

**From:**

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## **History and Humour**

### **British and American Perspectives**

November 2013, 222 p., 32,99 €, ISBN 978-3-8376-2593-6

One tends to associate history with serious modes of presentation rather than with humorous ones. Yet Clio also smiles and laughs out loud: Comic renderings of historical events and figures have made a significant contribution to »popular« history since around 1800. This volume offers case studies on history and humour in Britain and the US from 1800 to the present, discussing various historical topics, actors and events from the Middle Ages to the recent past.

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# History and Humour

## Charting the Field

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BARBARA KORTE AND DORIS LECHNER

The series in which this book is published is concerned with ›popular‹ ways in which historical knowledge is generated, communicated and used in society.<sup>1</sup> Popular history is intended to appeal, and to appear relevant to those who are not professionally concerned with the past – the so-called ›general‹ audience who encounter history in their everyday lives because they want to be educated, because they are looking for orientation, or because they want to be entertained. Humorous representations of history are of obvious importance to such interests, and there are more of them than one might expect, even though history tends to be associated with serious modes of presentation (academic, heroic, tragic) rather than with comic ones. Yet Clio also smiles and laughs out loud: Humorous renderings of historical events and figures have made a significant contribution to ›popular‹ history since around 1800. We find them in many cultures and in a wide range of texts, images and performances, in styles both coarse and refined. This is unsurprising in so far as, although one can identify cultural variation, a sense of humour seems to be a common human trait that permeates all our various lifeworlds and the ways we try to make sense of them. Humour can be aggressive and scathing, but it may also be pleasant and entertaining. A

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1 We would like to thank Katja Bay for her invaluable help in preparing this volume. Our thanks also go to Malena Klocke for her help in indexing as well as Natalie Churn for proofreading.

dose of humour can make the most serious situations and subjects more bearable, as in gallows humour, and this translates to our confrontation with history. Even some of the darkest and tragic episodes of history have been presented in humorous modes: The Nazis have been the subject of biting satire in films such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (1968) or Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). As Roberto Benigni's Oscar-winning *Life is Beautiful* (1997) has impressively shown, even the horror of concentration camps can be conveyed with tragi-comic humour. More examples of humorous perspectives on history from film and television suggest themselves: *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983-1989) is world-famous for its relentless view of British history which systematically debunks those in power through wit as well as slapstick. *M.A.S.H.*, both the original film (1970, dir. Robert Altman) and its television spin-off (CBS, 1972-1983), has amused world-wide audiences with an equally black-humoured perspective on the Americans at war in Korea. And the end of the GDR has been the subject of one the most successful German film comedies of recent years, *Good-Bye Lenin* (2003, dir. Wolfgang Becker).

Print culture has produced its own classics of humorous history, such as the French *Asterix* series whose inglorious Romans may have had more impact on the historical imagination of generations of readers all over the globe than any history book. Especially in Britain, with which the present book is particularly concerned, the history spoof has a long tradition. Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 and All That*, first published in 1930, not only continued a nineteenth-century tradition of comic historiography but also set the tone for later products such as the comprehensive *Horrible Histories* series, which was originally written for children but is also popular with adult readers in the English-speaking world and beyond (Terry Deary, 1993-present). As Jerome de Groot notes: »The books play on children's fascination with goriness, selling themselves as ›history with the nasty bits left in‹. The books are mischievous, irreverent and iconoclastic, appealing to a child audience's desire for silly jokes, presenting history as something tactile and simple.« (de Groot 2009: 39)

These few examples already demonstrate that humorous representations of history have a strong potential to attract audiences, and that they often remain in the public memory for a considerable period of time. While entertaining, they also provide knowledge and, most significantly, may give

rise to historiographical awareness and a critical attitude towards the authoritative narratives which history books tend to offer. This was exploited, for instance, in *The Comic History of England* by Gilbert Abbott A'Beckett, who was on the original staff of the satirical magazine *Punch*. The *Comic History* was first published in 1847/8 but remained available in the twentieth century. It was intended to »demolish« the »romance of history« (A'Beckett 1907 [1847/8]: vi), and A'Beckett writes in his preface:

»Though the original design of this History was only to place facts in an amusing light, without a sacrifice of fidelity, it is humbly presumed that truth has rather gained than lost by the mode of treatment that has been adopted. Persons and things, events and characters, have been deprived of their false colouring, by the plain and matter-of-fact spirit in which they have been approached by the writer of the ›Comic History of England.‹ He has never scrupled to take the liberty of tearing off the masks and fancy dresses of all who have hitherto been presented in disguise to the notice of posterity. Motives are treated in these page as unceremoniously as men; and as the human disposition was much the same in former times as it is in the present day, it has been judged by the rules of common sense, which are alike at every period.« (Ibid.: v-vi)

Not only history is the butt of humour, then, but also those who write and teach history. Indeed, *1066 and All That* is, above all, a spoof of eminent historiography: With barely more than one hundred pages, the book is conspicuously slim for its subject (the history of Britain, after all), undermines ›serious‹ facts with nonsense and trivia,<sup>2</sup> has a ridiculous errata page, and ends with a parody of the history school book, giving a list of absurd questions for student essays. Similarly, the *Horrible History* series is not just funny but, as de Groot observes, »a challenge to traditional, institutionalised forms of knowledge as represented in history classes« (de Groot 2009: 39). The series' *Barmy British Empire* (Deary 2002), for instance, certainly makes us laugh, but it can also alert young readers to the ›nasty bits‹ of im-

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2 »Napoleon ought never to be confused with Nelson, in spite of their hats being so alike; they can most easily be distinguished from one another by the fact that Nelson always stood with his arm like this, while Napoleon always stood with his arm like that« (Sellar/Yeatman 1999 [1930]: 97).

perial rule that are now in the focus of postcolonial historiography but may not yet have entered their history classroom.

Humorous representations have also been used as source material for historical study (without being historically themed themselves) and for popularisations of history since the nineteenth century. Thomas Wright's *Caricature History of the Georges, or, Annals of the House of Hanover, Compiled from the Squibs, Broadsides, Window Pictures, Lampoons, and Pictorial Caricatures of the Time* (1867, first ed. 1848) is a remarkable example from Victorian Britain. Wright here made the effort to collect caricatures and satirical songs from the previous century, complaining in his preface how little trouble had been taken to collect and preserve this material. The result of his dedicated work was a monumental and attractively illustrated book intended not only for further use by historians, but also for general readers interested in the previous century, which is presented to them as an entertaining mix of serious historical information, as well as notes on cultural tastes and fashions that appeared ludicrous to a more sober age.

Humour and history, then, appear to make good bedfellows, as the contributions to this volume indicate from different angles, for different periods and with different kinds of material. But how is humour to be defined? ›Humour‹ and related concepts – such as ›the comic‹, ›wit‹, or ›laughter‹ – have given rise to a daunting number of studies from philosophy, psychology, literary and media studies; other studies have their background in sociology and cultural history, as well as gender and postcolonial studies.<sup>3</sup> There are several classics in the field to which scholars today return, notably Freud's studies on laughter (1917 [1905]), Bergson's *Le rire* (1911 [1900]) and Bakhtin's exposition of the carnivalesque (1984 [1940]). Most recent scholarly work takes humour »seriously«<sup>4</sup> and approaches it so scrupulously at times that its categories become intimidating, bewildering and, taken together, quite contradictory.<sup>5</sup> Not even the key terms appear to be

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3 Cf. the survey article by Stefan Horlacher (2009); as well as Morrell (1987); Powell/Paton (1988); Cameron (1993); Fietz/Fichte/Ludwig (1996); Berger (1997); Bremmer/Roodenburg (1997); Pfister (2002); Reichl/Stein (2005); Paillet et al. (2009).

4 Cf. Palmer's (1994) title *Taking Humour Seriously*. To Palmer, arguing »that some comedy is art is to take it very seriously indeed« (1994: 1).

5 Cf. Morrell (1987: 4-5) on the difficulty of defining humour, laughter and amusement also in light of the changing understanding of these concepts across time;

used with fixed meanings or in a stable relationship with their conceptual neighbours. Some theorists distinguish between humour and the comic, others draw a line between humour and wit, or both and laughter. It seems pragmatic in our context to follow those who use ›humour‹ as an umbrella term for all occasions that give rise to the bodily phenomenon of laughter or the mental state of amusement (cf. Morreall 1987: 4). The sociologist Anton Zijderveld in his *Sociology of Humour and Laughter* (1983) employs humour as »an overarching concept, covering such phenomena as wit, mirth and the comic« (2).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Bremmer and Roodenburg in their cultural history of humour define the latter as a »message – transmitted in action, speech, writing, images or music – intended to produce a smile or a laugh« (1997: 1). Not only do such definitions include the wide range of media and genres in which humour manifests itself. They also comprise the wide span of humorous modes from gross, undignified physicality to intellectual satire and refined verbal play.

Research on humour and its functions is diverse, but it is possible to identify three major converging lines of thought – the *structural*, *psychological* and *social* functions of humour,<sup>7</sup> which also underlie the case studies in this volume. These three functions operate on different levels: first, regarding the context and content of a humorous reference; second, the emotions it reacts to or which are evoked by it; and thirdly, processes of identity formation or demarcation. The functions are not strictly separate from each other but interlinked.

The *structural* function concerns the conditions under which humour is perceived and/or produced. To Simon Critchley, the »comic world« is one »with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters« (2002: 1). There is widespread agreement across scholarly disciplines that humorous effects depend essentially on the perception of *incongruity*: Humour is generated by and/or perceived as an incompatibility of frames of reference or expectations. It de-

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Palmer (1994: 5-7) addresses the problem of defining and demarcating terms for ›funnyness‹; cf. also Neale/Krutnik (1990: Chapters 1 and 4).

6 This coincides with one of the definitions given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: »That quality of action, speech or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun« (›humour | humor, n.«. 2013: 7.a.).

7 Cf. for instance Morreall (1987); Palmer (1994); Berger (1997).



stabilises ›normal‹ and ›expected‹ ways of seeing, it provokes dominant frames of reference; it creates zones of transgression and subversion; it creates surprise; it undermines certainties and causality– which can also be established through a transgression of or play with literary genres.<sup>8</sup>

Viewed *psychologically*, humour can create relief in situations of stress and fear, or demonstrate a person's emotional control over a situation, but it can also be used to ridicule and humiliate others. As Zijderfeld concludes,

»A considerable part of humour consists of deviations from, and playful banter with, the institutionalized patterns of our emotions. [...] By erasing the boundaries between the couth and uncouth, the proper and the improper, the decent and the indecent, the civilised and the uncivilised, etc., black humour at first hurts our feelings, until laughter covers up the embarrassment.« (Zijderfeld 1983: 15)

That humour at times »mercilessly violates« taboos (ibid.: 15) is obvious also from Peter L Berger's assertion of humour's aggressive as well as defensive functions: While a »common occasion for comic laughter has to do with belittling, humiliating, or debunking an individual or entire group of people« and humour, hence, »can be used as a weapon« (Berger 1997: 51),<sup>9</sup> it can also »help manage fears associated with any threat, no matter what the case«, as it then »functions to contain terror deriving from events that are threatening in actual fact« (ibid.: 58). Similarly, Zijderfeld points to the »*liberating effect* of humour and laughter – as relief from psychological, social and even political pressures« (1983: 38). Humour's special powers seem to lie in the fact that it has both cognitive and affective sides.

Arguably, the *social* nature of humour is of the utmost relevance to our topic. As Henri Bergson wrote pertinently in *Le rire*: »To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one.« (1911 [1900]: 7-8) To Bergson, laughter is a corrective when life becomes rigid, mechanical and ceremonial: »Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream.« (Ibid.: 134)

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8 Cf. Berger (1997: 84); Neale/Krutnik (1990: 3).

9 On the aggressive function cf. also Zijderfeld (1983: 38-42).

The function of the carnivalesque in Bakhtin's sense also has an eminently social function in that it can help to articulate and at the same time contain subversive trends in society.<sup>10</sup> Zijderfeld has diagnosed a mirror function of humour: It distorts and simultaneously illuminates society by creating a distanced, defamiliarising view. To Zijderfeld, »the humorist is able to disturb our definitions of reality, causing the emergence of doubt as to the value of daily routines and giving rise to some confusion as to the very foundations of reality« (1983: 9). And he also notes: »This may be humour's most important function: it often works as a de-ideologizing and disillusioning force. A socially accepted and traditional structure of meaning is exposed to a totally different structure of meaning, while the former is, as it were, looked at from the perspective of the latter.« (Ibid.: 58) Berger agrees with Zijderfeld in many respects. In *Redeeming Laughter* (1997), he states that »A good cartoon or a good joke can often be more revealing of a particular social reality than any number of social-scientific treatises. Thus the comic can often be understood as a comic sociology.« (Berger 1997: 70) While emphasising the subversive functions of the comic, Berger points out that it can also play a stabilising role, by trying to keep excess at bay and society in balance: »Comedy ridicules those who think that they are richer, stronger, more handsome, or more intelligent than in fact they are, and the audience enjoys these discrepancies.« (Ibid.: 17-18) To Berger, »Humor functions sociopositively by enhancing group cohesion. [...] Almost inevitably, though, humor also has socionegative aspects. It draws the boundaries of the group and ipso facto defines the outsider.« (Ibid.: 57) Similarly, Powell and Paton hint at »the use of humour by social actors as a means of social control or resistance to such control« (Powell/Paton 1988: xiii), and Palmer looks into »the extent to which the social identity of occasions and participants determines the existence of humour« (Palmer, 1994: 12). Humour can thus play an important role in constituting identity, and in turn, it is a good marker of identities, for instance distinctive national and ethnic ones.

How can such insights about humour be related to history, and popular history in particular? The debunking function of humour seems of obvious

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10 Also cf. Bremmer/Roodenburg: carnival etc. »can temporarily dissolve the rigid social rules with which we all have to comply, although often with low rather than high humour« (1997: 2).

significance here: Humour – in its function of »playing with institutionalized meanings« (Zijderveld 1983: 8) – can deflate the myths that have been woven around historical events and their players; it reduces greatness and glory to a human scale and can thus throw a light on power relations. Humour reveals the inequality of power and questions the principles through which power is legitimised. Humorous renderings may explicitly counter historical master narratives, question dominant interpretations, and undermine the ideal that history follows plans and always has a cause.<sup>11</sup>

Humour may also help an audience to come to grips with a traumatic history. The fact that history involves trauma, however, raises an ethical issue involved in the relieving and entertaining potential of humour: Is it permissible, or when is it permissible, to laugh about certain episodes of history? Who may produce humorous representations, and who is authorised to laugh about them? Hitler, the Third Reich and World War II generally are a case in point. While British and American culture have produced great satirical work on this chapter of history, its comic rendering in a German context is still received far more controversially.<sup>12</sup> The recent satirical novel *Er ist wieder da* (2012) about Hitler by the German writer Timur Vermes even raised the attention of the British media. The *Daily Mail Online*, for instance, dedicated an article to the controversy around its bestseller status in Germany:

»A former journalist with a German mother and Hungarian father, Vermes has helped to stoke a debate over rising neo-Nazism, disillusion with a failing currency

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11 On the combination of history and humour cf. also the volume by Salmi on *Historical Comedy on Screen* (2011), which in its introduction (9-30) identifies anachronism, a play with genre conventions as well as the otherness of the past as main sources for historical humour.

12 A few years ago, the German director Dani Levy produced a farcical comedy entitled *My Führer: The Truly Truest Truth About Adolf Hitler* (2007), in which the title role was played by a well-known comedian. The film proved to be rather insignificant and disappeared quickly from the cinemas, but it caused a major discussion when it was released – while serious German films about the Nazi period and even Hitler (cf. *Der Untergang*, 2004, dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel) have been acclaimed world-wide. On transcultural dimensions of humour cf. Dunphy/Emig (2010).

and fears of inflation – the same toxic mix which enabled Hitler to come to power in the 1930s. Some have seen its success as proof that the guilt-ridden postwar generation has given way to one able to laugh at the monster who still haunts them. The book hit the hardcover number one slot in fiction, beating Ken Follet's *Winter Of The World* into second place, after being released in September. Reviewers are divided between whether readers are laughing at Hitler, with him – or at themselves. So far 17 foreign licences for it have been issued and Vermes is likely to become a millionaire out of his parody on a subject unthinkable for Germans just a few short years ago; treating the architect of WW2 and the Jewish Holocaust as a figure of fun.« (Hall 2013)

As this example indicates, some humorous approaches to history hence are transcultural, while in other respects it is tied more closely to nationally specific tastes and sensitivities. In cultural comparison, it appears that the Anglo(-American) traditions of humour are comparatively robust in their take on various facets of history.

The chapters in this collection are case studies on the use of humour in Britain and the US from 1800 up to the present, depicting historical topics, actors and events from the Middle Ages up to the recent past in a variety of genres and media. All of these case studies underline the fruitful interaction of humour's structural, psychological and social functions with popular history's ability »to sate a diverse range of desires: for historical education and entertainment, for relaxation and distraction, for identity and orientation, for adventure and exoticism, for new experiences and environments, or to escape from everyday life into a past that appears simple and less complex than the present« (Korte/Paletschek 2009: 9; our translation).<sup>13</sup>

The first two chapters are dedicated to nineteenth-century caricatures, though they treat history at different levels: BRIAN MAIDMENT looks at the reappropriation of historical caricatures, while SANDRA MARTINA SCHWAB analyses caricatures with historical topics. In a book-historical approach,

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13 »Wie nie zuvor ist Geschichte in den Alltag eingedrungen und scheint dabei verschiedenste Bedürfnisse zu befriedigen: nach historischer Bildung und Unterhaltung, nach Entspannung und Zerstreuung, nach Identität und Orientierung, nach Abenteuer und Exotismus, nach neuen Erfahrungen und Erlebniswelten oder auch nach einer Flucht aus dem Alltag in eine Vergangenheit, die Überschaubarer und weniger komplex erscheint als die Gegenwart« (Korte/Paletschek 2009: 9).

Maidment traces the afterlife of caricatures from the Regency period throughout mid- and late-Victorian reissues and discusses their recontextualisation. The popularity of these caricatures from the early nineteenth century throughout Queen Victoria's reign shows a sense of nostalgia, a yearning for a time in which social structures were allegedly still in order. The relief provided through nostalgic humour hence served as an attempt to reaffirm traditional social identities while distracting from contemporary Victorian anxieties. Schwab's analysis of Richard Doyle's caricatures on historical topics, by contrast, demonstrates above all a critique of contemporary society. Doyle's satire of medieval sources criticised the contemporary glorification of the Middle Ages and at the same time commented on current issues of public debate; furthermore, it paralleled historic and current topics in French-British relations. Schwab hence shows how multifaceted the combination of history and humour can be: Doyle's humorous historical accounts operate on a variety of levels such as meta-historical reflection, social comment, entertainment, as well as the demarcation of national identities.

The next two chapters are concerned with humorous representations of history on stage. STEFANIE LETHBRIDGE presents a look at history ›from below‹ in Stanley Holloway's monologues produced for the music hall. While these short comic pieces use history and humour to affirm a working-class identity, for instance by emphasising the importance of common soldiers in historical events such as the Napoleonic Wars, they do not contradict mainstream historical narratives; and while ›Great Men‹ such as Wellington may be depicted as unheroic and become a source *for* humour, »they are not normally made ridiculous«, as Lethbridge notes. Holloway's monologues on historical topics thus indicate a moderate use of humour as resistance to established hierarchies. DOROTHEA FLOTHOW's analysis of historical comedies on Charles II continues this idea of humorous depictions of ›Great Men‹ as unheroic. Charles II, as a king with whom the monarchy was restored in 1660 after the English Civil War and the Republic but whose lifestyle also gained him the epithet of the ›merry monarch‹, appears to invite humorous treatment through the incongruity already inscribed in his historical image. As Flothow shows, a vast corpus of comedies from 1800 to the present exemplifies a common regress to stereotypical characters and plots, whose popularity with the audience can be explained through the dramatic irony added by the knowledge of the historical king's real identity

as well as an escapist, exotic presentation of the past as a frivolous – or carnivalesque – other.

How ›Great Men‹ – or ›Great Women‹ – have long seemed to lend themselves to humorous appropriation can also be seen in ULRIKE ZIMMERMANN's and DUNCAN MARKS's chapters. Both analyse, across various genres and media, the long-lasting comic afterlife of the Duke of Wellington and Queen Victoria respectively. Zimmermann looks at caricatures, films and everyday material objects which satirise the Duke and show how he invited caricature through the »comic irritation« of his two conflicting images: the »dashing war hero and the elderly politician«. Even during his lifetime, the friction between his earlier military and later political career resulted in humorous depictions in order to deflate the threat which Wellington's political presence might have induced. While Wellington seems to have embraced the comic treatment of his character (up to a certain extent), a quotation ascribed to Queen Victoria is rather taken to illustrate a presumed lack of humour. Marks analyses the afterlife of the famous »We are not amused« (WANA). Tracing its reappropriations through different media such as books, plays, films up to the internet and social media, Marks observes an increasing detachment of the phrase from its historical context and presumed royal enunciator. He concludes that the phrase now rather serves to affirm or criticise a national or social identity, as it is often used to express Britishness or an ironisation of a British or posh attitude.

The use of history and humour to negotiate identities plays a central role in the last three chapters, which all reach across national borders by regarding issues of identity and alterity. BOB NICHOLSON, in a transatlantic comparison of late-Victorian usage of history in newspaper joke columns and comic novels, observes a struggle on the part of Britain to come to terms with America's increasing economic and cultural superiority. Thus, joke writers and literary humorists tended to »juxtapose images of the American future with those of an idealised British past« and emphasised the »centrality of history to British national identity at a time when the country's future was beginning to look increasingly uncertain«. This uncertainty may also be observed in the fact that British humorists turned to the past in the attempt to reaffirm British superiority, yet the popular reception of transatlantic humour at the same time indicates an acceptance of modern American culture in Britain. While the humorous use of history here serves to come to terms with a present threat, humour can also help to deal with a

traumatic past. IRVIN J. HUNT analyses Suzan-Lori Parks's absurdist play *Venus* (1997) which depicts the traumatic history of an African woman, Sarah Bartman, who was exhibited in Victorian freak shows across Europe. As Hunt concludes, Parks uses humour not in order to produce distance from the violence of a colonial past. Rather, her way of presenting Bartman's history within the genre of an absurd comedy is meant to lead to self-reflection in that it helps the audience to immerse themselves into Bartman's trauma via the »unbearable lightness of Parks's humor«. Finally, MARTIN CONBOY considers »Humour on the Dark Side« by looking at the British tabloids' press campaign during the 1999 World Cup final between England and Germany, which drew its humour from populist World War II imagery. Thus, Conboy concludes that the humour created in the tabloids through a questionable repetition of national stereotypes does not serve as a »key to unlocking the past« but »is an acceptable way of maintaining populist prejudices in the present«.

The case studies assembled here attest to the many ways in which history and humour have intersected in past and present cultural production. Taken together, they illustrate how humour can function to project nostalgic and benign views of history, but also how its main function appears to lie in more or less gentle critique of history and the ways in which history has been presented.

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