Fly Away Home and the Hollywood Conservationist Movie

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In Hollywood outdoor adventure movies from the silent era to the present day, wild animals have tended to be represented as obstacles to the progressive conquest of non-human nature by heroic, white European or American males, and have accordingly been demonised as excessively savage and monstrous. Whales and octopuses were threatening objects necessitating the use of violence in The Sea Beast (1926) and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1954), while in African safari movies, wild animals were either trophies to be won, as in The Snows of Kilimanjaro (1952), or obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of wealth or power, as in Trader Horn (1931) and King Solomon's Mines (1950). Similar constructions of wild animals have continued even into the era of modern conservationism, as the monstrous great white sharks in Jaws (1975), silverback gorillas in Congo (1995) and lions in The Ghost and the Darkness (1996) demonstrate.

Nevertheless, counter tendencies to such theriophobic narratives may be discerned even in the silent era of Hollywood cinema. In The Grub Stake: A Tale of the Klondike (1923), heroine Faith Diggs (Nell Shipman) enters a valley in which "Dame Nature", as the inter-title puts it, is shown to be not dreadful, as she expects, but Arcadian. Wolves, brown bears, beavers, raccoons are all friendly towards her, and reflect the benevolence of the Creator. The Christian humanitarian attitude shown to wild animals in The Grub Stake was reminiscent of contemporary nature writers such as William J. Long and Ernest Thompson Seton. Long in particular constructed wild animals according to the values of bourgeois gentility and Protestant piety, while reassuringly playing down the Darwinian struggle for existence by emphasising instead animals as altruistic, co-operative and spiritual beings. In this way, nature writers extended animal welfare concerns for the first time in American society to wild, as opposed to domesticated, animals. As Ralph Lutts comments, those writers dismissed by Theodore Roosevelt as "nature fakers" represented wild animals as "furry or feathery little people", so that readers might care for them "as they would care for other people, or at least as they would for their own pets" (Lutts, 1990: 220).

In popular American cinema, a similar humanitarianism informed the anti-hunting stance of Walt Disney's Bambi (1942), as well as the representation of wild animals in the same studio's True Life Adventures documentary series which ran from 1948 to 1960 (Mitman, 1999: 109-131). Moreover, in the late 1950s, a small number of Hollywood movies drew attention to the destructive effects of hunting, and questioned thereby the heroic status of the white hunter, so central to American notions of white masculine identity. The Last Hunt (1956), set in 1883, lamented the extermination of the North American buffalo, while Wind Across the Everglades (1958) was concerned with illegal plume hunting in the Everglades at the turn of the nineteenth century. Set in contemporary Africa, The Roots of Heaven (1958) advocated an end to the trade in both ivory and captive zoo animals. The interest in conservationism shown in these films came at a time when popular attitudes to wild animals were becoming more benevolent, due to the growing scarcity of wild animals as a result of habitat destruction and over-hunting, and to the popularisation of scientific ecology, which
was rehabilitating wild animals from varmints to be eradicated to valued members of a natural world refigured as an organic, inter-dependent whole (Dunlap, 1988). Anti-hunting narratives of this kind, which dramatise conservationism as a heroic struggle against hunters and poachers perceived as the main threat to wild animals, have continued to form the basis of Hollywood movies with a conservationist agenda. In more recent years, the Disney-produced *Never Cry Wolf* (1983) added to Farley Mowat's memoir (Mowat: 1963) a new narrative in which Arctic timber wolves are threatened by poachers, while *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) celebrated Dian Fossey's direct action policies to counter the poaching of mountain gorillas in Rwanda.

In addition to the anti-hunting story, the 1960s saw concern for wild animals in Hollywood cinema extend to the issue of animal captivity. A new narrative therefore emerged in which an individual animal is released from captivity back into the wild. Whereas *Flipper* (1963) saw Sandy (Luke Halpin) keep the benign dolphin as a pet at the end of the story, the Anglo-American production *Born Free* (1966) culminated in the release from captivity of the lioness Elsa, a decision made by Joy and George Adamson (Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers) out of respect for the right to freedom of the individual animal. This animal release narrative was subsequently replayed in a North American context in two Disney productions, *Charlie, The Lonesome Cougar* (1967) and *The Bears and I* (1972), which also celebrated the right to freedom of wild animals.

These two narrative tropes - the conflict between conservationists or nature lovers and hunters, and the animal release narrative - have not been mutually exclusive, and are combined in Disney's *Cheetah* (1989), for example. Yet movies with a conservationist theme remained a small, fragmented part of overall Hollywood production until the early 1990s, when a discernible cycle of movies with wild animal conservation as a central thematic concern was established. The recognition by the Hollywood studios of the potential popularity of conservationist sentiments, particularly when framed by the familiar conventions of the children-with-animals (or "creature-feature") genre, may itself be placed within the wider context of the steady growth in the size of the environmental "issue public" throughout the 1980s, in response to the neglect of environmental issues by the successive Republican administrations of that decade (Tatalovich and Wattier, 1999: 174-180). In commercial terms, the box office success of *Free Willy* (1993), which climaxes with the release of a captive orca back into the sea, led to studio investment in a cycle of similar films, including *Andre* (1994), *Born To Be Wild* (1995), *The Amazing Panda Adventure* (1995), *Flipper* (1996), and the subject of this paper, *Fly Away Home* (1996). Like their popular antecedent *Born Free*, these movies bring together a conservationist discourse with three older discourses within which wild animals have been represented in popular culture: the children's fable, the circus, and popular science. The following pages will explore the way in which these discourses combine in *Fly Away Home*, in order to present a brief typology of the Hollywood conservationist movie.

*Fly Away Home* is based on the autobiography of conservationist, pilot and sculptor William Lishman, who in 1994 trained a flock of non-migratory Canada geese to follow his microlight aircraft from his home in Ontario to their traditional wintering grounds in Virginia. The film adaptation makes significant changes to Lishman's book, radically transforming its implications for environmentalist politics. The real Operation Migration project used Canada geese as an experiment to determine if the same techniques could be used to help conserve birds on the endangered species list, such as trumpeter swans and whooping cranes (Lishman, 1995: 70; Defenders of Wildlife, 1998: 1-2). Although *Fly Away Home* mentions this
potential application of the technique in the scene with the ornithologist in North Carolina, the main focus for the movie's conservationist concerns is on the welfare of the Canada geese themselves. The fact that the geese eggs in the real-life Operation Migration were collected and hatched especially for the experiment, rather than saved from a developer's bulldozer, as in the movie, indicates the changes made by the film-makers to create emotional sympathy for the geese themselves, as victims in need of salvation (Lishman, 1995: 53). The film also invents a plot in which thirteen-year-old Amy Alden (Anna Paquin) loses her mother in a car crash in New Zealand, and comes to Canada to live with her estranged father, Tom (Jeff Daniels). Typical of the recent cycle of Hollywood conservationist movies, then, the narrative centres on the rehabilitation of a displaced and unhappy child through healing contact with wild animals, in this case in the form of a flock of similarly motherless geese. United by their shared concern for the welfare of the geese, father and daughter are reconciled at the end of the film. *Fly Away Home* is thus a dual narrative of mutual salvation: the benevolence of the wild animal saves the child from emotional distress, while the child saves the wild animal from captivity. The first of these narratives, the saving of the child by non-human nature, is the basis for that aspect of the movie that functions as a moral fable. Before discussing the implications of the second narrative for environmentalist politics, this aspect of *Fly Away Home* will be examined in more detail.

**Fly Away Home as Children's Fable**

The fact that Hollywood conservationist movies often involve child protagonists reflects both the target audience for the "family adventure" movie, and the wider symbolic significance of childhood in American popular culture. In romantic thought, the child is a "primitive" in privileged contact with an unfallen nature, morally innocent and open to new experience. The conservationist movie is therefore a narrative of redemption, in which the guilt of an urban, industrial society is alleviated through contact with a benign nature, whose mediator is the child. Both children and nature, as Karin Lesnik-Oberstein notes, are constructed in romanticism as "the essential, the unconstructed, spontaneous and uncontaminated" (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1998: 210).

Nevertheless, the Hollywood conservationist movie recognises childhood as a traumatic episode, in which the innocence of the child is tested by family relationships that are fractured and painful. Amy's bereavement and dislocation in *Fly Away Home* is paralleled by the plight of Jesse (Jason James Richter) in *Free Willy*, who has been abandoned by his biological mother, and has a fraught relationship with his new foster parents, and by Sandy (Elijah Wood) in the re-make of *Flipper* (1996), who is sent by his recently divorced mother to stay with his uncle Porter (Paul Hogan) in Florida. Indeed, the extent to which Hollywood children's movies in the 1990s have acknowledged a breakdown of the white, middle-class ideal of the nuclear family may be seen when the remake of *Flipper* is compared with its 1963 prototype, in which Sandy's mother is a devoted and contented housewife, repeatedly shown cooking and cleaning the house. In the conservationist movie of the 1990s, in contrast, the nuclear family is in crisis, and the child protagonist is in need of the therapy offered by the benevolent wild animal with whom he or she comes into contact. The conservationist narrative thus also becomes a coming-of-age narrative, in which the alienated child learns the restraints, obligations and responsibilities of adulthood. In particular, the responsibility the child takes in releasing the wild animal from captivity is a sign of his or her new-found maturity and sense of public duty. As Lesnik-Oberstein observes, whereas in traditional adventure stories boys were socialised into the conquest and mastery of nature, in more recent environmentalist narratives, the gaining of adult responsibility has come to mean

In *Fly Away Home*, the relationship that Amy establishes with the wild geese imparts a lesson about a child's need for a stable and secure home. Her father, plagued by guilt over the break-up of his marriage and his subsequent abandonment of his daughter, is able to use his apparently far-fetched plan to guide the geese to their wintering grounds to regain the trust of his daughter and prove his effectiveness as a father. Tom is thus the "sensitive-guy" figure that Fred Pfeil identifies as a recurrent type in Hollywood movies since the 1980s. A sculptor and inventor, his dungarees and long hair connote a benign eccentricity and idealism. Pfeil argues that the new "sensitive" male figure has tended to serve as an ideological ruse for the reinforcement of patriarchal power in Hollywood movies. The point of such narratives for their male protagonists, he writes, "is not finally to give up power, but to emerge from a temporary, tonic power shortage as someone more deserving of its possession and more compassionate in its exercise" (Pfeil, 1995: 49). Moreover, the "sensitive guy" movie, he adds, often restores patriarchal hegemony by repositioning its female characters in negative or traditionally subservient roles.

In some respects, *Fly Away Home* conforms to this pattern, in that it represents Tom's new partner Susan (Dana Delany) in the traditional female role of provider and nurturer, when she serves coffee for Tom and Amy as they discuss the planned migration of the geese. Nevertheless, the movie is a relatively complex and nuanced drama, which does not simply reinforce conservative female roles. Unlike the first *Free Willy* movie, for example, the film does not put blame solely on the mother for the trauma suffered by the child. Instead, the movie is even-handed: Amy is told by both parents that they were equally responsible for the break-up of their marriage. Moreover, when Tom dislocates his shoulder during the geese's migration and has to pass responsibility for the rest of the flight to Amy, he cites her mother's pursuit of her singing career as a model to inspire his daughter. Accordingly, Amy demonstrates that she too has the bravery to "go off and follow her dream", as he puts it. By piloting the microlight aircraft, and successfully leading the geese to their wintering grounds, Amy becomes an unconventional action heroine. *Fly Away Home*, then, is not simply a crude, patriarchal tract in which "father-knows-best". Instead, the representation of a fractured family relationship, and in particular the nervous tentativeness of a father-daughter relationship, is handled with a degree of psychological subtlety. The movie accepts that the contemporary family is not ideal, but the site of ongoing problems which are not susceptible to simple solutions.

*Fly Away Home* realizes its function as moral fable by constructing anthropomorphic parallels between the human girl and the geese she looks after, and thereby suggesting that nature is a site of universal values. Such anthropomorphic parallels are established from the start, as the sequence in which the geese eggs hatch uses comically distorted wide-angle close-ups of Amy's face to establish visual parallels with the chicks. Later, shots of Amy trying on hats and make-up are humorously intercut with a gosling appearing to flap its wings in "applause", and another "preening" in apparent imitation of the girl. Here the movie continues the nature-faking pioneered in cinema by Walt Disney's True-Life Adventure films in the 1950s: animal subjectivity is implied through semiotic analogies to human behaviour, constructed through shot selection, music and editing. In other words, the geese in these sequences appear to do one thing in the dramatic context of the narrative, when, in ethological terms, they are actually doing something with an entirely different meaning.
This humanisation of the wild animals is the basis for their construction as embodiments of "natural" values. As post-structuralist theorists have argued, concepts of "nature" and the "natural" have been used by dominant groups in bourgeois society to assert that social or political values specific to their own interests are universal, and therefore unchangeable. "The overriding function of the universal conception today", writes geographer Neil Smith, "is to invest certain social behaviours with the status of natural events by which is meant that these behaviours and characteristics are normal, God-given, unchangeable. Competition, profit, war, private property, sexism, heterosexism, racism, the existence of haves and have nots or of 'chiefs and Indians' - the list is endless - all are deemed natural" (Smith, 1990: 16). In the children's fable, then, animals are humanised as symbols of virtue or vice, either benign figures of an Edenic nature, or evil monsters embodying values outside of civilization. In *Fly Away Home*, the wild geese are constructed in such a way as to embody a moral lesson in the universal need for "home", shared by both human and non-human nature: both Amy and the geese come home at the end of the story. As already mentioned, however, this universalised discourse on "home" is a relatively liberal one, rather than conservative and patriarchal.

The benevolence of the wild animal in Hollywood conservationist movies like *Fly Away Home* not only serves the purposes of the children's fable, but also guarantees its right to be considered as an appropriate object for conservation. It is with this aspect of *Fly Away Home* that the rest of this essay will be concerned.

*Fly Away Home* and Environmental Politics

The humanization of the wild animal in the conservationist movie serves not only a didactic function appropriate to the children's fable, but also a role in its representation as audio-visual spectacle, in a discursive practice similar to that of the circus. As a discourse in which trained animal performances ultimately serve to demonstrate the mastery over nature of the animals' human trainers, and by extension the authority of colonial power, the representation of animals in the circus obviously runs counter to animal rights and welfare sensibilities. Nevertheless, such discursive strategies remain a recurrent feature of Hollywood conservationist movies. *Andre* even dresses its eponymous seal in sunglasses and Hawaiian shirt, and (in an anthropomorphic projection of meaning) has it "blow raspberries" at the children's schoolteacher, thereby perpetuating an extreme version of the circus tradition of humanizing animals for the purposes of carnivalesque entertainment. However, when the seal is returned to the sea at the end of the story, the narrative comes to reflect an animal rights agenda in contradiction to the central assumptions of the circus tradition. *Free Willy* similarly both draws on and undermines this tradition: sequences of trained animal performance put the orca on display for the audience's visual pleasure, while the plot turns on Willy's ultimate refusal to perform in front of an audience, and his subsequent release into the wild.

In *Fly Away Home*, when Amy initially wants to keep the geese as pets, her father tells her that it "would be kind of like jail". This humanitarian concern for the welfare and freedom of the individual animal is typical of the Hollywood conservationist movie. Like the circus tradition, however, these animal welfare and rights concerns also rely on the anthropomorphic humanization of the wild animal. Moreover, conservationist movies tend to repeat dominant anthropocentric value judgments regarding species hierarchy, valuing wild animals mainly for their sentience and intelligence, and therefore their proximity to human beings, or for their aesthetic qualities. Mass media representations of wild animals, as Ralph Lutts points out, tend to concentrate mainly on birds and mammals that are "novel, large, colorful, and spectacular. The less pleasant aspects of nature are often missing, such as the
lice, fleas, ticks, worms, and other parasites (equally a part of nature) that infest the noble
predators and beautiful birds" (Lutts, 1990: 193). What is lacking in such narratives is a sense
that animals can be valued even when they do not behave like human beings, or are not
aesthetically pleasing.

In the case of the Canada geese in *Fly Away Home*, although they are not the "charismatic
megafauna" promoted by conservationist movies such as *Free Willy* and *Gorillas in the Mist*
(1988), they can nevertheless be aestheticised as objects of beauty, and therefore rendered a
suitable cause for conservationist energies. Thus the newly-hatched goslings are represented
in a way that emphasises their neotony: they are fluffy and big-eyed, sexless yet playful
(Mullan and Marvin, 1987: 24-8). The "abstract features of human childhood", writes
Stephen J. Gould, "elicit powerful emotional responses in us, even when they occur in other
animals" (Gould, 1980: 87-8). Moreover, the adult geese in the film are constructed as part of
a sublime visual spectacle of widescreen, wide-angle landscape cinematography dominated
by autumn colours and golden sunlight. In these sequences, the wild animal signifies
individual freedom, in the conventional way described by Ted Benton: "a liberty of action
and expression, a carefree and dangerous libidinous abandon, unrestrained by the burdens and
disciplines of civilized existence, or unaffected by the degeneracy, enfeeblement and
dependency of domestication and regulated existence" (Benton, 1993: 66).

The environmental politics of *Fly Away Home* are based on a concern for the welfare of the
individual animal, a concern that shapes the movie's sceptical attitude towards managerial
conservationism, its ambivalence towards law, and its advocacy of non-violent direct action.
At the town meeting held to discuss the destruction of the wetlands near his home, Tom
initially appeals to the rule of law: "I mean there are laws against this kind of thing, and I for
one want to know who amongst you is going to enforce them." Later, however, Tom and his
family resort to vigilante action, illegally releasing the geese from captivity when it becomes
clear that environmental law demands that they be pinioned. At the climax of the narrative,
the Alden family's heroic action has become a collective protest, with placard-waving eco-
protesters at the geese's wetlands site in Virginia, itself threatened by a developer's bulldozer.
Despite this endorsement of direct action, however, the final surrender of the developer to the
protesters reaffirms the rule of law, when the arrival of the geese to their wintering grounds
within the legal deadline means that the developer loses his claim over the public lands. *Fly
Away Home* thus affirms the triumph of populist values over the impersonal forces
represented by both the developer and the wildlife manager, in a way that is ambivalent in its
attitude towards law.

Earlier, Glen (Jeremy Ratchford), the environmental officer, had explained to Tom why he
has to clip the geese's wings. "I get calls all the time", he tells him. "They land on people's
front lawns, the golf course. That's why we have Ordinance 93.14: all domestically raised
geese have to be rendered flightless. It's better known as pinioning." However, when he tries
to clip the wings of one of the geese, Amy hits him with a saucepan, and Tom throws him out
of his house. Despite Glen's defence that pinioning is "for the good of the goose, it's for the
good of the people", the movie valorises the more emotional response of the Aldens. Despite
his apparent good intentions, Glen's detached rationalism lacks Tom's vision and non-
conformist imagination, and Amy's moral innocence. The Aldens' emotional attitude towards
non-human nature informs their concern for the welfare of the individual animal, and is
derived from a recognition of a shared capacity to feel pain, as Amy projects her own hurt
and vulnerability onto the orphaned goslings in her care. That Amy cares about the life and
welfare of each individual animal is emphasized by her decision to turn her aircraft back to
look for Igor, the goose with the bad leg, when he gets left behind during the migration. Each
goose is, in the terms of animal rights philosopher Tom Regan, "subject-of-a-life", and
therefore valued in its own right (Regan, 1984: 243).

In addition to this concern for the individual animal, *Fly Away Home* also highlights the issue
of habitat destruction caused by excessive development, while presenting the opposition
between development and conservation interests as a complex and graduated one. At the
town meeting mentioned earlier, farmer Sam Phelps puts forward a reasonable point-of-view
in support of the development of the wetlands, appealing to his own economic survival. "I
don't have the luxury of an outside income", he tells the gathering. "I'm a farmer. My land is
part of the package, because I can't make a living off of it anymore. If I don't sell, how am I
going to send my kids to college?" Although the movie leaves the issue of development in
Tom's community unresolved, it at least raises the question in a way that avoids simplistic
polarizations. Moreover, in its dual advocacy of individual animal welfare and habitat
protection, the movie reconciles issues in conservationism that are themselves often
polarized. The debate over what should be the target for protection (genes, individual
organisms, populations, species, habitats or ecosystems?) has tended to be polarized between
scientific ecologists and animal liberationists, with the former arguing that the preservation of
a species should take priority over the lives of individual animals, and animal liberationists
arguing that the right to life of individual animals should be paramount (Eltringham, 1979:
76). *Fly Away Home* refuses to formulate conservationism as such an "either-or" choice. In
doing so, the movie conforms to the values of what ethicist Richard Ryder calls "modern
wildlife protection". Ryder seeks to distinguish three main differences between the older
practice of what he calls "traditional conservation" and the more recent one of "modern
wildlife protection" which he advocates: "First, the former is for human benefit whereas the latter
is for the sake of the wild creatures themselves. Secondly, conservation is concerned
with saving species whereas protection includes care for individuals. Thirdly, protection aims
to stop suffering as well as to protect life and habitat." (Ryder, 1989: 239) It is this "both-
and" approach that is advocated by *Fly Away Home*, as well as by other Hollywood
conservationist movies, such as *Flipper* and *Free Willy 2: The Adventure Home* (1995), in
which the orcas' habitat is threatened by the oil industry in the Pacific Northwest.

*Fly Away Home* also resembles these movies in its advocacy of a technological solution to
problems of conservationism: the microlight aircraft invented by Tom to lead the geese to
their wintering grounds is an example of a small-scale, state-of-the-art "green" technology
coming to the rescue of non-human nature. That the design of the aircraft was itself based on
the aerodynamics of a goose's flight further guarantees the benevolence of this technological
intervention into nature. Moreover, the spectacular sequences of aeroplane flight in the final
third of the film endorse a sense of technological mastery of the environment, a mastery that
is given as benign. "The beauty of the American landscape", writes geographer Yi-Fu Tuan,
"seems not designed for the sedentary and the slow-moving - for those who hug the earth"
(Tuan, 1993: 155-6).

The movie may also be seen as an endorsement of the efficacy of conventional science, in
that the geese's successful migration derives from Tom's understanding of the concept of
"imprinting". The orphaned geese fixate on Amy because she is the first living being they
see, and subsequently follow her around, assuming she is their mother. As environmental
officer Glen explains to Tom: "Geese learn everything from their parents. Everything from
what to eat, how to fly, when to migrate, where to migrate too... Without the parental
influence, your geese are going to get the urge to fly, they'll take off, and not know where
they're going..." The need for "parental influence" is the basis for both plot lines in the movie: Tom comes to fulfill his role as parent of his child, and Amy acts as surrogate mother to the geese. Imprinting is thereby represented in the movie as a technique which can form the basis for the paternalistic stewardship of nature. In this way, the movie distances itself from the more authoritarian overtones of imprinting associated with the originator of the theory, behaviorist Konrad Lorenz (Lorenz, 1973).

The reliance of *Fly Away Home* on science and technology as solutions to environmental crisis is similar to the re-made *Flipper*, in which the scientific knowledge of marine biologist Cathy (Chelsea Field) saves Flipper's life, and the barrels of toxic waste that have poisoned him are located by the use of a video camera strapped to the dolphin's head. Other conservationist movies, in contrast, show a more ambivalent attitude towards scientific knowledge. In *Free Willy*, the janitor at the aquarium, Randolph (August Schellenberg), is a Native American whose mystical beliefs embody the values of a prelapsarian and pre-industrial past, and represent a spiritually contemplative and deep ecological attitude to the orca, and by extension, to nature as a whole. Significantly, the successful release of the orca from captivity at the end of the film depends on the animal's ability to leap to freedom over the sea wall in response to the old Haida prayer that Randolph had taught Jesse earlier in the story. The conservationist politics of *Free Willy* are thus informed by a New Age sense of mystical, holistic interconnectedness, in which human-natural relations are re-enchanted. While similarly endorsing vigilante action by the morally innocent, *Fly Away Home* eschews the mystical solutions favoured by *Free Willy*, relying instead on human intervention in non-human nature through science and technology as a necessary basis for successful conservationist action.

Whether the resolution is effected by magic, Native American spirituality or science and technology, the conservationist movies of the 1990s offer narratives of mutual salvation (child saves animal, animal saves child), as an anthropocentric interest in the therapeutic effects that empathetic contact with non-human nature can have for traumatized children is reconciled with an extension of a liberal-individualistic notion of rights to the wild animals themselves. In this way, the family of nature is made whole again, and the world becomes "home".

**References**


**Filmography**


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Website

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