

Un-Wrapping the Postmodern: A Feminist Glance

Are we being seduced, in a Baudrillardian moment, by the frenzy of postmodernism? From Baudrillard's delirium of attributes to Jameson's modernist account of postmodernism, a discourse of cultural commentary confronts us with its reading of the end of ends, the crisis of representation, the implosion of meaning, the return of the repressed. . . . It tempts us with a dreamy vision of an open, inclusive discursive field, capable of theorizing developments across a wide range of disciplines. Postmodernism, more a rhetorical collage¹ than a monolithic discourse, has as one of its central themes the rethinking of traditional practices of theorizing. Two points here are critical: the first, identified by Lyotard, concerns the loss of credibility of the master narratives of modernism, and, more broadly, the question of the legitimation of knowledge; and the second point, as a corollary to this, questions the universality of grand theory. In considering these issues, I feel a nagging familiarity. Often identified as items on the postmodern agenda, these issues strongly resemble questions repeatedly raised within feminist theory. Questions regarding the legitimacy of master narratives and the status of theoretical discourse have long been concerns of feminist scholarship. This resonance suggests an important but often neglected question: what is the specific relationship between postmodernism and feminism? Is feminism, as Craig Owens (1983) asserts, an instance of postmodern thought? Or are these antagonistic movements, reminding us of the "unhappy marriage of marxism and feminism" (Hartmann, 1981)? I agree with Owens that the politics of sexual difference have been neglected within postmodernism; the time appears to be ripe for a feminist reading of the postmodern scene. But this does not mean that feminism should be grafted onto the postmodern agenda. For just as Lana Rakow argues that "it would be a mistake to see feminist scholarship as fitting into the critical/noncritical dichotomy [in the field of communications]. . . [since] neither side has given feminism a prominent voice in the on-going discourses of the field" (1985b, p. 5).

Feminism has already encountered some of the more striking and disturbing impulses of postmodernity which are now identified as elements of the postmodern condition: lack of faith in the explanatory power of historical master narratives, and the crisis of theoretical universality. In this sense, feminism anticipates the agenda of postmodernism at several points, and critically challenges it on several others.

The Problem of Master Narratives: Patriarchy as Ancient Narrative

Postmodernism questions the forms of authority upon which modernist master narratives assert particular visions of reality. As a source of legitimation for a discourse, master narratives provide grounds for consensus and methods for adjudicating incompatible interpretations. Lyotard writes: "In contemporary society and culture. . . postmodern culture—the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms. The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (1984, p. 37).² Defined as an incredulity toward meta-narratives which he suggests is "undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences," the postmodern condition is characterized here by the loss of belief in the possibility of a transcendental historical vision.

Jameson insists that the crisis of meta-narratives involves: "not the disappearance of the great master-narratives, but their passage underground as it were, their continuing but now unconscious effectivity as a way of 'thinking about' and acting in our current situation" (1984a, p. xii). He dramatically exemplifies this point by quietly invoking a traditional marxist narrative when he argues that "every position on postmodernism in culture whether apologia or stigmatization is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (1984c, p. 55).

This would seem to be one of several sites at which the intersection between feminism and postmodernism could be most profitably thought through. Yet the postmodernists fail to engage feminism directly. It is not, for example, that the voluminous feminist work which identifies the gender politics inherent in the legitimation of knowledge is recast as evidence of the incredulity toward meta-narratives; the work is ignored. It is not, for example, that the debates between feminism and marxism are offered as instances of the tension between politics and theory; the arguments are not cited. Given the extent of feminist critical and theoretical commentary on contemporary patriarchal culture (Rakow, 1985a), this yawning void of discourse within postmodernism "suggests that it [indeed] may be another masculine invention engineered to exclude women" (Owens, 1983, p. 61). Feminism overtly challenges the credibility of patriarchal narratives and at the same time recognizes their persistence as submerged narratives—not least, within theory itself.

The question of the legitimacy of knowledge has been a common theme within feminist work dating back centuries.³ On the politics of legitimacy, Kathryn Addelson (1981) writes: "When philosophers and moralists puzzle about questions like legitimacy, they often end up referring to universal moral principles. . . . But to look for universal principles is to look for the universally true names of things, and that is the same kind of thinking that permits exploitation and illegitimate control in the first place. For the basic question is, Who is doing the naming?" The politics of naming has long been a critical issue on the feminist agenda.

This confrontation with the mechanisms of legitimation points to what Paula Treichler identifies as the inherent potential for tension between feminism and theory. She elaborates the reasons for this tension and "why feminist theory is not immediately recognized as Theory with a capital T. Most theoretical traditions in this mode feature a Founding Father, with a capital F. Though there is a tradition of feminist thought, there is no 'Femina' that 'Feminist Theory' will ever derive from as. . . marxism from Marx, psychoanalysis from Freud, and so on" (1986, p. 27). She describes the resulting paradox that feminist theorists encounter:

if women follow the rules of the dominant theoretical traditions and produce something that looks like theory, their work will not be feminist; if they depart from the rules of these traditions, which are generally policed by men, their work will probably not be judged theoretical. . . . Though the name feminist theory may seem hopelessly contaminated, we have shown ourselves able to reclaim such works and define them as we choose. And, indeed, if we set aside the question of what theory [traditionally] looks like, we find that feminist theory is quite ready to name itself. . . . In contrast to those theories formulated around a central figure, feminists are generally comfortable with a collective, multiple-historical founding figure. (1986, p. 28)

The institutions of the academy are one of the most critical sites for the contestation of grand narratives. As Ellen DuBois, et al. (1985) argue, feminist scholarship finds new fervor within the academic disciplines as it challenges the traditional separation between politics and scholarship. Traditional master narratives are scrutinized for the normative assumptions they espouse in the name of objective scholarship which are in fact based on male experiences and perspectives (Langland and Gove, 1981). With its eyes turned toward the American academy, feminism uncovers the institutionalization of meta-narratives and identifies a significant site for the patriarchal silencing of women's voices.

Given this understanding, we can see that the practices of feminist theory suggest several questions related to the construction of the authority of grand narratives: how has the authority of founding fathers been created and maintained and how far must we defer to that authority; what are the grounds of legitimacy which support institutionalized traditions; what oppositional—alternative narratives does feminism offer, and how is the authority of feminist narratives constructed?

The Problem of Universality: The Politics of Male Epistemology

Resembling Michel Foucault's (1980) conceptualization of local theory, one of the espoused characteristics of postmodernism is the belief that theory can not and should not aspire to universality. Lyotard cries forth: "We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. . . . Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (1984, p. 82). To question the universal vision and generalizing focus of theory is to question the very definition of theory itself. The postmodern move is to subvert the whole, the original "one," to uncover what partialities are hidden behind the utopian unity.

Huyssen links the crisis of the universality of modernism with the emergence of the problematic of otherness. Although he suggests that "the women's movement has led to some significant changes in social structure and cultural attitudes," and that "the ways in which we now raise questions of gender and sexuality, reading and writing, subjectivity and enunciation, voice and performance are unthinkable without the impact of feminism," he fails to draw out the specific contribution of feminist thought to postmodernist theory on these very points.

The critique of the totalizing vision of the male perspective is a familiar theme within feminism. As early as 1952, Simone de Beauvoir states that "representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth." Catherine MacKinnon (1981) asserts that "feminism not only challenges masculine partiality but questions the universality imperative itself: Aperspectivity is revealed as a strategy of male hegemony." More recently, the

issues of universality and representation with respect to a male perspective have been addressed by philosophers working on feminist epistemology.

The critique of universality has also been debated among various feminist groups. Women of color, lesbians, third world women, and differently abled women challenge the elitism manifest in the production of feminist theory within the academy. Feminists challenge feminists to answer the question: upon what grounds do you speak of a universal "woman"? Donna Haraway conceptualizes this debate within feminism as the construction of fractured identities:

It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective. . . . Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in "essential" unity. There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. . . . None of "us" have any longer the symbolic or material capability of dictating the shape of reality to any of "them." Or at least "we" cannot claim innocence from practicing such dominations. White women, including socialist feminists, discovered (i.e., were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the non-innocence of the category "woman." (1985, p. 72)

Articulating alternative visions of women's fractured identities, Bell Hooks (1981) writes *Ain't I a Woman?*; Audre Lourde (1984) writes *Sister Outsider*; and Myra Ferree and Beth Hess (1985) describe the contemporary U.S. feminist movement as marked by controversy and coalition.

The differences among American, British, and Continental feminisms further attest to the prominence of the critique of the universality. American feminists have attended to the resultant disappearance/repression of women's intellectual work, history, and political struggles; Continental feminists theorize the "inside" of "otherness"; and British feminists work on a historical materialist understanding of women's struggles. Despite the tensions between these multiple sites of feminist work, the struggle to theorize the partial and, yet, collective identity of woman continues within each.

Criticism vs. Irony: The Structure of a Feminist Statement

How has the relationship between feminism and postmodernism been played out thus far? Huyssen nods toward feminism by suggesting that "women's criticism has shed some new light on the modernist canon from a variety of different feminist perspectives." Yet he remains baffled "that feminist criticism has so far largely stayed away from the postmodernism debate which is considered not to be pertinent to feminist concerns" (1984, p. 28). Considered by whom not to be pertinent? I have argued that feminism addresses at least two of the central issues of postmodernism. How is it that this work has remained invisible to postmodernism's theorists? Joanna Russ describes this invisibility as the result of the suppression of women's writing:

It is bad faith that stands behind what I shall call denial by false categorizing, a complicated now-you-see-it-now-you-don't sleight of hand in which works or authors are belittled or passed over by assigning them to the "wrong" category, denying them entry into the "right" category, or arranging the categories so that the majority of "wrong"-(slash-women) fall into the "wrong" category without anyone's having to do anything about the matter. (1983, p. 49)

Given the range of meanings and discursive sources of postmodernism, it seems significant that a whole spectrum of theoretical work fails to be included in the major commentaries on postmodernism. Just as feminism names itself theory, and thereby offers a challenge to traditional notions of theory, it identifies some of the striking qualities of our contemporary culture, theoretical practices, and

historical frameworks, and thereby reclaims for itself its own interpretation of the postmodern condition.

So what position is feminism to take with regard to postmodernism? Although the possibility of an authentic critical position has been doubted,⁴ feminism yet may be in the most appropriate position to construct a response to postmodernism that is neither purely celebratory nor morally condemning.

Meaghan Morris draws the distinction between criticism and irony arguing that the postmodern world "may be characterized by. . . an objectal irony, not subjective or objective, since the latter is but a guise of the former. An irony proper to the object;. . . it is a detour taken by the object itself in relation to the meaningful ends that the subject pretends to impose. . . . It is the irony of the masses diverting the aims of opinion polls into the involuntary humor of a mass spectacle of information. Criticism, critical theory created differences; irony, ironic theory creates distinctions, but only as a means of retaliation to the subject's enquiries" (1984, p. 109).

The postmodern, characterized by Morris as a loss of faith in denotation, seems to encourage the development of an ironic vision. Irony, the free play of connotative meaning, is particularly capable of expressing a feminist vision which seeks to evade the tyranny of denotation rather than merely to ease "the loss of faith" in it. For Julia Kristeva (1981), one of the qualities that women's voices shares with the language of avantgardism is the disruption of the smooth flow of the dominant discourse. As Cary Nelson (1986) argues, "the response of patriarchy to this connotative eruption is to try to impose the spiritual law of denotation, an imposition that can never be wholly effective, since denotative law can only be articulated in language with its own connotative effect." Feminism seizes the power to signify, and with this seizes the "tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway, 1985).

As criticism creates differences, irony creates distinctions. To this end, Haraway (1985) creates an ironic political myth of cyborg citizenship. She describes the cyborg as a creature of a post-gender world that embraces partiality and political commitments based on affinities rather than essentialist identities. Because cyborgs are both organic and cybernetic, they recognize that science and technology are not only a matrix of complex dominations, but more importantly, "possible means of great human satisfaction." But although cyborgs are in part organic, they have "no origin story in the Western sense. . . which depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate." Haraway's cyborgs refuse the dream of returning to the Garden before the fall.

Whether we interpret cyborgs as the mythical identity of human beings in our post-industrial age, or a metaphor for the identity of feminists who are both (and yet neither) "fem-bots" and goddess worshipers, Haraway reclaims and reinvents a space for socialist feminism within postmodernism. In the process she identifies the networks within which we are politically embedded which she labels informatics of domination, suggesting that although domination is still a characteristic of our age, its mechanisms and processes are more a part of the polymorphous information system characteristic of late capitalism than of organic conditions as they were understood within industrial capitalism.

Haraway articulates a wide ranging commentary on the cultural conditions of our age. Like Baudrillard, she asserts that communication practices and technological developments are changing cultural and social arrangements profoundly; like Jameson, she describes changing economic conditions endemic to late capitalism, and like Lyotard she is attentive to shifting epistemological frameworks. Yet her vision remains fundamentally feminist, a feminism rooted in

fragmented identities: "the permanent partiality of feminist points of view has consequences for our expectations of forms of political organization and participation. We do not need a totality in order to work well." Most significantly her feminist response engages postmodernism on its own terms. Her work, as well as work by other feminists including Katie King, Meaghan Morris, Teresa de Lauretis and Alice Jardine challenge Huyssen's claim that feminism has failed to enter into the postmodernism debates, or that the debates are considered inconsequential for feminism.

Conclusion: The Relationship Between Feminism and Postmodernism

Postmodernism represents its own set of practices as distinct from modernist theory through the use of rhetorical expressions of crisis, break, fragmentation, the prefix, "anti-." These are all meant to document its sense of separation from modernism. From a feminist perspective, the crises which preoccupy postmodernism do not appear as such, largely because the break between modernism and postmodernism is indistinct and arbitrary; patriarchal relations of domination have continued undeterred. Women's voices are still actively suppressed. Can we interpret postmodernism as an instance of patriarchy valorizing its own epistemological crises as a new cultural and historical age? Does this reading cast doubt on the value for feminism of the discussions, arguments, and cultural analyses that are carried on in the name of postmodernism? Postmodernism, as a theoretical discourse, has identified contemporary cultural sites of political struggle: the identification and meaning of changes in architecture, photography, music, cultural theory, and social formations. Perhaps, the time has come to crash the postmodern party. As Laura Kipnis (1986) argues, "[i]f a postmodern strategy of struggle over the terrain of popular interpellation, rather than the exclusionary tactics of modernism, were part of the feminist repertoire, this might produce a political movement able to pose a challenge to dominant discourses, and one not defined by the distance of theory from the world." To postmodernism, feminism offers a radical political discourse, one concerned to identify the production and institutionalization of master narratives, to affirm and theorize difference, and to recognize the pervasiveness of gender politics/affinities in late capitalism.

The question remains—what does postmodernism have to offer feminism? Tracing the implications of postmodernity for feminism, (both American and French), Alice Jardine (1985) identifies and labels the process of gynesis "as the process identified in France as intrinsic to the condition of [post]modernity." Gynesis is the process of "putting into discourse of woman"; a search for that which has been left out, de-emphasized, hidden, or denied articulation within Western systems of knowledge. "Woman as a new rhetorical space, is inseparable from the most radical moments of most contemporary disciplines. . . .she may be found in Lacan's pronouncements on desire; Derrida's internal explorations of writing; Deleuze's work on becoming woman. . . and Barthes' work in general." This echoes Huyssen's claim that the crisis of modernism pivots on the problematic of otherness. Thus postmodernism offers feminism an inter-disciplinary imperative to "perceive that the question of woman and language is not one of fashion; it involves rather a profound rethinking of both the male and female speaking subjects' relationship to the real, imaginary and symbolic, as well as the status of metadiscourse itself."

In any event the relationship between feminism and postmodernism is not simple, for neither of these is a monolithic discourse. Nevertheless, feminism cannot wait to be invited to comment on the cultural phenomena of our "age." Is a feminist postmodernism possible? Haraway and Jardine begin to sketch what

such a project may look like. It is not a project that should be left to those who argue for an essential female nature and femininity, nor to those who look at the gaps of masculinity searching for the other. This project is realized through the "political, theoretical, self-analyzing practices by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women" (De Lauretis, 1984). If this is the postmodern project—the search for the partial, the other, the silenced—it remains to be seen whether postmodernism is as open, flexible and self-reflexive as it claims to be to this very project.

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NOTES

1. Dick Hebdige (1986) in "stalking out the posts" explicates the critical postmodern debates; Larry Grossberg (1986) suggests that the term "postmodernism" is used to name three discursive terrains (culture, history, and theory) which should but do not remain distinct; Huyssen (1984) maps the temporal and geographic journey of the term; and Jameson (1984c) identifies it as a form of cultural logic endemic to late capitalism.
2. As Jonathan Arac suggests, the larger issue of "narrative" invokes the question of representation. For Jameson the "critique of representation is a major form of what must be called postmodernism generally" (Arac, 1986, p. xx). Arac describes the issue of representation as one which is rooted in a modernist debate between antirepresentational antihumanists and humanist defenders of representation. He traces postmodern positions through a tangled interdisciplinary history. For my purposes it is not necessary to re-present the various postmodern perspectives on representation. It is important to note that the debates about representation are presented as wholly inscribed within the break between modernism and postmodernism. Other than a reference to Virginia Woolf as an exemplary of the modernism case against representation, there is no mention of any of the critical feminist work on the politics of representation.
3. Dale Spender, in her book, *Women of Ideas* (1982), traces the history of women's intellectual resistance back through Woolf and Wollstonecraft to Aphra Behn—a political activist, feminist, and novelist who lived during the mid-seventeenth century.
4. Jameson (1984c), in particular, decries the abolition of critical distance within postmodernism, suggesting that its peculiar characteristics make a modernist notion of criticism problematic.

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Female Address in Music Video

Feminist media critics have moved in recent years to incorporate and problematize cultural approaches to the production of textual meaning, particularly Hall's (1982) notion of signification as a product of active cultural struggle. Under Hall's (1982) explanatory framework, authors and audiences are interested social subjects who subscribe to a number of discourse systems, allegiances which come into play as they make sense of mediated texts. Grossberg (1984) summarizes Hall's (1983) theory as it pertains to textual activity: "[Texts] are the ongoing product of people's appropriation of them in their attempts to represent their own experiences, to speak in their own voices rather than in hegemonic codes" (p. 98). Many feminist critics have responded to such a suggestion by asking, in the mode of De Lauretis (1984): "How do we envision women as subjects in a culture that objectifies, imprisons and excludes women?" (p. 10) The theoretical model of struggle over meaning, by making allowances for particular social (gender) interests and a range of subjective interventions, has made a considerable impact on feminist media criticism precisely because it opens up the ideological determinism which for several years has undervalued, even threatened to obliterate, female cultural agency.

Early feminist film criticism in Britain and the United States recognized gender as a social construct influencing textual production, but, as De Lauretis (1984) has argued, it failed to adequately theorize female experience, particularly the multiple ways in which women audiences engage with mediated texts. The early applications of structuralism, psychoanalysis, and ideological criticism largely denied female authorship and strategies of female address, and refused female spectators their interpretive practices.¹ De Lauretis (1984) has attempted to rework feminist criticism to account for the active field of cultural struggle in which meanings are produced, one which recognizes women as gendered subjects who participate in struggles over meaning.

Cultural struggle over meaning is an appropriate theoretical framework in which to consider gender representation in music video.² MTV, America's foremost music video channel, has been widely criticized for commercially perpetuating a sexist male orientation. The channel, a product of demographic thinking (Marc, 1984), was conceived with a specific target audience in mind, the broadly stated age group of 12-34 year olds (Wolfe, 1983). In translating its perception of youth into a textual address, MTV chose the path, not surprisingly, of reproducing the culturally-salient ideological category of youth. The target audience was articulated primarily in terms of *male* adolescent concerns and practices. Textually, MTV enacted its male adolescence address through

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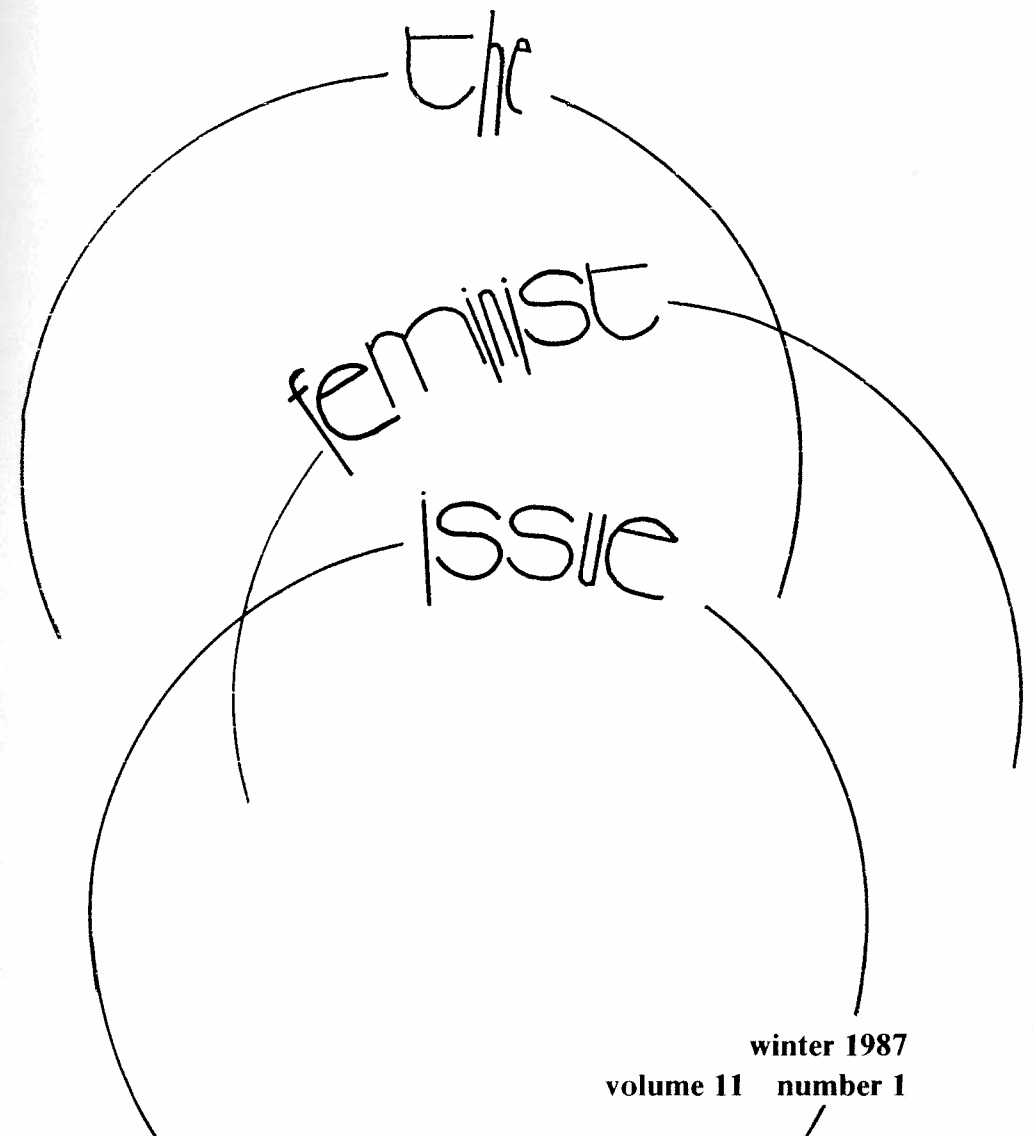
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