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Elliptical bodies: gender, biology and such unknowns...

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Abstract: This paper addresses the question of whether there is a necessary link between gender and biology. Since the construction of the self is formed by experiences, and biology dictates that women and men have irreducible differences (giving birth and menstruating being the most obvious), it suggests that the self is always already affected by biology. Hence reducing everything to cultural construction would be potentially anthropocentric: the underlying logic of 'social construction' is that everything is under our control, that our very being is the result of a cognitive process, and hence ultimately self-generated. More pertinently, if everything is reduced to culture, it no longer has any meaning (if everything is political, politics as such no longer has any meaning; if everything is social, the socius as such is dead). However if there are some biological irreducibilities, there is always already a certain part of us that is beyond us, that we are born into, that is unknowable (and potentially will always be unknowable). It is the gap between biology and gender, the unknowability that is biology – a part of gender, but always already haunting it with its impossibility of being known, controlled, subsumed under a particular conception – that this paper seeks to meditate. In other words, biology is the ellipsis when it comes to knowing our bodies, knowing our selves; indicating nothing more but the fact that something is there, something that may add or subtract, and which affects one, but in ways that one cannot be privy to, until it happens. One of the major notions posited is that it is precisely the irreducibility of biology that prevents gender as a category from not only becoming a totalizing imperative, but more importantly from becoming meaningless.

Keywords: Gender, Biology, Post-structural philosophy, Literature, Ellipsis, Unknowability

Assuming Gender is a Cardiff University project, comprising a journal, seminar, and lecture series. This interdisciplinary project is dedicated to the timely analysis of constructions of gendered texts, practices, and subjectivities and seeks to engage with contemporary conceptions of gender, while participating in the dialogues and tensions that maintain the urgency of such conversations.

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Elliptical bodies: gender, biology, and such unknowns...

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Perhaps we should begin by considering the beautiful epigraph in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* which goes, 'it must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel',¹ and in particular, how it speaks to us, of the unknown, and the unknowable. For if it is only told 'as if by a character in a novel', we are forever left unsure of whether the 'I' is that of the narrator or of a character: in fact, the narrator and the character are always already indistinguishable.

There is really no reason why one cannot consider the possibility that the narrator and the character are exactly the same entity. This would suggest that the narrative is unfolded at the very moment of its unfolding. What this opens is the very status of knowledge itself: for the narrator is supposed to possess a certain over-arching knowledge of what happens not only before but to a certain degree after – there is a certain knowledge of the future the narrator possesses that everyone else in the tale is denied (even the reader, especially the reader). Once the possibility of the narrator being veiled from the future of the narrative is considered, an uncertainty is introduced to the entire narrative, not just from the angle of whether the narrator can be trusted or not (of course (s)he cannot) but more pertinently whether anything uttered by the narrator is constative, or can even be considered a constative statement. What this suggests is that everything uttered by the narrator is a future-anterior statement: perhaps with some knowledge of the future, and a particular version of the past, but never in the present except for the very fact that it is uttered in the present. Which then enters the entire narrative into the realm of undecideability: the only thing that one can be certain of is the fact that the narrator is uttering the narrative; nothing else can we be sure of.

This is the problem we are faced with when we attempt to think of the relationship between biology and gender: the 'I' that is the basis of gender – the self of identity, the self that is constructed – is never fully determinable; it is always already the 'I' of the narrator (the one who is constructing the tale) and also that of a character in the tale. In fact, one might also begin to posit that the 'I' is both narrating and being narrated at the same time, in the same moment, in the very gesture of articulating the 'I'. This

¹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), [Epigraph].

suggests that the 'I' is never either completely singular nor is it merely part of a network, part of the rest of the tale: echoing Jean-Luc Nancy's beautiful formulation, the 'I' is a *singular-plurality*; always already singular and in relation with an other, another, all others.

The social-construction logic of gender has always been concerned with its status as plurality, where the 'I' is seen as the result of forces, influence, power, surrounding it, acting on it, acting with it. In this way, the construction of the self is affected through the imaginary: to be more precise, the self is formed in the imaginary. If you prefer the language of psychoanalysis, it is the negotiation between the superego and the id that is at stake here. However, reducing everything to a cultural construction would be an anthropocentric gesture: if everything is constructed, the underlying logic is that the 'I' is self-generated, or at the very least, the product of a solely human intervention. By extension, the human is the centre around which everything is generated. More than that, the implication is that the entire construction of the 'self' is under our control, that our very being is the result of a cognitive process; our very being can be subsumed under knowledge, and more pertinently our knowing. This is not to say that we do not perceive things in and through the self: after all, things happen to us, and we have to rely on our phenomenological senses to attempt to understand them. A false decentredness is just as problematic as its underlying premise is that 'one is so important that one has to decentre oneself so as not to affect everyone else'. However, to claim that one's phenomenological perception is true – or even worse, truth – would require a pre-determined system of decoding, to which all experiences are matched up against: this would suggest a minimum of actual correspondence – by way of responding to a particular situation – with the singularity of any event. We can see this again in psychoanalysis in the attempt to subsume the unknowable under the category of the 'unconscious'; everything that is unaccountable is then put under this, as if to say 'leaving this aside everything else is knowable': the 'unconscious' becomes the exception in order for normalcy – 'that we can comprehend the self' – to sustain itself. As Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* elegantly posits,

the unconscious, and the psychical order in general, become the insurmountable agency, giving the right of trespass over every previous individual and social formation ... the idea of the unconscious, like the idea of a consciousness, remains an idea of discontinuity and rupture. Put simply, it substitutes the irreversibility of a lost object and a subject forever 'missing' itself, for the

positivity of the object and the conscious subject. However decentred, the subject remains within the orbit of Western thought, with its 'successive topologies' ...²

In this manner, the imaginary that is the 'self', is the assumption in order to validate the axiom that the human is the centre of the world: instead of an unknown, an unknowable, psychoanalysis attempts to reinscribe it into a positivistic mode by terming it an 'unconscious'; merely the direct opposite of what is known, and hence still governed by the same logics, the same calculations.

An examination of the very premise of 'social construction' – that the 'self' is generated by experiences – problematizes the notion of the full plurality of gender (where man and woman are exactly the same, interchangeable, and only a product of influences, and more precisely a product of influences that can be known, cognitized and ultimately controlled). For if experiences are the basis of the self, then surely the differences in biology between women and men would result in different experiences: in fact the biological differences would be what Hélène Cixous calls the *irreducible difference* between the sexes. This is not to say that biology is deterministic, but to deny that it has an influence on experiences – and going by the very logic of social construction, gender, and hence the self – would be false. The fact that only a woman can experience pregnancy, and menstruation, suggests that these are absolute differences that separate her from any man, all men. This is not to say that all pregnancies and all menstruations are exactly the same as well: each experience is perhaps unique, but to deny that they play a part in the formation of the self is false. Since these experiences are biological, pre-determined by sex, this suggests that they are beyond social construction. Perhaps one can argue that the manner in which we speak of them, know them, attempt to understand them, still falls within language and hence within our constructions: however I would like to consider the fact that since they precede language (one does not have to conceive of menstruation in order to menstruate) there is a part of the experience that escapes cognition, that slips all attempts to understand, to know.

Even if we choose to constitute that all knowing comes in and through language – that we have no choice but to represent in order to know – this does not mean that we are able to completely understand through language itself. For if all knowing comes through language, this suggests that we can only know after the second experience; for it is only after the first time that any sort of

² Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1993), p. 143.

correspondence – referentiality – can be established. Hence, this suggests that all knowledge is based on memory; a correspondence between our memory and a particular phenomenological experience. However, any thinking of memory always already opens the register of forgetting. Perhaps here, we should slow down a little, and consider what it means to say ‘I forgot.’ One can always posit that ‘I forgot’ is a performative statement – anyone who has needed an excuse has used this phrase umpteen times. What is more interesting is to consider the possibility that ‘I forgot’ is a constative statement: in this case, for the statement to be true, there cannot be an object to it; the moment there is an object to ‘I forgot,’ then strictly speaking one has remembered what one has forgotten. Hence, unless one is deliberately lying, the utterance ‘I forgot’ is one in which there is no referent; at best the subject is uttering the very fact that (s)he has forgotten and nothing more. And if we take into consideration the fact that one is never able to control forgetting – it happens to one – this suggests that it is external to one; it is both exterior to our knowing, and its very finitude. In other words, we can never know if any act of memory also brings with it a moment of forgetting; which suggests that ultimately, we can never know if we even know.

Giorgio Agamben teaches us that in Greek, there are two kinds of life: ‘zoë’ which is ‘bare life’, and ‘bios’ which is one’s ‘social, and political life’. This suggests that one’s ‘bios’ is communal, in relation with others, in plurality; hence one’s ‘bios’ is always already in representation. It is one’s ‘zoë’ which remains wholly singular, unrepresented – perhaps even unrepresentable – and ultimately unknowable. However the fact that one is not privy to one’s own ‘zoë’ hardly means that it will cease to affect one: the most obvious instance of that would be death; the impossibility of knowing death never stops one from eventually experiencing it.³

Perhaps this is the point where we can posit that biology (especially in the sense of ‘zoë’) has been subsumed under the auspices of gender. By completely separating biology from gender, it is made the absolute other: this exclusionary gesture allows the positivistic logic of gender to sustain itself. In this manner, gender, and by extension the self, is reduced to a calculable logic: the ‘I’ is now totally within cognition. Considering that there is no logic which can sustain itself – ‘no proof can possibly exist determining the truth or falsity of the undecidable statement in the language of the system within which

³ For an excellent meditation on ‘bare life’ see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

the statement was formulated⁴ – in order for there to be any totality (in the form of a consistent logic that can prove itself within its own logical system), some form of exclusion – by way of the suppression of the axiom that does not conform to the internal logic of the system – must take place.

However, it is not as if making gender clear, completely knowable, comes without a price: once the self is completely calculable, it is also completely exchangeable, completely transparent. In response to his own playfully teasing question – ‘what happens after the orgy?’ – Jean Baudrillard quips, ‘every individual category is subject to contamination, substitution is possible between any sphere and any other: there is total confusion of types’.⁵ Hence,

each category is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all the other categories. When everything is political, nothing is political anymore, the word itself is meaningless. When everything is sexual, nothing is sexual anymore, and sex loses its determinants. When everything is aesthetic, nothing is beautiful or ugly anymore, and art itself disappears. This paradoxical state of affairs, which is simultaneously the complete actualization of an idea, the perfect realization of the whole tendency of modernity, and the negation of the idea and that tendency, their annihilation by virtue of their very success, by virtue of their extension beyond their own bounds ...⁶

If gender is now totally transparent, we have reached the stage of the trans-gendered, in the precise sense of everything is now engendered. However, once everything is gendered, gender itself ‘loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all the other categories’; gender itself loses all meaning. Ironically, by attempting to locate gender in everything, gender itself is rendered completely empty.

It is at this point that biology has to be re-inscribed into gender. For only if the unknowability that is biology is considered within gender – if unknowability is part of knowledge itself – is the gesture of totalizing knowledge, the gesture of totalitarianism avoided. This is the notion of knowing, understanding, that we glimpse in Werner Hamacher’s deceptively simple formulation, ‘understanding is in want of understanding’.⁷ Only if every attempt to know something brings an inability to comprehend within the same gesture, acknowledges a lack of understanding, is the full potentiality of the object of understanding

⁴ Avital Ronell, *Finitude's Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), p. 57.

⁵ Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1999), p.8.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 9-10.

⁷ Werner Hamacher, *Premises: Essays in Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 1.

itself acknowledged. In terms of gender, it has to be thought of as a code – in that one learns one's role to play; it is a form that is repeated, and normalized, only because there is mass repetition of that particular role. As Avital Ronell has argued in *Crack Wars*, there is no culture without addiction: it is only when enough people are hooked to a particular way of life – a certain role – that it becomes cultural. This opens the question of why certain roles are legitimate whilst others are not; an important question for sure, but not one that can be addressed here, and that we have to momentarily defer from.⁸ However what remains unknown is how these roles come into being in the first place; the question of origin remains unknowable to us. And it is this gap in the hermeneutical circle that allows the potentiality of the object in question – gender in this case – to remain un-effaced.

The category of gender – like any category – is faced with the problem of the relation between the part and the whole. For 'gender' to mean anything, it has to have a certain universality, applicable to everyone in general; but at the same time, it is also only able to derive any meaning from a particular instance, in its applicability to each singular person. In order that the whole is a sum of its parts, there has to be an effacement of the particularity of each situation – the over-arching concept has to be perfectly repeatable – each situation has to be treated as exactly the same, corresponding to a pre-determined set of criteria. However since each instance is a singularity, this suggests that it brings with it a unique set of circumstances, and hence there is no repeatability possible: even if the criteria were the same, there is no reason that the singular set of circumstances will ever match it in the same way. Hence, as Werner Hamacher posits,

the hermeneutical circle thus opens up and makes every closure into a hermeneutic fiction – a heuristically useful fiction, no doubt, a fiction capable of economizing on a deficit of understanding, but a fiction that can neither accommodate itself to the ideal of perfect understanding nor redress the loss, constitutive of language and understanding, which the ellipses themselves introject.⁹

And these ellipses, which are usually considered an aberration to writing – bringing the possibility of the incompleteness, or incompleteability of sentences to the foreground—or at best a mere supplement – a graphical novelty – are in fact, 'the rhetorical equivalent of writing: it depletes, or de-completes, the whole

⁸ Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

⁹ Hamacher, 'Hermeneutical Ellipses: Writing the Hermeneutical Circle in Schleimacher' in *Premises*, p.76.

so as to make conceptual totalities possible. And yet every conceivable whole achieved on the basis of ellipsis is stamped with the mark of the original loss'.¹⁰ Hence gender as a category is always already incomplete: all social-construction theory, or in fact any theory that attempts to make an over-arching claim, always has to rely on the fiction of a complete hermeneutic circle, held together by the ellipsis, which is then denied in that very same gesture. Once the ellipsis is taken into consideration, not only is complete knowability a fiction, but more than that, whether it can be known even through fiction is itself ultimately unknowable. In the context of gender, it is biology that is its ellipsis; it is biology that is its unknowability.

It is this unknowability – this ellipsis that both allows one to know yet never allows this knowing to be complete – that Jacques Derrida notes in his magisterial text *Right of Inspection* when he argues that even though the reader has a 'right to see', and that it take a certain 'skill to see', in that it is not a random, purely arbitrary act, (s)he is always already bound by a 'law of seeing'. After all, 'you have the authority to tell yourself these stories but you cannot gain access to the squares of that other one. You are free but there are rules'.¹¹ In this way, reading, and seeing, is a negotiation between the reader and the text. One is free within a certain set of rules – after all one is bound by grammar – and one's reading is an interjection, an interplay between the reader and the text within the rules laid out, the rules before which both the reader and the text must stand; 'there is a law that assigns the right of inspection, you must observe these rules that in turn keep you under surveillance'.¹² In order to play the game – the game of seeing, the game of reading – you have no choice but to 'remain within these limits, this frame, the frame-work of these frames ...'.¹³ And more than this, a text gives both you and itself (through its characters, through the outcome of its own narrative),

a right to look, the simple right to look or to appropriate with the gaze, but it denies you that right at the same time: by means of its very apparatus it retains that authority, keeping for itself the right of inspection over whatever discourses you might like to put forth or whatever yarns you might spin about it, and that in fact comes to mind before your eyes.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 74.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Right of Inspection*, trans. David Wills (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1998), p. 1.

¹² Ibid. p. 1.

¹³ Ibid. p. 1.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 2.

It is in this way that every seeing reveals and conceals at the same time; every seeing always already involves a certain inability to see, an inability to know. In effect every reading is a positing, taking a position, making a choice, which comes with a moment of madness, of blindness. Otherwise all one is doing is re-writing the text; otherwise one might as well not be reading at all.

It is Franz Kafka that has taught us that one can never know the law which one stands before. But just because we do not know the law does not mean that it does not affect us. Hence all we can ever do is to attempt to guess what this law that has effects on us is: this we see in the gestures of K, from *The Trial*, who can do nothing but posit what is required of him. It is this positing that is captured in the statement of the priest in the cathedral when he says to K, 'no ... you don't have to consider everything true, you just have to consider it necessary'.¹⁵ This is due to the fact that K is faced with a law that he must approach, and which has power of judgment over him, but at the same time, is a law that is always hidden from him. And it is this positing that allows K, at least momentarily, to respond to his situation, even as much as it may be futile. Otherwise, it would be a situation of complete non-response, one that would still not free him from the effects of the law. But this is a response that takes into account the blindness that is inherent within every attempt at responding; the unknowability within every attempt at grasping the situation, and the provisionality of any knowing – even, and perhaps especially, the attempt at understanding the self.

Death is this unknowability that resides in every act of knowing, every attempt to know: not a death that is merely a phase of life, an end-point that is always already taken into consideration in advance, death as a negativity to life, but death as such, death that is a pure void, that can at best be constituted as a catachrestic metaphor; death as a pure name, naming nothing except for the fact that it is naming. This suggests that we cannot define death, that at best we might begin to approach it but that it will always already slip away from us. It is not as if we cannot know death because it is beyond us – in fact it is part of us, a part of us that is (n)either within (n)or without us. In this sense we are always stricken with death, but a death from within that remains unknowable to us, one that we can at best glimpse as a metaphor, as a narrative, as fiction.

¹⁵ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998). p. 223.

And as K has no choice but to posit, to guess, to plunge into the law, perhaps we might attempt to do the same. Even as much as any attempt to understand death as such is imaginary at best, we either have to abandon any hope of understanding, or we can attempt to approach the imaginary, with some imagination. Here we might even attempt to channel an echo of Beckettian hope, whilst allowing for the full absurdity of the situation to play out – after all we cannot go on, but we must go on. It is with this in mind that we approach Marguerite Duras's beautiful tale *The Malady of Death*. Perhaps in this non-direct way, we might begin to catch a glimpse of the unknowability that haunts the self, that is always already of the self, that does not allow the self to totalize. One must never forget that we can only see ghosts when are not looking for them. In other words, we will approach the question of gender – taking into account the unknowability of biology – 'as if' we can do so; 'as if' we can even begin to know.

In *The Malady of Death*, there is a conversation between a 'you' and a 'her': at first glance, it would seem that it is between a man and a woman in a room by the sea. Occasionally an 'I' – perhaps a narrator; perhaps the 'he' – interjects. It is this impossibility of distinguishing, of separating the 'he' and the 'I' within the text that bring the 'she' into question, that opens the question of referentiality; if one is never able to discern who is uttering the utterances, the poles of elocutionist and referent – the binary of subject and object – are imploded. At the end, all you can say about the status of referentiality in the text, to borrow a phrase from the very first time the 'I' appears, is 'I don't know';¹⁶ not just an 'I don't know' in terms of a lack of knowledge, but more precisely an 'I don't know who the 'I' that is uttering this statement is in the first place'. An echo of this is found later in the line 'you think you know you know not what ...'¹⁷ the first register it opens is 'whether one can know they don't know something'; another potentially more interesting register is, 'if one only "thinks" one knows one does not know, then whether something is known or not known is now unclear'. In either instance, the difference between knowing and not knowing is blurred; they are no longer antonyms but rather parts of each other: in other words, every time something is known, there is always already something unknown within it. The unknowability is not only in the content – the object to which the utterance refers to – but more radically in the relationality of the

¹⁶ Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Press, 1986), p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.40.

subject to itself: each time one utters 'I don't know', one is attempting to name oneself as well, to utter one-self into being.

The only difference that is posited between the 'I', 'you', and 'her' is found in the line, 'your difference, your death'.¹⁸ What is unknowable – the difference between the utterers – what can only at best be posited – is death itself. This is why the tale is named *The Malady of Death*: death is always within one (one is a carrier of death from the very beginning) and always also from without (death ultimately claims you). But it is not as if one ever knows how death affects one: 'one knows without knowing how'¹⁹ and more than that, 'whoever has it doesn't know he's a carrier, of death. And also because he's like to die without any life to die to, and without even knowing that's what he's doing.'²⁰

One is tempted to turn to the afterword, to the commentary in *The Malady of Death*, by someone, someone we too easily presume to be Marguerite Duras herself (to gain a certain level of security; to cling onto this interpretation) to stabilize as a fact the presence of two persons in the scene. However, as one can never be certain of the status of the commentator, this security – and assuredness – is called into doubt, into question. It would be too quick, too convenient, to ascribe this to a self-reflexive gesture, as a foregrounding of itself as a work of fiction. This is unless we explore the very limits of self-reflexivity, and open the possibility of a questioning of who this self – through the 'I' – is. Hence it is not so much the status of the work as fiction that is fore-grounded, but the fictionality of the self that is reflected upon. It is this unknowability – this indiscernability of the status of the self, of the possibility of the multiple self(s) – that is the gap that allows us to read, to respond with the text, but always only provisionally, situationally; each reading is a singular reading, a positing of both the self that is reading, and the self that is read.

This suggests, each time the self is constituted it is at best done provisionally. And since one can never be sure whether one knows the self – since all knowledge of the self brings with it the possibility of an unknowability – this suggests that all we are doing is speaking of the self 'as if' we are able to do so. Hence, each time we utter 'I', we are naming the self. In this situation, the 'I' is the medium, the space – the very gap as it were – for one's biology – one's 'zoë' – and one's represented self – one's gender – to communicate with each other. And this is a communication that does not premise on knowing the other,

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 32.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 19.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 19.

subsuming the other under one's understanding, but instead maintains the full otherness of the other, whilst attempting to touch, to negotiate, to respond to and with the other. This is communication as Lucretius posits: a negotiation that happens in the skin where two (or more) parties attempt to touch each other; and where both parties are affected, altered even, but in ways in which can only be known after, or at, the moment of communication.²¹ And it is death – what remains exterior to one's cognition, and yet happens to one; always already to come – that allows the self to maintain itself as irreducibly different from every other, including itself; that allows the self to be, and yet remain unsubsumable by anything else.

By allowing the self to maintain its status as the gap between biology and gender – the gap that allows them to affect each other, yet at the same time never allows how they do so to be known – a totalitarian theory, one that subsumes every situation under itself, is prevented from coming into being; neither biology nor gender is rendered absolute. The unknowability of the self both allows biology and gender to communicate with each other, but also ensures that communication is impossible at the same time: in this sense, the exchange between them is always already a *symbolic exchange* – one where there is no equalization, flattening out of differences, abstraction, but only reversibility, play – or even better still, an *impossible exchange*, an exchange between *irreducible differences*. How biology and gender affect each other can never be calculated, predictable, nor known in advance: all we can posit is that they do; and that each exchange happens only in the moment of exchange.

Not only does the irreducibility of their difference(s) prevent either biology or gender from subsuming the other, it also allows both biology and gender to be as such: otherwise by consuming the other completely, they – biology and gender – would consume themselves, into meaninglessness, into nothingness.

²¹ Lucretius, *Sensation and Sex*, trans. R.E. Latham (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 39-60.

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