realizing the LD format allowed a film to be viewed with multiple audio tracks, Criterion hired film historian, Ronald Haver, to provide a feature-length lecture on the history and production of *King Kong* that could run concurrently with the actions on screen. The purchaser was provided not only with *King Kong*’s restored visual and audio, but with the option to become further educated on the film text itself—initiating the “film-school in a box” concept that drives the Criterion brand to this day. As Mark and Deborah Parker write, “Although the best possible transfer of a film was part of Criterion’s mission from the onset, the content (here the film) was arguably secondary to Stein’s goal of exploring a technology with interactive possibilities” (48).

Despite breaking new ground in the realm of supplementary material for the releases of the *King Kong* and *Citizen Kane* LaserDiscs, and the added industry clout from Roger Smith, Criterion failed to find financial backers to support the extensive costs to produce new titles, and Smith ultimately abandoned his partnership with the Steins. It was at this time Criterion’s relationship with Janus Films began. In 1985, the Steins struck a deal with the owners of Janus—Saul Turell, his son Jonathan (Criterion’s current CEO), and William Becker (father of current Criterion president, Peter Becker). Forming The Voyager Company, the partnership initiated a dual focus to continue pioneering the

advancement of CD-ROM technology and, through the Criterion Collection division, the LaserDisc format (Parker 49).

For its part, Janus Films has offered the extensive Janus film library, providing ample textual support for the company's interest in re-releasing classic film texts in digitized, restored, and remastered versions, available readily for public consumption. Founded in 1956 by Massachusetts theatre owners Bryant Haliday and Cyrus Harvey, Jr. as a distributor of foreign films to the Art-house circuit, Janus Films was eventually purchased by the Turell and Becker families in 1965, who "aggressively acquired films, and began supplying titles to universities and schools" (Shae), as well as Independent film houses across the country. Criterion CEO, Jonathan Turell, discussing Janus's history prior to their involvement with Criterion, notes:

Janus, over the years, licensed the movies and acquired the rights to the movies, but we never really cared about the medium. It was always the movies themselves. Janus really started out as a non-theatrical distributor, bringing the films to college campuses on 16mm, and then to the theatrical business a little bit, and then television licensing. We did a huge deal with PBS, actually, in the 70s to bring these movies to television in the United States for the first time, without commercials and with subtitles. (Turell and Becker)

Because of this, Janus Films' legacy has come to be seen as largely responsible for introducing American audiences to many famed international filmmakers, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, François Truffaut, and Yasujirō Ozu. As NPR's Andrea Shea noted in 2006, the company's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Janus Films has come to be seen as "the pre-eminent distributor of classic foreign films in the United States. Fifty years ago, its founders took a chance on distributing a little-known director named Federico Fellini and ushered in the golden age of the art-house cinema" (Shae). Due to their partnership, Janus Films provides the Criterion Collection its

established clout within the American cinephile community, backing technological advances Criterion has pursued in regards to format and changes in at-home exhibition.

Just as Criterion was able to foresee and adapt to the rise of DVD culture at the expense of the LD format upon which they had forged their name, Criterion is now actively pursuing the streaming Video-on-Demand (VOD) environment as media consumption begins steadily shifting online. As Becker writes on his blog, it has always been Criterion interest to actively pursue "the latest technology to present [the films] in editions that will deepen viewers' appreciation and understanding of the art of cinema" (Becker). While providing content on the most modern and popular forms of technology is a means of maintaining Criterion's mission statement of providing the market with otherwise overlooked film texts, it is also a means of ensuring the brands survival in a rapidly changing media culture. According to a study by the New York Times, roughly 34% of Millennials (aged 18 – 34) watch the majority of their media content by streaming it online (Newsy). While the streaming environment presents an obvious challenge to the Criterion brand (profits from physical delivery is considerably higher than those provided via streaming (Ebert)), the company has taken steps to actively embrace the format, utilizing the Hulu Plus platform to maximize brand awareness both within and outside the online cinephile community. As Becker writes in an article titled "A Long Time Coming" on *Criterion.com*:

Criterion has always been a company driven by its mission, not by any particular medium, and while we still see our core business as producing the world's best DVD and Blu-ray versions of the world's best films, this new venture with Hulu represents a huge expansion of our reach. Not only will Hulu users have access to the largest digital archive of Criterion movies for the first time, Hulu Plus subscribers will now be able to stream our films (and yes, before long, many of our supplements too!) on a wide array of devices, including iPhones, iPads, PlayStations, and Internet-connected television sets.

## Criterion in a Streaming World

As Lucas Hildbrand writes in his article, “The Art of Distribution: Video on Demand”: “As a platform and revenue stream, VOD emerged as a millennial strategy to navigate the convergence of film, cable, and the Internet” (26). Before joining forces with Hulu in 2011, the Criterion Collection had shown interest in partnering with an existing Video-on-Demand service as early as 2008, when Criterion began streaming many of their titles (non-exclusively) through subscription-based online cinephile hub, *MUBI.com* (formerly *TheAutuers.com*) at a price of \$3 per stream (Tyron). However, this relationship was short-lived. While *MUBI.com* allowed Criterion the ability to provide their product-line online, MUBI was ultimately not advantageous as a means of bringing Criterion’s brand image of art-house and “important” cinema to the wider general audience outside the online cinephile community. First, the costs were too high; at \$3 per movie “rental,” users would be weary to approach or takes risks on the kinds of art-house or foreign content provided in many Criterion titles, and worse, viewers did not “own” the content on the Cloud, as they could through competitors like iTunes. Second, *MUBI.com* (or *TheAutuers.com*) was simply not a household name. The website, designed by entrepreneur Efe Cakarel, was constructed as a resource database, online magazine, and social-networking site geared specifically for the online cinephile as “an online movie theater where you watch, discover, and discuss auteur cinema” (Tinch). While the site was popular within the online cinephile community, providing Criterion a presence for the first time on gaming consoles (via the PlayStation Network (PSN) MUBI application) and allowing Criterion to experiment with the kinds of “online film festivals” that it would continue to produce once they shifted to Hulu Plus, the wider general online community was largely

unaware of *MUBI.com*'s existence, preventing Criterion from enticing new audiences to their product line. Given many Criterion titles were still available for streaming on Netflix at the time, it is little wonder that Criterion did not find a suitable home on the MUBI platform. However, the lasting impact of Criterion's involvement with *MUBI.com* can still be found today, with the construction of the *Criterion.com* website to cater to the online cinephile community and promote the ideal that *Criterion.com* should be seen as not only a hub for cinephiles, but for fans of the Criterion product line.

When Criterion granted exclusive streaming rights to Hulu in February of 2011, debate arose surrounding the decision to abandon Netflix entirely, given it is still far and away the most popular streaming service available. While the legitimacy of Hulu has since increased exponentially, and is now recognized as a streaming service on par with its primary competitors, at the time Criterion struck a deal with Hulu the service was not widely accepted by fans as a proper home for the company. Fans criticized the service's comparatively poor streaming quality: for example, as Criterion fan Moviegeekjn [John Nesbit] complained on his blog, "The Criterion Collection has blundered with their Hulu streaming deal. While championing quality DVD releases with the finest video/audio quality and high standards for supplemental material, The Criterion Collection has abandoned their Mercedes standard and selected a Yugo to host its streaming yard sale" (Moviegeekjn). Today, streaming capability via Hulu services still maxes out at 720p, or approximately DVD visual quality, and provides only basic stereo sound capabilities. Comparatively, Hulu's primary competitors, Amazon Instant Video and Netflix, provide up to 1080p streaming with 3D capability (for those with equipped televisions) and Dolby

Digital Plus 5.1 encoding on the majority of content, in addition to 7.1 encoding on select content (Flacy).

Given these comparative shortcomings, why would Criterion—which heralds its interest in providing the highest visual and audible quality in its products as a brand standard—choose to align itself with the Hulu Plus platform? Two explanations can be derived to explain the benefits in granting exclusive rights to Hulu: First, the Hulu platform promotes and enhances the Criterion brand image within the platform better than was provided by Netflix or other services at the time. Criterion, informing their followers of the Hulu merger via their Facebook page in 2011 write:

It has never been easy to find Criterion movies on Netflix — "Criterion" is not even a searchable term there. Compare that with Hulu's willingness to develop a whole area of their site around us, brand the films associated with us, and develop the capability to show many of our supplements alongside our films. The energetic, independent, creative team at Hulu was willing to build their business around us in a way that just wasn't in the cards anywhere else. ("Criterion and Hulu FAQ")

Second, Criterion faced (and still faces) significantly less competition from other film content internally on the Hulu platform. To this day, Hulu remains primarily focused on providing users access to streaming content from television or original programming, while providing significantly less film content than its primary competitors, Netflix or Amazon Prime. Chuck Tyron writes in his book, *On-Demand Culture*, that “one of the more significant aspects of [the Criterion] deal is the degree to which it alters Hulu’s place in the digital distribution ecosystem, changing it from a service primarily defined by its television holdings to one that is at least somewhat focused on fostering (and profiting from) internet cinephilia” (33). Thus, not only does Hulu provide a venue for Criterion to promote their brand identity *en masse* in one centralized location, it also ensures Criterion films stand out

as the primary filmic output provided to Hulu users on the service. In return, the Criterion Collection provides Hulu promotional value for attracting new audiences to the Hulu service, with Criterion widely promoting the exclusivity and availability of its content on multiple devices through Over-The-Top (OTT) Content provider Hulu Plus, and Hulu promoting new Criterion titles on its home page.

Over-The-Top (OTT) is a term used to describe video or audio content provided via broadband or public internet services, without a Multiple System Operator (MSO), such as Pay-TV cable/internet companies like Time Warner Cable or Charter Communications, involved in either the method of distribution or control of the content itself. For services such as Netflix, a Subscription Video-on-Demand or SVoD service, access to content requires the user to subscribe to the service for a fee. Due to the subscription cost, subscribers are not required to view advertisements before viewing or accessing materials. On the other hand, services such as Hulu act as an Advertising Video-on-Demand service, or AVoD, wherein viewers are subjected to advertisement before and/or during their viewing experience, and even those users who choose to subscribe to Hulu Plus' pay service will encounter ads before or during presentations. As far as Criterion content available on the Hulu OTT platform, for \$7.99 a month, subscribers to Hulu Plus are granted full access to 800+ films (and supplementary features, where provided) in the "Criterion" section of the Hulu platform, and only encounter advertising prior to a feature's playback. For non-Hulu Plus subscribers, many (though certainly not all) of the features are available to stream, but with intermittent (approximately every 15 minutes) advertising breaks.



For Criterion, the benefits of OTT platforms is their wide accessibility across multiple devices. According to a 2014 survey titled “Marketing to Millennials” conducted by from online media tracker, comScore, Millennials (and post-Millennial generations) have become increasingly accustomed to consuming media via their laptops, tablets, and cell phone, with almost 1 in 5 Millennials consuming media *only* on their smartphones. However, debate abounds as to the artistic legitimacy of the film viewing experience provided on mobile devices in the OTT environment. As a notable example, director David Lynch, whose films are available streaming on the Hulu Plus service, provided a negative commentary on the format during an interview for the DVD Special Features on his film *Inland Empire* (2006): “If you're playing the movie on a telephone, you will never in a trillion years experience the film. You'll think you have experienced it, but you'll be cheated. It's such a sadness that you think you've seen a film on your fucking telephone. Get real” (Gilbert). It is a legitimate question to ask whether Criterion is forsaking the interests of their established brand identity—ensuring each film is “presented uncut, in its original aspect ratio, as its maker intended it to be seen” (“About Criterion”)—in order to turn a profit. As James Kendrick writes: “Beginning in 1986 with their eighth laserdisc release, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Criterion released all of their ‘Scope and matted widescreen films as they were intended to be seen in terms of framing and composition (their first seven releases were of films shot in the Academy aspect ratio of 1.33:1, which closely responds with the aspect ratio of the TV screen)” (129). But what aspect ratio works best with the iPhone screen? The prospect of watching Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985) on a 3x5 inch display may seem sacrilegious to the devoted cinephile and long-time Criterion fan, and appears, at least ostensibly, contradictory to the

visual experience Criterion established within their mission statement. However, there is little doubt that media consumption through handheld and mobile devices is on the rise, and Criterion must engage this market head-on in order to stay relevant and engage new audiences.

Thus, Criterion's interest in the transition to the streaming environment can logically be seen as driven as much by necessity as by advertising opportunity. While the Blu-ray disc has maintained a grasp on the consumer market, the DVD format is slowly declining in public interest. In a 2014 column for Yahoo Tech titled "What Products Will Technology Have Killed in 5 Years," technology writer and TV science presenter David Pogue suggested the DVD may be extinct by the end of the decade. "If I had to predict near-term death sentences," writes Pogue, "CDs and DVDs might qualify (10 years). Anything that spins, really, is probably slated for extinction sooner or later. Hard drives are still much, much cheaper than the flash memory used as "hard drives" in tablets and phones (and some laptops), but it's only a matter of time." However, the home-entertainment industry as a whole is changing rapidly in an attempt to adapt to consumer demand for Video-on-Demand services. As *Wall Street Journal* writer, Ben Fritz, suggests in his 2014 article, "Sales of Digital Movies Surge," many companies are stripping down interests in physical formats, such as DVD's or Blu-ray, due to increased profit margins from online distribution. "The total U.S. home-entertainment market remains well below its peak of more than \$22 billion in 2004," writes Fritz, "a drop that has squeezed the profits of every studio and led to widespread cost cutting."

With consumer interest increasingly aimed towards cross-platform OTT content provided by SVoD and AVoD services like Netflix and Hulu, film studios have in turn

increased their focus on advanced digital rentals or purchases of just-out-of-theatre content through iTunes, *Amazon.com*, or wired cable television and Broadband On-Demand services. In doing so, studios now provide consumers with for-purchase film releases weeks before DVD/Blu-ray availability (and sometimes releasing simultaneously with the theatrical release) in order to maximize sales profits. “Online movie sales are studios' highest-profit-margin transaction, along with Blu-ray discs, which is why they have aggressively pushed the format,” Fritz writes. “Although some people are now buying movies online who might otherwise have bought a DVD or Blu-ray disc, studio executives said the biggest change is people who would have rented a movie but now, unwilling to wait, are buying it instead.”

But cost cutting is occurring not only at the hands of the industry, but by consumers as well. Due to the wide array of streaming media available via OTT content, consumers (particularly Millennial consumers) are increasingly shying away from physical disc based formats, and cutting-the-cord on wired cable television services all together. According to a 2014 study by the Digital Entertainment Group, sales of physical media such as DVD or Blu-ray discs declined 8% in 2013, while consumer participation in subscription based streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu Plus rose 32%, reaching \$3.16 billion in revenue (Fritz). And, as Charesse James, writer for online Magazine *Slate*, notes: “Today, we live in a television culture characterized by cord-cutters and time-shifters. [...] It’s everything an overstressed yet media-hungry millennial could desire. And it’s not just millennials: I know more and more adults and parents who’ve cut the cable cord and acquired similar practices.” For Criterion, the rise in subscribers and legitimacy for Hulu Plus means a wider general viewership for the Criterion brand name. Given the generally elitist and high-brow

image Criterion has garnered, availability of Criterion titles on Hulu at a lower cost enables a wider viewer set to interact with Criterion texts, increasing the likelihood of new fandom for the brand from otherwise non-cinephile sections of the online community. Further, because the Hulu platform allows Criterion to be viewed on nearly any consumer device, providing a wider range of consumption possibilities for new consumers to ingest on their preferred platform(s), Criterion is provided financial returns (even if not equal to those from physical sales) for their films without being restricted by playback limitations of physical formats.

Clearly, the paratextual rich experience found in the DVD/Blu-ray packages is notably missing in the Hulu environment. While some special features, such as making-of documentaries, trailers, or deleted scenes, are available on Hulu for a small percentage of the available films, the vast majority of the titles included on the Hulu platform are missing the paratextual experience all together. In fact, describing all 800+ films available on Hulu as “Criterion” films is a bit of a misnomer, as a large portion of the films are simply digital scans of films within the Janus archives, which never actually received a full “Criterion” restoration. However, what Criterion’s involvement with Hulu demonstrates is less an attempt at repackaging of their primary product for the streaming environment, and more of a kind of public outreach and advertising opportunity, benefiting both the company and fans alike in two distinct ways:

First, Criterion is able to release a larger number of films than would be possible otherwise, allowing for the release of films on Hulu that otherwise may be deemed too risky financially to receive the full “Criterion” treatment. The costs involved in producing and distributing Criterion DVD’s and Blu-ray packages are extensive, and consideration

must be taken by Criterion to ensure that films being released will provide adequate financial returns. Distribution on Hulu, on the other hand, is considerably lower risk. As Janus Films' spokesperson, Sarah Finklea, noted during an interview with *Adweek.com* concerning the increase of "movie only" versions of Janus films available on Hulu: "Once we discovered that we were able to get good-quality masters but Criterion could only put out so many discs a month, it was a perfect opportunity to make sure the films could be seen" (Theilman). Thus, the pre-existing community of Criterion fans and online cinephiles benefit by being provided a considerably larger viewing opportunity for films that otherwise may never be seen, and Criterion benefits from possible financial returns for titles that may otherwise be simply sitting on the Janus shelves. As Becker notes: "There's a lot of things that are on our Hulu channel that are completely unavailable anywhere, you know, anywhere to be seen, certainly in the States. [...] So that's one of the big, big advantages that we have going into the digital world is that we can actually make a lot more films available than have ever been available before" (Turell and Becker).

Second, Hulu acts as a form of advertisement and source for entryway paratexts to the primary Criterion product. According to Jonathan Gray, entryway paratexts aid "in preparing us for the text and offering us our first encounters with it [...] hold[ing] considerable power to direct our initial interpretations, telling us what to expect and establishing genres, gender, style, attitude and characterization" (79). Promotional material—such as posters, commercials, or trailers—typically attempt not only to establish meaning for a text to a perspective audience, but to convince them to watch "this film or television show" over another title, providing coded information that influences perspective viewer expectations. The selling of DVD and Blu-ray "special editions," like

those produced by Criterion, act in a similar manner, promoting themselves as the more authentic, expanded, un-cut, or authorized text than viewers had access to in theatres, or, as a “special” or “collector’s” edition superior to other (usually less expensive) releases of the same title. While the Criterion brand name itself acts as an entryway paratext to the Hulu platform, what I would like to suggest is that Criterion’s presence on Hulu Plus is in-and-of itself an extended entryway paratextual experience, inviting consumers to “pre-view” Criterion film texts prior to purchasing at lower cost or risk. Because the “Criterion Experience” is more about the paratext-rich package rather than the film texts themselves, the titles available on Hulu can then be seen as entryway paratexts that may convince consumers to purchase the primary physical packages, in addition to being a means of accessing a greater breadth of Criterion titles quickly and easily. Thus, Criterion can be seen as fostering a wholly new and different paratextual experience for their brand by utilizing the online format to its full extent.

### **Criterion and the Online Community**

Expanding upon their presence on Hulu, Criterion has made strides to promote its brand image across multiple online outlets, successfully integrating their existing paratextual-rich packages with online paratextual communities. Criterion’s Facebook ([www.facebook.com/CriterionCollection](http://www.facebook.com/CriterionCollection)) and Twitter ([www.twitter.com/Criterion](http://www.twitter.com/Criterion)) accounts, for example, provide an open means of social outreach to fans in addition to acting as a promotional tool for the company. While Criterion uses these social networking sites to promote online sales of Criterion packages occurring across the internet from retailers such as *Amazon.com* and *Barnsandnoble.com*, the company also provides links to

interviews with Criterion staff and online documentaries about Criterion, as well as blog entries, fan art, and fan-sites owned and operated by Criterion fans. Criterion has used these spaces to communicate and embrace fan enthusiasm for the company, providing an ad hoc open forum for interested fans. On Facebook, Criterion makes daily updates intended to interact directly with fans, releasing production stills or rare movie posters for their films, and posing simple questions (i.e. “What are you watching this weekend?”, “What film are you most thankful for?”, or “What one film simply must be seen on the big screen?”) to begin an open forum with their followers. Clearly, Criterion is reaching out to online communities through social networking sites in order to embrace the fan base that they have already established, as well ensure as a means of spreading their brand image to new audiences.

However, the primary space for Criterion’s online presence is their official website, *Criterion.com*, acting as a site of convergence for all of Criterion’s online and offline activities. Media scholar, Henry Jenkins, explains that this “convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (3). Acting as a combination of marketing tool, document library, and cinephile hub, *Criterion.com* bridges the gap between the paratext-rich “Criterion Experience” provided within Criterion packages and the highly accessible (but relatively paratext-free) Hulu environment, providing a realm where Criterion’s online fan community is able to seek out and interact with an ever-expanding paratextual environment. All available Criterion titles can be purchased directly through the website, and if a user is a Hulu Plus subscriber, the user can use *Criterion.com* to search through the entire collection of films available via Hulu, and link to the feature directly

from the Criterion website. Each film is provided a separate page wherein users can access clips and trailers for each title as well as details, including aspect ratios and spine numbers. Further, users can browse the cast and crew for each film, and link to a listing of other Criterion titles that each filmmaker has worked on. But *Criterion.com* also acts as a paratextual extension of the archival experience available within Criterion packages, allowing *Criterion.com* to become a site for an ever-expanding archive of information, photos, clips, and essays on films within the collection (including those titles now out of print). While the majority of the specific documentaries and peripheral materials available on physical releases are absent from the website (likely for promotional and advertising reasons), Criterion editors are constantly updating the pages for Criterion titles with new essays and articles about each film. In doing so, Criterion offers an every growing paratextual archive for cinephiles to dig into outside the primary Criterion packages, providing an outlet for the paratextual experience lacking from the streaming format available through Hulu Plus.

Additionally, and most importantly in terms of Criterion's attempts to embrace the online cinephile community, Criterion utilizes *Criterion.com* to promote what Henry Jenkins describes as "participatory culture," a culture "in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content" (331). Not only does Criterion use *Criterion.com* as a means of promoting their brand image across multiple media platforms by providing users the ability to purchase films or browse films available on Hulu, but acts as a forum where fans are encouraged to engage with and create material that is then promoted throughout the company's website.



The primary arena for convergence is “My Criterion,” *Criterion.com*’s members section. Through “My Criterion,” Criterion promotes the idea that the site should be seen as a space for fans and online cinephiles to converge and communicate, with its promotional tag reading: “My Criterion is a free way to build your virtual collection, make lists, and share them. It’s your new home on Criterion.com” (“My Criterion”). “My Criterion” provides a means of free, direct involvement for subscribers to the Criterion website. When a new user signs up to become a “My Criterion” member, their contributions are promoted heavily throughout the site, providing an arena for Criterion’s fan culture to forge a collective intelligence that extends far beyond the paratexts provided by the company. As Jenkins writes on collective intelligence:

Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives. Because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume... None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. (3-4)

While *Criterion.com* is an environment controlled heavily by the company, “My Criterion” users are capable of directly interacting with one another by creating new user-generated paratexts, and influencing each other’s perspective on the proper reading of a particular Criterion text.

In the “My Lists” section, fans are encouraged to create and share categorized film lists from titles available within the Criterion Collection, establishing their own personalized film canons that can be shared with the Criterion fan community at large. Topics range from the educational, such as contributor Criterophile’s “Akira Kurosawa’s Favorite Criterion,” based on a published interview with the director; the politically-

motivated or humor-driven, like Aleksí's "Films That Reveal How The 1% Function" or David MacDonald's "SEE! Monsters! Aliens! Demons! TERROR!"; and the very personal, as in contributor Adrien's "Ten Films I Love" ("My Criterion"). These fan-created canons act as user-generated paratexts, suggesting reading and grouping strategies through which other users can navigate and discover new titles within the Criterion Collection. Criterion, for their part, utilizes these lists to further promote their films, as well as provide weight to each user's opinion within the site. When a user adds a film to a List, the List is promoted on the page for that particular title alongside pieces of archival information, interviews, documentaries, and articles provided directly by Criterion.

Another section, titled "My Collection" acts as a trophy room for titles the user has purchased, becoming a visual archive of the films that the user possesses. For the user, the "My Collection" section provides a visual inventory of their films, with the web design for each user's "Collection" page played out like a shelf at home, a visual representation of the user's at-home library. But the "My Collection" page serves a larger purpose for users: an ability to showcase (and show off) who or whom is the true Criterion fan. Because members have the choice to publish their "My Collections" listing, fans with larger collections can use their "My Collection" list to indicate to the *Criterion.com* community that they should be considered "true" Criterion fans. Of course, there is no restriction or ability to prove that a user actually owns all of the films listed in their collection (and so, it is possible, if not likely, that many lists are inflated), however the "My Collection" section provides a suitable function for fans to place themselves within the Criterion fan community.

## Conclusion

As Criterion advances into an increasingly online realm of promotion and distribution, many longtime Criterion fans remain skeptical of Criterion's transition to the streaming environment. Major studios, like Sony, have promoted online storage services such as UltraViolet—an on-the-cloud digital-rights library for those who purchase a DVD or Blu-Ray that allows purchasers to view their films on multiple devices—however the service has not yet caught on with the public at large. Still, for Criterion fans a common fear appears to be that physical ownership of a Criterion title is not only a source of pride, but a means of preservation, ensuring the owners' personal archive remains under their own control. As *MUBI.com*'s Film Forum contributor, Enygma, noted during a talkback on the subject of "Criterion in the Cloud":

I am still a DVD guy myself, as I like all the special features and the ability to share. If I really like something, I want a hard copy, as I never trust digital storing sites or just storing a film digitally on a computer. [...] the formats for distribution are changing so fast, that who knows what the future will soon bring? But, I'll always have my *2001* DVD special edition to watch any time I want, no matter what happens! ("Criterion in the Cloud")

While films provided on Hulu should not be seen as a replacement for the paratext rich physical packages provided by Criterion, when coupled with the paratext rich environment found on *Criterion.com*, fear of a shift to online and all-streaming availability is not unwarranted. When Criterion began providing DVDs alongside their LaserDisc releases in the late 90s, Criterion made a point of informing their user base that they were not going to abandon the LD format outright (Crowdus 47). Similarly, when the Blu-ray format began to gain popularity in the 2000s, Criterion made strides to inform users that the DVD format was not going to be abandoned in promotion of Blu-ray. In both cases, Criterion eventually either ceased production of the older format, as with LD, or ceased releasing the older

format in conjunction with the newer format (Criterion DVD's are now only purchasable within Dual-Disc Blu-ray packages).

Thus, for longstanding Criterion fans, positive aspects provided by the online streaming format come bridled with some hesitance: while Hulu does provide a suitable outlet to consume Criterion products en masse, there is some fear of it (or digital, "on-the-cloud" versions) becoming Criterion's primary direction as consumer interest in the digital over the tangible continues to increase. As *MUBI.com* contributor Fin writes:

For me, part of the appeal of collecting Criterion's has got to be the supplements and booklets that come with the film. *Two-Lane Blacktop* comes with a paperback copy of the script. *Vampyr*, as well, just to name a couple of examples. I really like having these materials on my bookshelves and am not interested in the eBook equivalent that might come with a new business model. Essentially, I want the physical media AND a digital copy. ("Criterion in the Cloud")

Fortunately for fans, it is unlikely that Criterion's physical discs and packages are likely to leave the shelves anytime soon. However, there is additional concern that Criterion's growing interest and emphasis on the streaming environment may have untold reverberations on the number of films the company is capable of restoring moving forward. As film critic, Roger Ebert, noted in a 2012 article, "Movies Don't Stream Themselves," OTT digital streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu account for considerably lower revenue than rental and direct sales, and while the streaming environment may provide the income to keep the rights to many of Criterion's back-log of titles, it may not be enough to provide the enormous costs required to perform full restorations on the seemingly-lost or damaged films that Criterion supports and releases (Ebert).

What the future will hold for Criterion is an unknown, however it is clear that Criterion is making strides to entice and embrace the ever-growing online cinephile

community. In their attempts, the company openly acknowledges the challenges involved in attempting to bring Criterion into the online streaming environment, while remaining understandably (and predictably, given their history) vague and elusive about their vision for the future. During a 2013 interview at Il Cinema Ritrovato, an annual international film restoration festival held in Bologna, Italy, Becker discussed the challenges Criterion faces venturing ever forward into the immaterial online world:

When we're streaming we're just getting the movie. How do we connect those things together? How are we going to be able to create a coherent experience, a coherent, you know, really, cinephile's exploration of a film in an online world? And I feel quite certain that that's going to be the challenge that we are faced with, and we will meet, over the coming years. But we have much less control over it than we did, you know, going into DVD or Blu-ray because when we got started on DVD and Blu-ray there was a spec, you know, there was design, and we had no control over that and we cursed it's limitations – but we could live with it. We knew what it was and we knew how we could use it. It's worth remembering that when we recorded the first commentary tracks on laserdisc, there were only two analog tracks, so you could only record a commentary on a Mono film, because the left channel would be playing the soundtrack, and if you wanted to hear the commentary track, you would just have it come out of the right speaker. And, you know, so, I think there are going to be work-arounds like that in the beginning and I think ultimately we are going to be able to make some, some very interesting ways of presenting things, whether it's on tablets or on televisions. (Turell and Becker)

No matter the ultimate result of Criterion's attempts through Hulu Plus, for now the winner is the global cinephile community, being granted unrivaled access to an array of films otherwise unavailable in any medium, and backed by an ever-growing archive of paratextual documents through *Criterion.com*. Utilizing both of these online formats, Criterion has found a way to branch out, entice, and embrace a larger community of prospective consumers. In effect, by focusing on providing a larger selection of rare films rather than a smaller sub-sect of niche films at a premium cost, Criterion has legitimized their mission statement of “putting the films first.” As Becker notes: “We've been very active in just showing, trying to build a community around these films. So whether it's

through Facebook and Twitter or through our own website [...] we want to be a place for cinephiles to come together and to share a set of values about cinema. And, so I think that's kind of at the core of what we've been focused on, that and the next generation. ” (Turell and Becker). Opening the availability of their titles to a wider audience at a significantly decreased cost, and inviting involvement from the online cinephile community, Criterion is actively pursuing new audiences while simultaneously opening the doorway for participation from their core demographic—rebranding their image without sacrificing their brand identity or alienating their fan base. As the industry and consumers increasingly embrace digital and streaming formats over the physical, it is clear that The Criterion Collection is taking strides to stake their claim as the premier go-to source for cinephiles in the vast online landscape.

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