

The friction of the animal and the divine

Sex and the circus in Neil Jordan's *The Miracle* (1991)

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Abstract:

This article looks at representations of early sexual experience in Neil Jordan's *The Miracle* (1991). It contrasts the fantasies and the realities of the parallel sex lives of the film's teenage protagonists, which are central to the narrative and set within a travelling circus. Both the circus ring and the Catholic Church feature in Jordan's film as locations in which sexual desires are expressed, and this article considers the associated functions of the actors and icons proper to these spaces as we see them on screen. It thereby forges new critical connections between *The Miracle* and prose, poetry, and plays written by W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge. The article also makes extensive use of an original and as yet unpublished interview conducted with Neil Jordan in June 2014.

Keywords circus; Jordan; sexuality; Yeats; Synge

The Circus Association of Ireland published journal-cum-fanzine *Circus* between 1990 and 2000. Over ten years, the magazine detailed trade secrets such as the latest developments in human physical performance styles, state-of-the-art designs in circus machines, appara-

tus and architecture, and the practices of world-class animal trainers working in Ireland. *Circus* is caught between looking forward and looking back, combining historical features with news and reviews. The magazine shows that the circus is most often a family business: photographic portraits chronicling major events in the personal histories of Ireland's leading show families – births, deaths, and marriages – which are prominent in the magazine. On facing pages, trends in Irish consumerism are seen in promotions for Clairol hair colour or adverts for Irish-manufactured farm machinery. And of course there are announcements from the circuses themselves detailing their touring routes for the coming or current season: Ireland's National Circus Fossett's took a full-page advertisement in *Circus* in November 1990. Audiences could expect a terrific show from famed ringmaster Edward Fossett Jnr and his troupe. Mr Fossett would command expertly an African elephant, camels, llamas, zebras and myriad horses – big and little, chestnut and arab. Fossett's also presented exotic acts to the people of Ireland including El Hakim the Fakir (played by familiar favourite Barry Walls) and their latest version of the ever-popular American Frontier narrative "The Westerners with Chief Otaki: Ropes, whips, fire etc." (*Circus* 1990, 6). Other less spectacular recommendations were printed beneath an aerial photograph of their big top: plain text quietly touts the names of a number of Fossett's performers recently featured on RTE, and records that movie goers would be able to see Fossett's on the big screen when "Neil Jordan's *The Miracle* filmed at Bray" was released the following year.

Jordan's film received relatively favourable reviews in more recognisable publications from British and American critics on its release in 1991. Relatively favourable reviews by Brian Palma and Julie Salamon appeared in the *Guardian* (Palma, 25) and the *Wall Street Journal* (Salamon, A10) respectively; however, both Palma and Salamon express reservations about whether or not the treatment of conventional themes and complex relationships is convincingly pulled off by the director and his lead actress, Beverly D'Angelo. Desson Howe's piece in the *Washington Post* was less kind: entitled 'No Cure for 'Miracle'', the critic felt that Jordan's "shortcomings" were, ironically, held up to the light by cinematographer Phillippe Rousselot's excellent camerawork (Howe, 41). Meanwhile, Philip French counted the film among his favourites in

an end-of-year round-up review for the *Observer* – an article for the English newspaper in which he all-too-easily claims Irish director Jordan as “one of half-a-dozen of our most remarkable movie-makers.” However, French is correct to appreciate and identify the particularly fine observations Jordan makes in his characters, which make *The Miracle* a picture of: “individuality and distinction on local subjects.” (French, 39).

French’s appraisal accords with the director’s own view of the film. Jordan commented in an interview given to the *Washington Post* around the time of the US release of *The Miracle* in July 1991, that: “By and large my preoccupations are more personal than political. More emotional.” (Hinson, G1) Therefore, social constructs of the present country are seen only incidentally and in the background of the film – for example, in people’s hairstyles and clothing, and in their leisure pursuits. Its soundtrack is not pop, soul, and rock-and-roll, but the compositions of Hoagy Carmichael, and the lyrics of Alberto Testa. Jordan’s effort is, then, to create a study of personal and emotional subjects that are in some ways out of time, if not timeless, through sensitive deployment of sounds and images that were considered classic, if not outdated, by 1991. But although *The Miracle* refuses to be fixed in time, it is definitely located in a place. Jordan’s own production notes describe his film as “particularly Irish” and state that its “Irishness” was constituted in its representation of male/female relationships (Zucker, 2008, 87). Predominantly, *The Miracle* explores these fundamental – and fundamentally Irish – male/female relationships through the character of adolescent Jimmy. The film is an Oedipal narrative of desire in which the boy obsessively pursues Renee, the mother he presumed dead, who responds to her son’s increasingly forceful advances with increasing ambivalence. Jordan’s subtle, sophisticated study of the emotional complexities bound up in encounters between Jimmy and Renee takes place between live performance venues: seaside dance hall, city theatre, parish church, and visiting Fossett’s Circus. These locations are generously full of images that come to frame the narrative. It is notable that dance hall and parish church belong to the real world of lived experience; these are familiar and unimpressive locations where Jimmy works alongside Sam, and in which he challenges the efforts of his father and the promise of his faith. Theatre and circus amusements, meanwhile, are transposed

from life to coexist in Jimmy's imagination, transforming his intangible emotions into vivid images. Tellingly, the theatre is where Renee works, and the circus is where Jimmy's fantasies about her are set. But the religious icons and circus images that feature separately as markers of distinct stages in his development towards a better-informed state of self-consciousness combine to produce the film's final sequence.

Jordan went back to Ireland, and back to his own childhood, after a run of professional disappointments in Hollywood. The director explained in interview why Bray, County Wicklow was his chosen location for *The Miracle*:

It's very simple. My mother grew up in Bray. I spent time there as a child. It's been a convenient backdrop to a number of my films. It's always had that strange element of fantasy against the general greyness of Irish life. (Interview, 10 June 2014)

Strangely fantastic Bray is seen as a version of Tír Na nÓg: dissimilar from the mystical vision of that mythical place that is seen in Jim Sheridan's *Into the West* (1992), and rather more robust and tawdry. The locations of leisure, pleasure, and entertainment between which the story is set are the concrete means by which the special effort required to secure eternal youth is made apparent. Women work particularly hard to arrest the appearance of maturity. It is "Not Mrs, boy. Miss." Strange who fascinates Jimmy and his friend Rose as they walk along the promenade. Renee believes that she "lost it a long time ago" – according to Rose, her hands betray that she is much older than she looks. Renee is associated with a time that is long before her own in her style. Before they speak, Jimmy thinks that given the general cool of her red lipstick, sunglasses, and "old-fashioned" stockings, her desirability must derive from the fact that she is French. But the pathos inherent within attempts to defer age and maturity are coolly recognised and easily accommodated by Jordan as plausible, personal narratives of desire. There is no suggestion in actress d'Angelo's characterisation of Renee that the desire to return to a past self has overtaken her, nor any hint of her visible surrender to a time that has gone. She is perfectly composed in classic fashions of the Forties

film star, which coordinate with Twenties popular jazz and Sixties bossa nova performed by Jimmy on saxophone and piano, to indicate the attractive and expressive potential of the outmoded.

Chiefly, it is Renee who produces the contemplative mode of *The Miracle*, which Elizabeth Butler Cullingford has accurately, if uncertainly, described as “oddly reverent” (Cullingford, 2001, 252). Oddly reverent is apt, since it connects the way in which D’Angelo is styled – both in performance and appearance – to the habit in which Waters continues to use the language of Catholic devotion to express the novel and exciting articulacy his generation found in popular icons. Jimmy often watches Renee swimming, and, accordingly, this lead actress and new-found object of adolescent fascination becomes, in a certain sense, a secular Star of the Sea. This association is reinforced by the recurring group of holidaying nuns who, so beautifully directed to imply a child-like delight, rush towards the water in their swimming hats and old-fashioned full-length bathing suits – costumes that are suitably muted counter symbols to the loud leotards sported by the female acts at Fossett’s which leave nothing to the imagination. Renee is further secured by the recurrent use of Hoagy Carmichael’s ‘Stardust’ (1927). Mitchell Parish’s lyrics trail images of a lost paradise garden out of the lover’s dreams into the world of musical performance. ‘Stardust’ is often heard in scenes where D’Angelo is costumed in sequined garments. Accordingly, she embodies her own memory of “the years gone by” when she stood literally demurred beside the garden wall – just inside Eden, or just on other side of that immovable symbol of lost innocence.

The circus, as both a real event and an imagined location, provides Jordan with images that give form to the unuttered narrative of Jimmy’s desire: to lose his innocence to Renee. The director elaborated in interview on his decision to give Fossett’s such a prominent role in *The Miracle*:

At the circus, there’s the possibility of enacting a real and a fantasy event [...] Selfishly, I suppose, I just chose what I could from the circus. I just wanted to create images.
(Interview, 10 June 2014)

As he related the cinematic influences that determined how the circus was made to appear in his film – Fellini’s *La Strada* (1954), Carol

Reed's *Trapeze* (1956), and Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) – Jordan emphasised the popular image of the circus as something “slightly sinister” or “slightly ‘other’”: especially in “the small and closed society of Ireland, performers are almost inevitably from strange and ‘other’ backgrounds – [there’s] always something almost orientalisised about them.” (Interview, 10 June 2014) The extent to which Fossett's, as filmed for *The Miracle*, could be considered sinister is arguably limited. Nevertheless, its slight ‘other’-ness and exotic potential, especially within the Irish context, are deployed to great effect in Jordan's deliberate co-ordination of sexual suggestion and religious expression within the circus image.

In scenes filmed during ‘real’ circus performances, Jordan makes frames out of human bodies or circus apparatus effectively to develop the plot. Jimmy is seen playing the saxophone alongside a bored-looking clown through the legs of a contortionist who bends over backwards to pick up a rose. At a more advanced stage in Jimmy's pursuit of Renee, the same contortionist is seen firing an arrow with her feet into a crudely shaped plasticine heart. These frames draw attention to Jimmy, indicating that his narrative of experience is manufactured out of conventions. They are, in themselves, complex structures, founded upon the woman and her actions in performance, which signal the drive of this peculiar narrative, as they elide the obviously sexual with clichéd icons of the banally romantic: the rose and the heart.

Unspoken truths are realised and wishes are fulfilled through the circus as constructed in Jimmy's dream-space. In filming the dream sequences Jordan wrote for his character, cinematographer Roussetot allows his camerawork to appear self-consciously naïve, transforming human faces into types or icons of themselves. Jimmy's first circus dream stages the son's primary, sexual fascination with his mother. Circus semiotician Paul Bouissac reveals that in the circus system “natural objects (humans, animals, artifacts) undergo a process of *iconization*” [original emphasis] (Bouissac, 2010, 36). In this scene, Renee becomes an illustrative case in point. She is cast as an aerialist, dressed in a sequined bustier to perform her routine; her son masters the *cord lisse* apparatus. Throughout the couple's performance, ‘Stardust’ is heard non-diegetically, played off-key by an unseen saxophonist. Renee smiles down at Jimmy in an illuminated inversion of an earlier dream, or memory in which, silhou-

etted, she is framed with the fringes of what is first taken as a miniature theatre, or promenading parasol, but then understood to be the decoration on infant Jimmy's pram. Intercut with these shots are moments from a sequence in which father Sam is burnt alive. First, a photograph of Jimmy's father catches light and then, flames spread to the man himself, lying in his single bed.

These dreamed images appear to resolve the Oedipal phase of Jimmy's development, a resolution necessarily postponed until the return of his mother. The result is the second circus dream, the desexualised content of which belongs to the more mature latency phase. The sequence reveals another aspect of Jimmy's emotional response to Renee's return: the unfulfilled hope for a reunion between mother and father. It is presented in the dress circle of Dublin's Olympia Theatre where his mother takes on the role of Frenchy in a stage adaptation of Hollywood Western, *Destry Rides Again* (1939). Jimmy has followed Sam and watched from a distance as his father tries to prevent Renee from future visits to Bray. As Jimmy's eyes close sleepily, curtains lift on an open-air, sea-side tableau in which Renee and Sam flank two kneeling circus elephants. His mother is outfitted as a saloon girl, while his father is dressed as a Mexican bandolero. Though symbolising adversarial communities in the folklore of the American West, the pair hold hands and bow together gracefully. Bouissac argues that family circus refuse to hint at of "any kind of dysfunction", and Jimmy manufactures for himself that same functioning unit out of the circus trope (Bouissac, 2010, 83). Seen in his family picture, framed in the symbolic logic of the traditional circus, his parents smile to an audience applauding them from elsewhere – apparently they are with Jimmy in the dress circle, since the hands that clap for this reunion overlap with the son's sleeping face. When he wakes he is alone again, save for the cleaning lady sweeping between the seats, too late to enjoy his parent's performance and to join in with the audience's elated response.

Jimmy's companion, the aspiring writer Rose, is equipped with the skills to interpret these dream sequences in the mode of the psychoanalytic literary critic. Rose deconstructs their significance according to basic principles she has learnt in an advanced alphabet of narrative theory, which she also uses to compose her own original fantasies. In turn, she delivers her lessons to Jimmy as they eat

chips and ice creams, walk the promenade, or ride the seaside rollercoaster. Rose ornaments these designs with excessive words and arch phrases that erupt into her conversations with Jimmy to disrupt the manner in which two teenagers might be expected to talk: “pellucid” and “gauche” are fine examples. It is in this vein that Rose describes from behind the bars of the circus animal lorries her advancing plan to seduce Jonner, the brutish animal trainer, and thereby orchestrate the final sequence of the film; Rose works to tame him through the inflictions of sexual frustration and humiliation. But in the scene shot in the animal lorries, Rose occupies an ambivalent position: there, she perhaps deliberately inverts her civilising intentions as she is equated with the animals that Jonner commands and coerces into performance.

The few critics who have hitherto considered the role of the circus in the film have insisted upon the relationship between the sequences shot at Fossett’s Circus and the fleeting circus images in W.B. Yeats’s ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ (*Last Poems*, 1939). Kathleen Gallagher Winarski reads *The Miracle* as a redemptive transformation of Yeats’s despair, enacted as Jordan stretches literary traditions to liberate his own fiction. According to Gallagher Winarski, the poet’s elusive theme is constituted by the director who can capture real circus animals on film, thereby “breathing life into Ireland’s stories of family and nation.” (Winarski, 1999, 98) However, Jordan himself denies the relevance of Yeats’s late-style melancholia for his work (Interview, 10 June 2014). And so, the Fossett’s animals as captured on film in scenes such as that where Rose is caught in the animal cages are not like Yeats’s past ‘theme’. Jordan sees in his circus creatures living, vital beings that offer him dramatically ironic images: his characters appear in these moments of identification in complex and negative terms.

In interview, the director commented: “At a circus you have tents; a series of cages; the vehicles. They house both people and animals. It’s a place where wonder, fantasy, magic have to be chained and put in cages.” (Interview, 10 June 2014) This lamentable recognition of the need to contain and limit the reach of wonder, fantasy, and magic bears striking resemblance to Yeats’s review of his own sense of the power of the artist in ‘The Theatre, The Pulpit, and The Newspapers’ (1903):

I had spoken of the capricious power of the artist and compared it to the capricious movements of a wild creature, and *The Independent*, speaking quite logically from its point of view, tells me that these movements were only interesting 'under restraint'. (Yeats, 1962, 119)

Yeats cannot have known that the point of view of *The Independent* aligned exactly with that of famed circus proprietor Frank Bostock, who wrote in 1903 (the same year in which the poet published his essay responding to and lamenting the logical perspective of the newspaper) about what his "public does not know", that: "the tamed animal is a chimera of the optimistic imagination, a forecast of the millennium." (Bostock, 1903, 185) Jordan communicates his own unrosy view of the caged animal through aspirant artist Rose, caged at the circus. His unwitting return to Yeats is even more complete as Bostock's symbolic chimera is mated with chimeras of the Catholic Church. For in her caged setting, Rose is also associated with the nuns she observes and narrates as they paddle and splash in the sea: "Nuns remain children longer than most [...] It's to do with their lifetime's confinement." According to Rose, nuns maintain their childhood beyond the expected time because they are "married to a man they never meet." That Jesus Christ should not be named outright and his proper sign should be replaced with the humbler concept of 'man' indicates the gentle irreverence with which Catholicism is viewed throughout *The Miracle*. But, importantly, Jordan's script casts forward a poignant, if naïve reflection on Rose as she is seen behind the circus bars. The inference is that, in being wedded to an absence, nuns stay children because they remain intact, and immaculate, in marriage. Rose is confined by the role she has given herself in Jimmy's present narrative of desire, within which her virginity and, by standard implication, her childhood are coincidental sacrifices. Both Catholic practices of devotion and adolescent sexual drives are, then, caught within this particular circus frame.

Prevailing critical approaches to *The Miracle* are arrested at the Oedipal phase of Jimmy's sexuality, and thereby fail to attend to both the dreamt circus form that represents his fantasies of deliverance, and the real circus image that represents Rose's sexual experience. Carole Zucker's reading falls short in this regard. She lauds

Jordan enthusiastically for entering “untrammelled territory” in his “postmodern fairy tale” and exploring: “a dark recess of the mind that has not been substantially addressed in thousands of years of folklore and fairy tales, although Oedipus is an obvious exception.” (Zucker, 2008, 89) Zucker’s reading is deficient, too, as it fails to appreciate the possibility that the conventional elements of Jordan’s narrative are themselves “particularly Irish”, and indebted to Irish literary traditions. Toni O’Brien Johnson has persuasively demonstrated how Irish literature’s most famous parricide, Synge’s Christy Mahon, is typical of medieval tales, and considers that his entertainment value for the coastal community of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) is derived from his concretisation of the archetypal struggle between youth and age – a contest hitherto confined to the oral tradition both within the setting of Synge’s play and the context of its production. Synge parallels the archetypal struggle between Christy and Old Mahon with that between Pegeen and the Widow Quin as they vie for Christy’s attention – Pegeen more energetically than the Widow. Elements of this tripartite male-female relationship are also explored by Jordan in *The Miracle*, most notably in Rose’s absent-minded disappointment at Jimmy’s lack of interest in her as sexual partner. “Gauche”, one of Rose’s prize words, is used disparagingly to dismiss the rather trashy and predictable narrative Jimmy invents for Renee before he realises her actual story. But gauche is an adjective that might just as easily catch Rose herself in the cross fire of her attempts to wound his image of Renee: she snaps cattily that it is probably the menopause that makes the older woman emotional.

Rose’s resolution to seduce, and thereby “humanise”, Jonner doubles in force after Jimmy promises that he will try to “work” on his jealousy. Instead, he remains preoccupied with Renee. The ambivalent, ambiguous mood in which Rose is seen in relation to Jonner lends to the uncertain tone of *The Miracle*. Zucker is quite incorrect in her statement that Jordan did not produce a sex scene until he filmed the extravagant sequences involving Julianne Moore and Ralph Fiennes in his adaptation of Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1999) (Zucker, 2008, 138); their couplings convey confidence, assurance, and a wealth of sexual experience. However, Jordan’s first sex scene is, in fact, played out by Rose and Jonner on the hay-strewn floor of a Fossett’s tent. It is less sophisticated, but consider-

ably more affecting. Rose and Jimmy discuss the humanising plan before it is affected. Jimmy asks Rose if it will not hurt, and Rose says, quite calmly, that it will. The intimation of the pain of a girl's first sexual experience gets to two orders of discomfort: the physical and the emotional. In what Jordan subsequently films, Rose is seen wooden and distracted as Jonner pumps energetically at her. Sexual pleasure is not supposed to be the end, but the means by which Rose sets the spectacular final sequence of the film in motion. But what she imagines before and narrates after the event in Jimmy's company has quite a different tenor. It is not the girl's sense of practicality, but rather her romantic bent that are conveyed in her descriptions. However, she differs from Gabriel as her overblown images are devoid of any mawkishness or melancholy: Rose sees herself in classical terms, like the goddess of love, with her hair spread out across the floor like a seashell. Conclusively, she owns the revised moment when Jimmy suggests that her crown might have been more like a fan: "Who's hair was it? *My* hair – like a seashell – on the hay." The girl sees herself after the fact as classical Venus, and not as conventional coquette.

The severance between the recorded image of the lived moment and the repetition of that moment taken out of memory and put into words allows the Rose/Jonner sex scene to be read as Romantic drama as defined by O'Brien Johnson in relation to the plays of Synge. According to her, the grotesque appears in Romantic drama as "the vital foil for the sublime"; the grotesque finds a correlate in the comic, while the sublime is associated with the awesomely dramatic (O'Brien Johnson, 1982, 2). To inject comedy into what is, ostensibly, a serious inquisition of morality is an action Jordan performs in *The Miracle*. Walking past the circus animal cages, Jimmy describes his mother's acting style as both comic and tragic. Rose pitches the central "story to do with love" involving father, mother, and son between tragedy and farce on the seaside rollercoaster. In even simpler terms, when Jimmy says that he is no longer "sad" at the end of the film, that makes Rose "happy". The mood of the film is, then, indefinite, or blurred. In his preface to the first published edition of *The Well of Saints* (1905), Yeats described the almost magical power of the masterful playwright over use of idiomatic language in resonant terms. For Yeats, Synge made "word and phrase dance to a very strange rhythm" that:

blurs definition, clear edges, everything that comes from the will, it turns imagination from all that is present, like a gold background in a religious picture, and it strengthens in every emotion whatever comes to it from far off, from brooding memory and dangerous hope. (ed. Saddlemyer, 1998, 53)

In the final sequence of *The Miracle*, Jimmy seeks relief from his anxieties in the parish church. He turns to plaster icons in the hope that they will turn his imagination from all that is present. These are the same icons to whom Rose had made irreverent devotions on his behalf, euphemistically asking in mischievous tones that they help him to win Renee in sexual conquest. But at that moment, Jimmy renounces his faith in their power; in the instant, Rose gives him “no reason to believe”. The passive, dispassionate saints, who are akin to his saintly-yet-defeated father Sam, stare blankly out at Jimmy, but at once seem to share the knowledge of ‘The Statues’ that inspired one of Yeats’s *Last Poems*: “Empty eyeballs knew / That knowledge increases unreality, that / Mirror on mirror mirrored is all show.” (Yeats, 1992, ll.20-22, 384) The potential of Jordan’s statues as intercessors and articulate advocates on behalf of the faithful has been overpowered by other secular images more ready and better able to turn the imagination away from the present time.

Jordan explains that while Jimmy might look to the church in desperation:

He finds no answer within the space of the church or the world it represents. But he does find it in his girlfriend’s sense of fun – in her imagination – in their mutual imaginations which are allowed to run riot. (Interview, 10 June 2014)

To return to ‘The Theatre, the Pulpit and the Newspapers’, Yeats argued that the theatre – that drama – was “the most immediately powerful form of literature, the most vivid image of life.” (Yeats, 1962, 119) It stood, then, in opposition to life’s enemies as they are instituted in the pulpit and the press. Transforming noun into similar adjective, Jordan is a director keenly aware of the power of theatricality – the dramatic – in the images he creates, and looks for cine-

matographers who are “willing to use colour and light and shade in a way that is consciously unrealistic.” (McIlroy, 1989, 115) The final opposition staged in *The Miracle* is not between the pulpit and the theatre; instead it is between the pulpit and the circus. Jimmy’s imagination literally runs riot at the close of the film, as Rose releases the animals that embody his brooding memory and dangerous hopes through her ambiguous self-sacrifice. In place of a miracle, the incredible presence of the circus elephant appears in the aisle, freed from its cage by Rose, as promised, with the keys she has stolen from Jonner as he pumped thoughtlessly away at her. Her act of revenge – Jordan’s own “anarchic, untrammelled gesture” – is at once an act of devotion to Jimmy (Interview, 10 June 2014). Upon exiting the church, he finds himself within a kinematic scene in which circus animals run comically wild on the promenade. Men rush after them, trying to recapture the llamas and lions, the horses and ponies, the zebras and monkeys that scatter across the seafront in place of the child-like nuns. And yet, despite the comedy of this scene, *The Miracle*’s final narrative note is deliberately off-key; to talk in simple terms of sadness and happiness is, at this point, unsatisfactory. Rose has given herself up to two boys in one act; there is no real resolution for Jimmy or his parents. Both nuns and animals will be returned to habitual life in the convent or at the circus. But in this wonderfully upsetting moment of symbolic equivalence that is sprung from the anxieties of juvenile sexuality, a fundamental belief that once belonged to Synge is displayed: “The gaiety of life is in the friction of the animal and the divine.” (ed. Saddlemyer, 1968, 186)

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