

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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INTERVIEW (1970)

Mrinal Sen

Bengali language

OVERVIEW

Director Mrinal Sen made his first feature film in 1953 but was slow to come into success as his first few films didn't fare well at the box office. Eventually, he tasted both success and controversy with *Baishey Sraavan* (*Wedding Day*, 1960) and *Aakash Kusum* (*Up in the Clouds*, 1965). Soon after, *Mr. Bhuvan Shome* (1969), a landmark film, radically altered new cinema and art-house cinema in India. *Interview* is considered as the first film in Sen's "Calcutta Trilogy". Other films such as *Mrigayaa* (*The Royal Hunt*, 1976) and *Aakaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine*, 1980) still retain their impact. He won awards at all the major international film festivals, including Cannes, Venice and Berlin. His films usually have a signature shock treatment style that is both cerebral and hard-hitting, coupled with technical jugglery and gimmicks. He was both loved and hated for his uncompromising political stance and critique of the contemporary communist government in West Bengal. Along with Satyajit Ray and Ritwick Ghatak, Sen is considered one of the trio of great Indian filmmakers both domestically and internationally.



Film In many ways, *Interview* was a logical extension of Sen's earlier film *Aakash Kusum* (*Up in the Clouds*). *Interview* depicts one of the many possible futures for a lower middle-class youth like Ajay from *Aakash Kusum* if he chose to get a job instead of starting his own business. The story was conceived again by Sen's favourite screenwriter Ashish Barman, though much of it was not pre-scripted. *Interview* remains a thoroughly experimental film, employing a mix of Brechtian alienation (theatre), the *cinema verite* style of contemporary European films and a non-narrative structure. With the exception of two characters, Karuna and Shekhar Uncle, all others were played by non-actors and appeared as their real-life personas, including the police officer and the interview board members. The interview itself was shot at the IBM offices in Kolkata. A few weeks earlier, Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi* had been shot with a similar interview scene; Sen specifically requested the board chairman to ask the question, "What is today's most important event?". In *Pratidwandi*, the hero answers "The Vietnam War", which cost him the job; in *Interview*, Ranjit cleverly says, "It's my interview, of course", thus leaving a good impression. In one scene, the protagonist's girlfriend mentions her phone number, which was actually Sen's own phone number; for months afterward, smitten Romeos would call the number and Sen's wife had a hard time convincing them that the girlfriend did not live there!

The film won a Critics Award at the Sri Lanka International Film Festival (probably 1972) and Ranjit Mallick won the best actor award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (1972).



LIST OF CHARACTERS

Ranjit Mallick	An editor and actor and the protagonist in search of a better job
Karuna Bannerjee	Ranjit's Mother
Shekhar Chatterjee	Shekhar Uncle, a family friend
Mamata	Ranjit's elder sister
Bulbul Mukherjee	Ranjit's girlfriend

SYNOPSIS

The story of the film borders on the absurd: a man with top credentials fails to get a better job simply because he appeared at the interview wearing traditional Indian clothes instead of a western suit. This interview was arranged for Ranjit by his late father's friend, Shekhar Uncle. It was at a prestigious Indo-British firm and would get him double his current salary— all he had to do was look good. But he faces obstacle after obstacle on his way— the shoes he was planning to wear were run down; he couldn't get a haircut as the barbershop was too busy; the dry cleaners where he had left his only western suit began an indefinite strike that day; even after managing to procure another suit from a rich friend, he gets embroiled with a pickpocket on the bus and forgets leaves the suit there. In between, he makes time to shatter the fourth wall in a sequence shot on a tram by speaking directly to the viewer and referencing his and other characters' real-life and on-screen personas. And then he meets with his art student girlfriend twice. Upon returning home after failing to track down the lost suit, his mother advises him to attend the interview in traditional clothes, which he does, shocking the interview board. But no matter how articulate and confident his answers, the inevitable happens and he doesn't get the job. This compels an almost surrealist exploration of colonial hangover and breaking free from it, ending with an encounter between a Caucasian mannequin dressed in a suit and Ranjit, who finally breaks the shop window and tears off the mannequin's suit in an angry, almost revolutionary gesture.



SCENES

Opening Scene We see several iconic places in Kolkata. A crane truck removes a large statue of a British general riding a horse from its pedestal and transports it through the busy city. Over the opening credits, a disembodied voice/ interviewer asks the character/actor “Mr. Ranjit Mallick” about



his background and interests.

An important day The moving camera follows a winding narrow lane past old houses. An aged lady, Karuna, lights a coal stove on a terrace. A young woman, Mamata, hangs out a saree to dry, then applies a colourful dot (*bindi*) to her forehead. Karuna gives some tea to Mamata, who is in a rush to leave for work. She wakes up her younger brother, Ranjit, before leaving his tea with him and rushing away to her job as a cashier for a milk van. Ranjit chats with his mother about his upcoming job interview that Shekhar Uncle has arranged for him; the salary will be double his current job, she tells him.



Tips for the interview We next see Ranjit at a busy market which sells live fish. He suddenly sees Shekhar Uncle, who calls him aside to advise him on the interview. It's a “saheb [British] company” and he must be well-dressed in a suit and get a haircut. They plan to meet at the interview venue at 2:30 pm.



The morning Ranjit waits for some time at a barbershop, but leaves without getting a haircut as his fish would spoil if he doesn't. Back home, he practices tying a tie on his bare neck in the mirror but fails to get the knot right. Mamata comes and helps him, getting it right on the first try. He complains about how constricting a tie and button-up shirt are and hopes that soon he'll be able to work without such stuffy clothes.



In search of shoes Ranjit tells Mamata to get his dress shoes shined. A friend drops off a pair of black socks. Karuna has put those shoes away in a box full of old bottles, bins and odds and ends. Mother and son search for the shoes. When they find the pair, it is banged up. We see the shoes magically turning sole-side up and walking in stop motion, followed by a split-screen gallery with different moving and still images of another young woman, Ranjit's girlfriend, Bulbul.



Mother and son argue Ranjit hums a tune and shaves while Mamata sweeps the floor. She asks him if Bulbul knows about the interview. They argue about her using his shaving blade to sharpen pencils. Mother and son search for a while to find the dry-cleaning shop's receipt for Ranjit's suit. Ranjit is angry with his mother for hoarding and being disorganized and Mamata reprimands him.



Fiction or real life? Ranjit rides a crowded tram. He peeks into a female co-passenger's film magazine, which features a picture that looks just like him. He is recognized by a few passengers and says that he's "Ranjit Mallick", an upcoming actor-cum-handyman-cum-editor at a weekly magazine. He speaks directly to the camera and continues to explain that a film director, "Mrinal Sen," found his life interesting enough to make a film on a day of his life. We see Sen's cameraman, K.K Mahajan, perched on a luggage rack near the roof of the tram.



Satyajit Ray's *Song of the Little Road* Ranjit continues looking at the camera and says that while he is real, as is the fact that he's riding the tram and that he has an interview later in the day, everything that the film has shown so far isn't the truth. For instance, he reveals that his mother is not actually his mother, but the actress who played the role of Apu's mother in Satyajit Ray's *Song of the Little Road*. At the same time, we see an iconic scene from that film, ending in a freeze frame. As for his sister, Mamata, her husband is a "bad man," who had left her less than a year into marriage and has taken up with another woman.



More genre-bending

Ranjit leaves. But another co-passenger, a middle-aged man, now starts speaking directly to the camera. He says that this isn't so much the story of a film, but his and our story, too.

Protest

We see a protest procession and a painting of British soldiers, then a running press. Ranjit proofreads a social awareness piece aloud with machinery moving behind him. Crowds of protesters are dispersed with tear gas and police batons.

Strike at the laundry

Karuna and Mamata read a newspaper report that all dry cleaning and laundry services in the city are on strike that day. Ranjit goes to the dry cleaners to pick up his suit but finds it closed. At home, Mamata laughs at their father's loose dress trousers that Ranjit was trying on. Karuna brings another of their father's suits but the style is outdated. Mamata suggests he wear traditional clothes but Ranjit objects to that. She then suggests that he try to borrow a suit from friends.



Meeting Bulbul Ranjit heads out again. We see the busy city with much traffic and many posters of Hindi films and shops. Bulbul (Ranjit's girlfriend) chats with a friend about art over the phone— she prefers still life to landscapes— while Ranjit waits. She finally turns her attention to him and he pretends to be offended. She asks him his plans after getting the job.



Wedding dreams He wants to move to a new flat, with the implication that they will be together. She wants the latest furnishings, paid for by his prospective employer, "Peterson and Sons". Ranjit and Bulbul sit quietly together while images and sounds of a typical Bengali wedding are shown; suddenly he jumps up, saying that he won't wear the silly groom's hat; she starts laughing at him.



No luck in finding a suit

Ranjit calls Bulbul from a pay phone to tell her that he had no luck in procuring a suit after he left her place; this is followed by a freeze frame of a Caucasian shop mannequin wearing a bespoke suit. He gets the contact details of another friend from Bulbul and goes to his house, but the friend has moved away.

Luck strikes He meets a friend who gives him the idea of going to another friend whose westernized family owns many suits. He is able to borrow a nice suit there. He calls Bulbul and promises to meet her after the interview. Riding on a bus, his friend tells him that he has been unemployed for almost a year and would be glad for Ranjit's help.



Pickpocket While riding on the bus for a long time and observing various passengers, Ranjit notices a pickpocket and stops him. It is already 1:30pm. Some passengers drag the pickpocket to the police station. Ranjit gets delayed there after giving his incident report to the policeman. Hurrying out, he remembers that he left the borrowed suit on the bus.



No luck with lost suit He calls State Transport from a pharmacy but the line is engaged. Irritated, he looks at the various posters in the pharmacy advertising everything from cough relief to remedy for nervous exhaustion to hair removal cream. On a final call, there is a crossed connection and he fails to find the whereabouts of his lost suit.

Attending the interview in traditional dress He returns home. Karuna and Mamata chastise him about losing the suit. Ranjit says he will not attend the interview. His mother insists he attend in traditional dress. He gets dressed in a dhoti and kurta (*dhuti-panjabi*) and goes for the interview.



The interview Ranjit faces a table full of men in suits. Some of them appear disparaging and some look at him in admiration. The interview is conducted in English. They ask him about his degree, job as a journalist, if he reads newspapers, if he has read a particular novel and so on. But every time a question is asked and Ranjit begins answering, the words are overlapped with fast-paced percussion music and unrelated sequences, like a voice recorder outside the interview room or office clerks typing. Ranjit keeps answering questions confidently. The interview ends cordially and the board chairperson says they will communicate with him. Shekhar Uncle is also seen as a board member.



“In this country Computer is a job-eater” The message, scrawled on a newspaper sheet, is followed by an IBM machine and men and women working at a call centre.



A date Bulbul waits to meet Ranjit after the interview. She is sketching some sculptures at the Indian Museum in Kolkata. As they walk in a picturesque inner courtyard, we hear a replay of the previous conversation about their dreams after getting the job. This is followed by a view of busy city streets.



Retort Ranjit returns home and overhears Shekhar Uncle and Karuna talking while having tea; they are discussing his “clownish” attire at the interview. He refuses to believe that Ranjit tried his best to procure a suit. Ranjit steps in and castigates Shekhar Uncle, saying that he already has a job and is financially responsible for his small family. His impassioned retort is again overlapped with fast-paced music and footage of crowds, slums, traffic etc. in the busy city, rising in pace and hitting a crescendo.



Invisible interlocutors In front of a black screen, Ranjit sits alone, ponders and then smokes. An invisible interlocutor tells him that he had been chasing Ranjit since morning—he is the viewer/ audience. He doesn't believe Ranjit's assertion that he is not sad or frustrated about losing the job. Ranjit is angered at his questions about the day and trying to procure a suit and failing. It would have been a “huge” job with better salary and benefits as he was chasing upward mobility, asserts the interlocutor. Another voice tells him that he was lying and it is a case of sour grapes; Ranjit gets angry again.



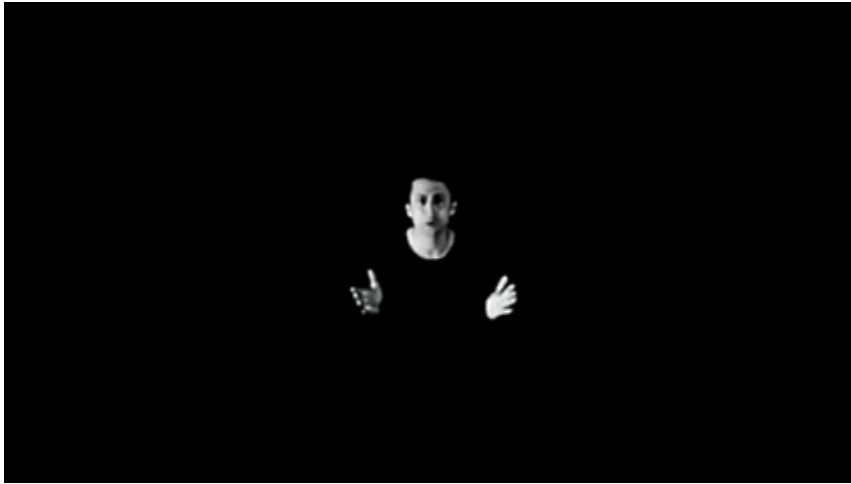
Encounter with a mannequin We see a handsome Caucasian mannequin wearing a bespoke suit in a shop window, interspersed with Ranjit on a black background, his expression changing as the mannequin turns and he turns, too. Suddenly, Ranjit is now the mannequin in the shop window wearing the same bespoke suit, while Ranjit in front of the black background looks on admiringly. The interlocutor sarcastically says, "Lovely"! No one could have prevented him from getting the job if only he had a suit.



What if? In a split-screen, we see Ranjit on the black background on the right and a long office corridor with him in a suit on the left. He looks at the camera and says that he should have got the job but he had dressed up as a clown in traditional clothes. He had all the right credentials but no suit. If he were rich, owned many suits and a wardrobe, he wouldn't have had to worry.



Closing scene In a mime costume with only his face, neck and hands visible on the black background, Ranjit says that we should protest against this treatment; but the invisible interlocutors are silent. Back in his traditional clothes, a rock appears in Ranjit's hand and he throws it at the mannequin, interspersed with images of revolutions and the chant "Long Live Freedom". He tears off the suit from the mannequin in pieces. The film ends with a still of the now-naked mannequin.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Ranjit

Ranjit is the protagonist of *Interview*. He is a typical lower middle-class man who works for a weekly magazine and is in search of a suit to wear for an interview for a better job. He finds himself conflicted and angry at his circumstances after he does not finally get the job for lack of a proper Western suit.

Ordinary Ranjit is less an individuated character and more a typical lower middle-class youth until the sequence at the very end of the film. Everything from his lifestyle to behaviour patterns, reactions to situations and attire mark him as someone very ordinary, be it in his interactions with his mother and sister or with the general public, as in the pickpocket sequence. He yells at his mother for unnecessarily hoarding odds and ends, argues with his sister on little things and makes sure the pickpocket is apprehended.

Friendly Ranjit has many friends from different walks of life and generally has a friendly attitude towards everyone. His girlfriend is from an affluent family, but that doesn't seem to have affected their banter and teasing attitude towards each other. He has a friend who lends him dress socks and another who has been out of a job for some time, as well as another, rich friend who happily lends him a suit. He treats the little boy who works at his magazine press well, too.

Conflicted From the beginning, Ranjit was conflicted about the necessity of western attire for the interview. He tells Mamata that ties and suits were constricting and they should soon get rid of formal attire at work, but also gets quite distressed when he isn't able to finally get a suit to wear at the interview, even going so far as to suggest that he should forego the interview altogether. In fact, had he had actually been able to procure a suit, it is unlikely that questions about decolonization and revolution would have arisen in his consciousness with any potent force.

Angry We see Ranjit as a stereotypical "angry young man" in the closing scenes of the film, where he lashes out at his invisible interlocutors about his own conformity and double standards—was he really so unaffected at having lost the wonderful opportunity? We are not presented with a commonplace argument that he's too good for the job because the firm was too narrow-minded about "proper" attire. Instead, we see what amounts to a somewhat half-hearted attempt at revolution that doesn't line up cleanly with Ranjit's previous mindset. Only after admiring himself in the figure of the suited mannequin does he take a rock and break down the glass wall and shred the mannequin's clothes. He appears to be angrier about his individual situation and lashes out symbolically, but that does not necessarily signal any lasting change or revolution in his real life or in a broader social sense.



Karuna Karuna, played by the actress Karuna Bannerjee, is Ranjit's mother in the film. Her real-life persona and most famous on-screen appearance in Satyajit Ray's *Song of the Little Road* are referenced directly in *Interview*. She plays a typical widowed lower middle-class, middle-aged lady with grown children.

Caring Karuna's life revolves around her children. As usual for mothers from that socio-economic context, she mainly takes care of the household, including chores, organizing and meals. She is the first character we meet while she makes tea in the morning for Ranjit and Mamata. She seems to be a bit more affectionate towards her son—again typical of the “son preference” shown by many Indians generally. She also loves her daughter, Mamata, dearly and has a friendly relationship with her, which is also typical given that she was abandoned by her husband.

Hoarder Karuna is an incorrigible hoarder. She lovingly stores odds and ends in large dusty trunks and has preserved her late husband's almost 30-year-old suit. Ranjit never fails to chastise her for this habit, not understanding that it stems from both trying to preserve memories and saving money by reusing items instead of buying them again.

Practical After Ranjit fails to procure a suit, Karuna suggests that he appear for the interview in traditional clothes. According to Ranjit, who's firmly in the “mom doesn't know anything” phase of life, this was a “naive” solution and she couldn't appreciate the gravity of the situation. Regardless, with no choice, he follows her advice. But it was both a practical and radical idea, especially coming from someone like her.



THEMES

Politics— colonial hangover/ decolonization A major theme of the film is ‘colonial hangover,’ or the desire of brown/ native intellectuals and bureaucrats to continue in the “grand old ways” of their erstwhile British masters in nearly every sphere of life, from law and governance to something as simple as attire. This is an attitude that continues to trip up former colonies, such as India. What is needed— as the film signals in its first and last scenes with a statue of a British general on a horse being taken down and carried away from its pedestal— is a decolonization of the mind. In this particular film, it is the rather absurd and erroneous correlation between credentials and attire, as if a male interviewee wearing traditional clothes is somehow daft or “clownish”, that the moment he dons a suit and tie, he rises in stature and becomes qualified. Facing a board full of men in dark suits, Ranjit confidently answers their questions, but the cacophonous music and overlapping, unrelated footage symbolizes how little an impact his words are making. Further, western suits are uncomfortable and constricting, Ranjit complains to Mamata; soon, he hopes, there will be no more need for suits and ties at the office. Sadly, this absurd correlation between clothes and character remains true for most jobs in India, especially for men, even today, despite 75 years of independence and the hot and humid climate.

Culture— striking and unions Much as Ranjit would like (or pretend) to challenge the colonial hangover around attire, the reason he fails to get his own suit from the dry cleaners is that all the dry-cleaners went on a city-wide strike on the day of his interview. Indeed, images and footage of strikes, processions and union action recur in Sen's early films, including *Interview*. Sen's sympathies

with Marxist ideologies are well-known, though it did not endear him to the [non-Marxist] Communist government in West Bengal, which was in power intermittently from the late 1960's to 1977 and then continuously up until 2011. While unionisation benefits all workers in theory, in reality union deadlocks over the slightest of matters led to frequent strikes, which shut down some public works sector or the other, if not the entire city. By the 1980's and 1990's, "strike culture" was so entrenched in and disruptive of Kolkata city life that week-long, and even month-long, strikes were common. Usually, no benefits were reaped for the common workers from these extended strikes, like Ranjit's poorer friend who admitted that he had been unemployed for the last seven months and that the union did not seem to be doing a good job of negotiating terms with his employer.



Class Like Sen's other films, *Interview*, is an exploration of class and its associated social and psychological expectations. When both Karuna and Shekhar Uncle chastise Ranjit (at the beginning and end of the film, respectively) about why he didn't pick up the suit from the dry-cleaner's, he retorts that he had no place to store it. The family didn't own a single wardrobe, only moth-infested trunks packed to the brim with odds and ends. This is a snapshot of the daily lives of lower-middle class Bengalis of that time. Ranjit can't help wonder what would happen if he owned many suits like his rich friend who happily lent him one. Would he get the job if he had generational wealth like this friend? And even lower on the class spectrum is the pickpocket who Ranjit apprehends and hands over to the authorities in an act of over-moralistic policing. The man is apparently a known offender and the police officer doesn't hesitate to make him squat on the floor, shout abuses at him and hit his head a few times. All the well-meaning, gentlemanly middle-class members present, including Ranjit, feel that this treatment is justified and are instead more concerned about how quickly they can get out of there.



Attraction Like many of Sen's other early films, the relationship between Ranjit and Bulbul in this one is a bit strange and off-kilter. They seem to have already settled into a sort of casual relationship that would eventually either fizz out or lead to marriage without much effort on their part; there are no sweet nothings and barely any romantic frisson. Bulbul, in particular, is strangely detached as we see in her signature languorous but slightly vacant/thoughtful expressions. She likes teasing him often, as with her wish that he wear the silly traditional groom's hat at the wedding. She thinks nothing of keeping Ranjit waiting on the day of the interview with a major problem on his hands while she discusses art preferences with a friend over the phone. Nor does she hesitate to ask him to meet her right after the interview. And while they have dreams of a married life together, these are also mundane and based on upward mobility. Ranjit wants to buy a new flat where, presumably, he will live with Bulbul, and she wants the "latest fashions" in everything. Ranjit's mother and sister don't seem to have a place in these dreams. Bulbul is much more affluent than Ranjit and it's unclear if that was a factor in the relationship; either way, the film leaves this poor boy-rich girl affair a mystery to the end.

Film vs Reality In a striking genre-bending move, *Interview's* protagonist and other single-appearance characters suddenly look directly at the camera and address us, the viewer, in the tram sequence, shattering any illusion of the fourth wall. This sequence was, in fact, the first example of Brechtian alienation in Indian cinema. Then Sen takes another step by retaining the real-life names of every named character, including Bulbul and Shekhar, on screen. Further, the cameraman and other shooting crew also appear as their real selves in the tram sequence, with the metafictional premise that Mrinal Sen, the renowned film director, found Ranjit Mallick's life fascinating enough to follow him around with a camera all day and make a film, which is what we are now watching. And the feather in the cap is the meta-referential exposé where Karuna is shown in the character of Apu and Durga's mother in Satyajit Ray's *Song of the Little Road*. In that iconic sequence, the mother's husband returns with gifts for Durga but the girl has already succumbed to her short illness; Karuna/Sarbajaya cannot bear to look at her husband and the gifts and sobs aloud. Ranjit explains that while they have no real familial relationship and she's an actress, she would have acted in the same manner while bereaving his death and this makes them a perfect on-screen mother-son duo. All these scenes, taken together, jolt the viewer out of any sense of voyeurism we may be entertaining and firmly nudges us to view the film as what it really is— our own story— as the random commuter tells us in the tram sequence.

Introspection / surrealism The last five scenes in the film may be interpreted in many ways, one of them being the conflicts arising from Ranjit's fractured persona that force him to introspect. One persona claims to be perfectly content with the fact that he did not get the job—he has no frustrations or qualms. Then the invisible interlocutors (or conscience/ different persona) argue that Ranjit's disdain may be real or pretence, possibly a case of sour grapes since he didn't get the job, a view that angers one persona. Another persona looks on admiringly at the suited Caucasian mannequin, seen many times and from different angles and distances. Another persona turns into the very mannequin and poses inside the shop window. Yet another watches as another Ranjit, now dressed in a suit, moves in stop-motion along a long office corridor. But from within these fractured scenes and convoluted symbolisms arises a more definitive conclusion to the conundrum. A brick appears in Ranjit's hand and he throws it many times until the glass shop window shatters; then he

pounces on the mannequin and tears off the suit, followed by images of revolution. Thus, the not-so-implicit “message” *Interview* ends with is a call for freedom from colonial hangover and a decolonization of the mind that would leave the colonizing ideology naked at the end, like the mannequin. But that is not so easily achieved.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) How is decolonization central to the film? Discuss with two scenes as examples.
- 2) What picture of “family” do the central characters represent? Discuss the role of each character within the family structure.
- 3) Which unconventional cinematic technique employed by *Interview* left the deepest impression on you? Discuss with examples.
- 4) Did you require much contextual information to appreciate the film? Which areas were most unfamiliar to you?
- 5) Were you in Ranjit’s (highly polished) shoes, how would you have handled the situation?

