

HORROR AND *ORRORE*: A CANON HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

The word “horror” comes already socialized. We use it, plus words derived from it, without excessive concern in formulations such as “a horrifying war,” “a horrible disease,” or “the horrors of poverty.” At the same time, it is also undeniably associated with a genre and its somewhat standardized motifs, such as monsters and haunted houses—motifs that differ, at times greatly, from what we associate with the word “horror” in real-life scenarios. Indeed, how many among us have ever dealt with a masked serial killer? Likely fewer than those who have faced, either themselves or through loved ones, cancer, financial downfall, or sexual violence.

Of these two uses of the word, the burgeoning field of Horror Studies has thus far focused on the one tied to the eponymous genre. This is understandable: as well as being a popular form of entertainment, the horror genre’s symbolism provides a platform for addressing a wide-ranging set of topics, from consumerism to patriarchy. While the specifically Italian conjugations of this genre will be thoroughly addressed, our issue of *Italian Quarterly* also seeks to analyze horror as it is associated with an experience that we encounter in works beyond the horror genre.

Where could this inquiry begin? If the study of the horror genre rests on a recognizable canon and a set of established approaches, such as those drawn from the philosophy of literature, evolutionary social sciences, or psychoanalysis,¹ the analysis of more ordinary forms of the horrifying seems like a hopelessly vast and vague scholarly endeavor. But perhaps this should not be cause for concern. We may simply begin by acknowledging something we already take for granted: horror is an experience that can be found in a great variety of contexts, and that we may encounter first-hand in our lives. Accordingly, it is not contentious to state that there are, for example, novels and movies that depict certain horrifying aspects of life without quite belonging to the horror genre. We may indeed choose to have this inquiry start with what we already know, which is to say the fact that horror may manifest around us, in the ordinary, and is therefore writ large in the arts as well.

In his essay “A Plea for Excuses,” J. L. Austin argues that a methodology informed by ordinary language philosophy should examine “*what we should say when*” (181). With this approach, he continues, “we are looking again not merely at words (or ‘meanings,’ whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about;” in doing

¹ See landmark works in the field, such as Noël Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror*, Mathias Clasen’s *Why Horror Seduces*, or Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous Feminine*.

so, we entrust “a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena” (182). To paraphrase, if we use such and such words in ordinary language to describe such and such phenomena, there are probably good reasons for that; by analyzing the former, we may also gain a better understanding of the latter, and vice versa. Austin proposes to call this approach “linguistic phenomenology,” and while the philosopher himself concedes that this term is “rather a mouthful,” it is nevertheless appropriate for the topic at hand: there are experiences that we define as horrifying in ordinary language, and their manifold representations in the arts can serve as a productive starting point for our inquiry. By focusing on works that bring to mind the word “horror” without quite belonging to the eponymous genre, we may attain a heightened awareness of how we use the word “horror,” which in turn, according to Austin, can sharpen our understanding of that very phenomenon.

Let’s consider an example. Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* is a text for which a consensus on its ties to horror should not be hard to achieve. From the perspective of ordinary language philosophy, this is both reassuring and harrowing: it suggests that there is an intuitive, common-sense connection between the Holocaust and horror. Where to go from here? Austin is careful in specifying that “ordinary language has no claim to be the last word, if there is such a thing;” on the contrary, “it is the first word” (185). Otherwise said, the methodology he proposes should be considered a point of departure, something that allows us to do more with the material we are analyzing, rather than a verdict that settles things. After this beginning, we can develop our inquiry by asking, for instance, what literary techniques Levi uses to depict the horrors of Auschwitz, or what the phenomenological underpinnings of the experience in the *Lager* are, as described in the text. While being careful not to presuppose the direct or full transferability to the phenomenal world of the knowledge we may gather from a literary work, even one of testimony, our analysis may lead to a more acute awareness of why *Se questo è un uomo* and the Holocaust bring to mind the word “horror,” as well as horror’s functioning, underlying characteristics, consequences, and so forth in literature and beyond.

In sum, there is much to be gained by trusting our use of the word “horror” in contexts beyond the horror genre. All of a sudden, a new approach to the canon is unveiled—one that connects Giovanni Boccaccio’s and Alessandro Manzoni’s descriptions of the plague to the existential despair diffusing some of Giacomo Leopardi’s work, leading us to Anna Maria Ortese’s descriptions of abject living conditions in postwar Naples in *Il mare non bagna Napoli*. These are, of course, just some examples: since horror is found in the everyday, it should come as no surprise that a vast number of texts depict, describe, and focus on this experience. Ordinary language philosophy’s liberating perspective validates the diverse horrors present in these works

without equating them with each other, their distance from the standardized motifs associated with the eponymous genre notwithstanding.

Simultaneously, it also suggests that a work need not be horrifying in its entirety for it to be discussed in relation to horror: if the temporality of horror is not fixed in our lives (something may only momentarily horrify me, and this horror may not leave long-lasting traces), why should it be any different in a novel? This issue of *Italian Quarterly* is thus also an invitation to explore, revisit, and reimagine the Italian canon from a perspective that is mindful of the horror that is variously present in it. We believe that this will make it possible to read, teach, and interpret our primary sources in new ways, as well as allowing the establishment of innovative connections between authors and works that would otherwise be difficult to scrutinize comparatively.

A call to focus on horror beyond the horror genre is not, of course, merely a matter of literary criticism. If horror haunts our literature, it is because it haunts our world as well. Italy, like many other countries, has suffered from pandemics, wars, natural disasters, pillaging, and countless other catastrophes. The Italian population has been both a victim and a perpetrator of horrors: Fascism's violence, colonial atrocities in Africa, and internal terrorism are just a few of the most recent examples. Today, the proliferation of recording and sharing devices combined with the hyperconnectedness of our societies results in our nervous systems experiencing a constant influx of horrifying stimuli: if we are lucky enough to be sheltered from it in our everyday lives, all it takes is scrolling through our feeds for us to be exposed to the horrors manifesting elsewhere, including point-of-view recordings of armed conflicts and school shootings, footage of environmental disasters, famine, and forced displacements, reportages about teen suicide and terminal diseases... The list goes on, and each of us can likely integrate it with our own experiences.

Horror's presence in our world has not gone unnoticed. If World War II prompted Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the "wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity" (1), a more explicit thematization of experiential horror is found in the works of Julia Kristeva and Adriana Cavarero. While Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* takes a psychoanalytic approach in linking horror to the abject, and in particular to how abjection evokes a breakdown of meaning triggered by the blurring of the distinction between subject and object, Cavarero coins the word "horrorism" to describe a kind of violence against the helpless that compels us to side with the victim, in contrast to the emphasis on the perpetrator and their intentions evoked by the word "terrorism." Taking a transmedial approach attentive to horror's existential impact, Eugene Thacker devoted a trilogy to horror and philosophy; the title of the first volume, *In the Dust of This Planet*, inspired not only the first season of Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective*, but also Jay-Z's costume designer. Today, "para-academic"

publishing houses such as Zero Books or Repeater Books feed and feed off horror-centric critical theory blogs, podcasts, and threads on social media.² In conjunction with the popularity of the genre, it is clear that we are witnessing growing scholarly and cultural interest in the topic of horror at large.³

As noted, however, this issue of *Italian Quarterly* is not only concerned with horror as an experience: it also explores its textual manifestations, both in mainstream culture and, crucially, in the genre that takes its name from this experience. While the horror genre is not the sole literary form to address horror as an experience, it is the one that the word immediately brings to mind. At the same time, the complex and contradictory reception of this genre in Italy sheds light on the fraught relationship between Italian culture and horror.

That horror is not exactly perceived as a native or major feature of Italian culture (as is the case in most non-Anglo Saxon cultures), and that its manifestations in Italy are attributed to foreign influences, is perhaps underlined by the fact that the Italian language uses two different words to refer to horror as an experience and horror as a genre: while the Italian word “orrore” is used to describe the experience, the genre is simply called “horror”—a loanword from English. Modern Italian culture, it has been argued, has defined itself as “the encounter between the legacy of Classical antiquity, Catholic religion, and philosophical rationalism,” thereby “rooting cultural identity in the worship of aesthetic ‘measure,’ the refusal of superstition, and philosophical/theological rigour” (Aloisi and Camilletti 2). When the tropes and modes of the Gothic romance were imported into Italy, it was at the cost of the rejection of their most extreme and disturbing features, in a process of negotiation with Italy’s self-perceived “rationalism.” Such was the case with *I promessi sposi*, in which Manzoni adapts many tropes of the Gothic (isolated castles, almost superhuman villains, murders and mysteries in the monastery)⁴ without, however, importing any reference to the supernatural. In a famous (albeit private) letter sent by Alessandro Manzoni to the Marchese D’Azeglio in 1823, the author expresses disdain for these manifestations of Romanticism. He labels them as “non so qual guazzabuglio di streghe, di spettri, un disordine sistematico, una ricerca stravagante, una abiura in termini del senso comune; un romanticismo insomma, che si

² The aforementioned horror trilogy by Thacker is published by Zero Books, which also published Dylan Trigg’s *The Thing*. Jon Greenaway’s *Capitalism: A Horror Story*, published by Repeater Books, is a good example of how a kind of internet-based, politically outspoken critical approach to horror has been developing in recent years.

³ Some of the most recent examples include horror’s connections to feminism in Anne Elizabeth Moore’s *Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes*, horror and queerness in Joe Vallese’s *It Came from the Closet: Queer Reflections on Horror*, or studies of cultural history such as W. Scott Poole’s *Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror* and *Dark Carnivals: Modern Horror and the Origins of American Empire*.

⁴ On Manzoni’s debt to the Gothic tradition, see Giannantonio; Frangipani; Giovannoli; Camilletti, “Il sorriso del conte zio;” and Saggini. The content of this and the following paragraph condenses the argument of Malvestio and Serafini.

sarebbe avuta molta ragione di rifiutare, e di dimenticare, se fosse stato proposto da alcuno” (“an unimaginable muddle of witches, spectres, a systemic disorder, an extravagant research, and an abjuration of common sense. In short, a kind of Romanticism that one would have much reason to refute and forget, had it ever in fact been proposed by anyone”; our trans.; 886).

What has been pointed out in the previous paragraph is, to a certain extent, a commonplace of Italian criticism, endlessly echoed in discussions of the Italian fantastic, horror, and Gothic—indeed, “a systemic disorder” was used as the title of the introduction of the first extensive discussion of the Italian Gothic (Malvestio and Serafini). The view expressed by Manzoni, and particularly the way in which he applied it in the aesthetic balance of his novel, proved to be hugely influential in Italian letters, which makes his repudiation of the excessive manifestations of the Gothic an almost obligatory starting point in discussions of this topic. Manzoni’s judgment contributed to shaping the twentieth-century theorizations of the Italian fantastic, which, under Tzvetan Todorov’s influence, monopolized the debate on this genre in the 1970s and the 1980s. Critics and scholars as diverse as Gianfranco Contini, Enrico Ghidetti, and Italo Calvino, in anthologies and essays, consistently undermined the importance of the supernatural and irrational dimension of the Italian fantastic, as well as the importance of its more disturbing and macabre traits, in favor of a more reassuringly intellectual approach. Calvino, for instance, unhesitatingly dismisses the fantastic in the nineteenth century as a minor domain in Italian literature (“*Racconti fantastici*” 210), which was, in his view, characterized by the reason’s dominion over emotion, and a strong stylistic effort, implicitly opposed to the disorder of the Gothic novel, pulp fiction, and the penny dreadful (Calvino, “*Il fantastico*” 224). Similar considerations have been reprised in the more recent, but surprisingly old-fashioned, debate on the Italian “weird” (Malvestio).

Despite its relevance, it is important that we move away from this perspective. As rooted as they are in Italian culture, it should be noted that pointing out these aesthetic judgments risks reiterating them: repeating that horror has had no space in Italian culture automatically implies that it *cannot* have space in it. Instead, it should be underlined that, since Manzoni’s time, the most extreme and disturbing forms of the Gothic and, later, horror have consistently found space in Italian fiction—be it in the bloodthirsty ghosts of Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi’s novels (see Corradi) or the morbid love stories of Carolina Invernizio, the pulp tales that appeared regularly in *La Domenica del Corriere*⁵ or the monstrous creatures of Vasco Mariotti’s thrillers, the terrifying folk tales of Eraldo Baldini or the postmodern Gothic of authors like Michele Mari and Chiara Palazzolo. Despite the Italian literary establishment’s opposition to horror and its negative

⁵ See Foni, *Alla fiera* and *Piccoli mostri*.

reputation, the horror genre (in many different manifestations) has had a pervasive influence on Italian culture.

Of course, in the discussion of the reception of horror, a question inevitably arises: what defines horror as a genre? We believe that the term should be used in a dynamic, contextual, and relational sense, rather than a formalist sense: in other words, a text does not belong to a specific genre simply because of a set of characteristics it possesses, but rather in virtue of the ways in which it is communicated to the audience and perceived by it. In his discussion of science fiction, John Rieder insistently argues that the best way of understanding science fiction is to *avoid* defining it and instead approach it from a historical and holistic perspective. Genres, he argues, are “constructed more or less anonymously in a collective process” (7), and the temporal scale on which they develop and evolve eludes strict definitions: the vast and often contradictory community of producers, publishers, distributors, and consumers of a genre contributes to “defining” the common cultural conception of that genre. In this sense, Italian horror is simultaneously what is being, and has been, sold as horror, and what can be re-read and re-interpreted as horror, as in the case of the aforementioned examples.

Compared to other genres in the Italian cultural system, horror has perhaps created a less recognizable and coherent editorial field (as opposed to crime fiction), and a smaller and less organized fandom (as opposed to science fiction). While horror has not failed to move large audiences in Italy, this has been the case mostly in non-literary fields. When one thinks of Italian horror, the first names that come to mind are not those of writers, but more likely those of the “unholy trinity” of horror maestros: Mario Bava, Dario Argento, and Lucio Fulci. The most distinctively Italian stream of horror can be found, in fact, in cinema: from Riccardo Freda’s *I vampiri* (1957) onward, Italian culture has developed a peculiar approach to horror movies that has evolved over time from the sexual explicitness of the Gothic *filone* of the 1960s, to the slasher crime movies of the 1970s (which in many ways function as a counterpart to the contemporary development of folk horror in Great Britain), to the gory, exploitative movies of the 1980s, with their zombies and cannibals. Italian horror cinema has extensively explored the contradictions of a changing country, addressing the development of sexual mores and the abandonment of traditional Catholic values, as well as the violent changes imposed on Italian landscapes and ecosystems by the rapid modernization of the country. Yet, in many ways, Italian horror cinema is also emblematic of the difficult relationship between the genre and its national culture: it took nearly a decade from *I vampiri* (which is set in Paris) before Italian horror movies started to be conspicuously set in Italy, and in the 1980s they were again mostly set abroad, tackling the problems of globalization, but also showing their dependence on the international market (not to mention the parasitic dimension of many of these movies, which in several cases were marketed as fake sequels to Anglo-American blockbusters, as in the case of Fulci’s *Zombie 2*). Perhaps another sign

of the difficulty of categorizing horror as such in Italian culture is the fact that the remarkable *filone* of Italian slasher movies from the 1970s fall under the label “giallo,” which is to say crime, rather than horror.

Another field in which horror gained massive popularity in Italy is that of comics (see Camilletti, “Comics and the Gothic”). From the 1960s onward, Italy saw the widespread diffusion of the so-called “fumetto nero”—a broad term encompassing a variety of monthly publications centered on crime stories (most notably *Diabolik*) and on Gothic and horror elements combined with sexually explicit drawings, as in the case of *Jacula*, *Satanik*, and so on. The 1980s also saw the publication of *Dylan Dog* (still in print to this day), which gained a vast, unprecedented audience almost immediately, with hundreds of thousands of copies sold per month. Clearly, the case of *Dylan Dog* can be viewed as an example of the peculiar relationship between Italian culture and the horror genre: following a pattern already seen in Italian cinema, *Dylan Dog*, the most famous, iconic, and commercially successful Italian horror comic book series, is not set in Italy, but rather in the United Kingdom. Yet, the ways in which the United Kingdom is represented in *Dylan Dog* attest to a complex process of remediation that reflects both the postmodernist climate of that decade and the difficulty of adapting horror tropes to Italy.

Dylan Dog is postmodern in its intense metatextuality: the first issue of the series, notably, is inspired by George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), with several plates reproducing scenes from the film, which the eponymous protagonist even watches in a movie theater; the title (*L’alba dei morti viventi*), however, reprises the sequel to Romero’s movie, *Dawn of the Dead* (co-produced by Dario Argento), while Dylan’s assistant is Groucho, a Groucho Marx lookalike. At the same time, the foreign setting offers the authors a blank slate on which to project whatever they wish without being confined by narrow national borders. The London imagined by Scavi (who never set foot in the city before publishing the comics) is generic, non-descriptive, and modeled on tourist guides, while the choice of the zombie theme (which is essentially alien from the British tradition of horror) is a reference to the contemporary exploits in the genre by directors like Lucio Fulci, as well as a metaphor for a vast array of social problems in Italian society at the time, from political radicalism to heroin abuse. In this sense, *Dylan Dog* constitutes a perfect example of the articulate relationship between Italian horror and Italian culture, while also demonstrating the level of creativity and complexity that Italian horror products can achieve.⁶

⁶ Some of the issues discussed here in relation to *Dylan Dog* emerged during the workshop on Italian Gothic-horror comics in translation. The event, organized by Fabio Camilletti as part of the Italian Seminar Series in conjunction with the Warwick Comics Research Network, took place at the University of Warwick on November 1, 2023.

In the literary field, a distinct stream of horror publications is perhaps more difficult to find: editorial series intended for mass audiences, like *I racconti di Dracula* or *KKK—I classici dell'orrore*, were never as popular as Mondadori's *gialli* or the sci-fi *Urania* series. Even today, the work of publishers specialized in the field is perhaps less visible than that of their counterparts in other genres: while every Italian bookstore contains a rich section of national crime fiction, with authors like Andrea Camilleri and Donato Carrisi attaining international success, the same could hardly be said of horror. Yet, independent (one might even say militant) publishers like Edizioni Hypnos and Zona 42 tirelessly promote the genre by publishing books that are simultaneously in dialogue with the international horror tradition and stylistically refined. In terms of international recognition, moreover, things seem to be changing for Italian horror: as recently as 2023, Luigi Musolino's collection *A Different Darkness* was shortlisted for the World Fantasy Awards.

By discussing the horror genre alongside horror as an experience in the Italian context, this issue of *Italian Quarterly* blazes a new critical trail in terms of the many ways in which this word permeates Italian cultural production. Furthermore, taking into account mainstream literature together with more markedly genre products allows one to see the intersections between these allegedly separate, but in reality closely intertwined, fields of cultural production.

This issue contains contributions from well-established scholars as well as early-career researchers. The order of the essays offers readers a chronological overview of the many manifestations of horror in Italian literature and culture. Fabio Camilletti's "The Abjection of Horror in Romantic Italy" examines the roles of terror and horror in the Classical–Romantic quarrel in Italian culture at the start of the nineteenth century. The study explores how the distancing from and integration of these elements into other forms are closely linked to the evolving self-perception of Italian identity. Marco Battaglia turns to the visual arts in his "Piranesi's Horrors: Sepulchral Ruins, Gothic Prisons," in which he investigates the artworks of Giovanni Battista Piranesi and their relationship to contemporary Gothic imagery. Moving on to the twentieth century, Roberta Bulla discusses Dino Buzzati's non-fiction writings in her "'The Nameless Horror': Probing the Unfathomable in Dino Buzzati's *Cronaca Nera*." Bulla explores the ways in which Buzzati, a renowned author in the fantastic tradition, imbues his journalistic work with the lexicon and imagery of horror. Annamaria Elia, in her "Agentività delle piante. *Ecophilia*, post-apocalissi e mostruoso vegetale nei racconti della fantascienza italiana tra gli anni Sessanta e Ottanta," focuses on the relationship between horror and science fiction, and on their capacity to dramatize and represent the agency of the vegetal world. By taking into account a vast corpus ranging from established authors like Primo Levi to lesser-known contributors to sci-fi magazines, Elia shows the extent to which the imagination of plant horror was central to Italian speculative fiction

in the second half of the twentieth century. Andrea Capra shows the breadth of Elena Ferrante's engagement with the topic of horror, especially as it relates to matters of powerlessness and the absence of control. Focusing on the Neapolitan Novels and Ferrante's concepts of *smarginatura* and *frantumaglia*, Capra's "To Dissolve and to Shatter: The Role of Horror in Elena Ferrante" traces a path in Ferrante's work that emphasizes how Ferrantian horror goes well beyond her use of motifs taken from the horror genre, and is in fact one of the key elements of her production as a whole. Roberta Tabanelli focuses instead on Saverio Costanzo's TV adaptation of Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*. In "The Horror Subtext in Saverio Costanzo's Adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend* as Authorial Signature," Tabanelli examines the interplay between Costanzo's use of horror genre motifs in his production as a moviemaker, and the horrifying elements already present in Ferrante's novels. In so doing, Tabanelli's essay questions matters of filiation regarding cinematic adaptations of literary works, and emphasizes Costanzo's authorial signature present in his rendition of *My Brilliant Friend*. Finally, Marco Malvestio's "Il buio italiano di Luigi Musolino. L'orrore dell'Antropocene e i limiti del folk horror" discusses the work of Luigi Musolino, an emerging Italian author of horror and weird fiction whose literary output has been well received abroad. By addressing Musolino's folk horror, Malvestio not only shows how this sub-genre addresses the many environmental issues of the Anthropocene, but also how Anglo-American models underpin the imaginary of Italian folk horror, in ways that may not always be transferable to the Italian context. Two interviews conclude this issue: the first with Michele Mari, one of the most eminent contemporary Italian writers, who discusses his relation to literary horror and real-life *orrore*; the second with Lucio Besana, an emerging writer and screenwriter in the field of horror and the weird, who addresses the difficulties of, and opportunities associated with, writing horror in Italy today.

Much work remains to be done: these notes on horror and the ordinary, as well as on horror/*orrore* and genre, will hopefully serve as a springboard for future scholarship, and an invitation to reflect on the potentialities that a focus on horror as an experience discloses for research in the humanities. While the entertaining and enthralling qualities of the horror genre are indisputable, is there anything at all redemptive about horror as an experience, both in itself and as depicted or mediated by the arts? How does horror differ from adjacent experiences such as terror, dread, trauma, or anxiety? Do horror's modern manifestations differ from, for instance, how it was represented, experienced, and retold in premodern times? Are there commonalities between how different cultures and traditions render that which horrifies, be it in thinking or in the arts? And in terms of genre, what is peculiar to horror in the representation of *orrore*? Do formulaic tropes and narrative frames serve as a tool to express otherwise unspeakable emotions, or do they end up anesthetizing them?

Paying closer attention to Italian Studies, are there specific aesthetics in Italian literature or cinema to depict the horrifying, beyond the horror genre? What are the intertextual residues of the horror that emanates from the canon's core, represented by Dante's *Inferno* or Boccaccio's depictions of the plague? As our literature becomes progressively more diverse, how do first- and second-generation migrant authors voice the at times horrifying vicissitudes of their pasts in their works? What is the relationship between the horror genre and contemporary Italian culture? And how does horror manifest in forms of art that this issue does not directly address, such as, for instance, theater, music, or poetry?

These are some of the questions with which, we believe, future scholarship on horror and *orrore* will have to wrestle. Our hope is that through the perspective shift that this issue of *Italian Quarterly* proposes, horror will be recognized as more widespread and mundane than criticism currently considers it to be. The widespread, mundane nature of horror should come as no surprise. In the end, we know that horror resides in the ordinary: on the one hand, we use the *word* "horror" more broadly in daily life than we do in relation to the extreme situations that define the genre; on the other hand, the *experience* of horror is itself ordinary—potential and incipient in many familiar situations. To evoke a Wittgenstenian adage, "what is incomprehensible is that *nothing*, and yet *everything*, has changed" (Wittgenstein II §474): by bringing the word "horror" back to its everyday use, we are renewing our scholarly endeavors by making them cohere with what we have known all along.

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