

Introduction: Feminism and Aesthetics

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It is with great enthusiasm that we present this special issue of *Hypatia* on feminism and aesthetics. It has been more than twelve years since guest editors Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer put together the first special issue of *Hypatia* on this topic (1990). Then in its initial stages, feminist theorizing about art and aesthetics introduced considerations of gender into discussions of creativity and genius, the nature of art and its appreciation and interpretation, the imagination, and other traditional questions of philosophical aesthetics. The result was an unprecedented challenge to the existing philosophical literature. Pioneers of work in feminism and aesthetics raised the possibility of a specifically “feminine aesthetic,” identified the “male gaze” implicitly assumed by visual representations of the female body, called attention to the interests embedded in purportedly disinterested responses to art, and argued for the importance of attending to African-American women’s literature and other previously ignored aesthetic traditions. This early work directed philosophic attention for the first time to women’s experiences, including women’s experiences of their own bodies and their sense of themselves as creators. One result of this theoretical work was a flurry of interest in the body as an object of fashionable adornment, or alternately, as a vehicle for political activism and/or embodied sexuality.

From the perspective of more than a decade later, we can chart the development of the issues that preoccupied those first doing feminist work in aesthetics. Some of the early questions have been answered or set aside. So, for example, many contemporary feminists now reject the idea of a uniquely feminine aesthetic and the essentialist thinking about women and women’s art on which it relied. Other concerns retain their hold. Work on the question of how gender affects traditional philosophical notions, for example, genius, aesthetic autonomy, and disinterested judgment, continues, as does attention to the social, economic, and institutional barriers confronting women who seek to have their art accepted in the mainstream art world. The result of the past dozen years is an abundant and mature body of scholarly work—work that continues to nourish and provoke.

As readers will learn from this special issue, the past decade or so has also witnessed an expansion of work into realms for the most part previously unexplored: a concern with aesthetic pleasure and the pleasures of the body, the gendered aspects of beauty and the sublime, the relation of aesthetics and ethics, the impact of feminist jurisprudence on aesthetics, and the role of the imagination in political art.



Detail: Hypatia runner from *The Dinner Party*,
© Judy Chicago 1979, mixed media.
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The annotated bibliography presented in this volume provides a good starting point for charting the ebb and flow of a decade or more of feminist work in aesthetics. Presenting only a small proportion of the available publications in this area, author Joshua Shaw begins with the two pivotal volumes published in 1990: *Hypatia* (republished as *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, 1993) and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (republished as *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* [Brand and Korsmeyer 1995]). Shaw's emphasis, like that of Brand, Hein, and Korsmeyer, is on work in analytic philosophy. The resulting bibliography reveals the wealth of material now available on women artists, feminist re-visioning of art history, and feminist theory, work that originates in feminist visual theory, film theory, cultural studies, and art history. Material in this area has blossomed beyond expectations. Detailed and thorough texts now exist on an incredible variety of women artists, past and present (see bibliography for texts by Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, Marsha Meskimmon, Helena Reckitt, and Ella Shohat). Such studies of individual artists are greatly enhanced by the sophisticated theoretical frameworks used to explain both their work and their place in history, frameworks unimaginable in the early 1970s when women artists were first taking their rightful place at the forefront of feminist scholarship and legitimization (see bibliographic entries by Katy Deepwell and Griselda Pollock).

The bibliography also details the innovative and expanded range of topics that have come to take center stage in feminist philosophical inquiry to date, notions such as aesthetic autonomy (Mary Devereaux), the feminine sublime (Barbara Claire Freeman), evolutionary psychology and beauty (Peg Brand, Nancy Etcoff), horror in film (Cynthia Freeland), melodrama, (Flo Leibowitz), film comedies (Naomi Scheman), as well as emerging topics such as the feminist re-visioning of architecture and urban spaces (Joan Rothschild). Finally, the bibliography usefully directs the reader to key feminist essays in various more general collections: *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (Kelly 1998), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Levinson 2003), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (Gaut and Lopes 2001), and Brand's *Beauty Matters* (2000). Also included is relevant work on aesthetics from Pennsylvania State University Press's *Re-Reading the Canon* series.

In addition to the bibliography, this volume contains book reviews highlighting four additional volumes of important feminist work in aesthetics. Estella Lauter analyzes the first comprehensive volumes on this topic coming out of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, respectively: Penny Florence and Nicola Foster's *Differential Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophy and Feminist Understandings* (2000) and Hilary Robinson's *Feminism—Art—Theory: An Anthology 1968–2000* (2001). These two volumes make clear that while feminist work in aesthetics expands beyond the boundaries of North America, international dialogue on these issues is still in its infancy.

Flo Leibowitz reviews two additional volumes: *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency*, by Diane Tietjen Meyers (2002), and *Self-Portraits*

by *Women Painters*, by Liana de Girolami Cheyney, Alicia Craig Faxon, and Kathleen Lucey Russo (2000). As Leibowitz points out, both books explore the concepts of female agency and identity that play central roles in how both male and female artists represent the female body. *Gender in the Mirror* (Meyers 2002) provides an illuminating comparison of the ways that women have been gazed upon and depicted by male artists while alternatively being repositioned and reconstructed—with new identities and modes of agency—by women artists. *Self-Portraits* (Cheyney, Faxon, and Russo 2000) provides an art historical approach that organizes works chronologically, yet we also learn of the intimate self-concepts each artist chose to convey through self-portraiture. Central to both these texts is the recurring notion of the body and the way women artists have sought to portray *themselves* in ways that create new forms of agency and identity that promote personal empowerment.

It is not surprising, then, to see these same topics recur in the main body of our journal essays, which fall more or less naturally under three broad headings. Section One focuses on women artists such as Adrian Piper, Jenny Saville, and Janine Antoni, and on new ways of situating their work. Section Two interrogates the role of bodies and beauty in women's lives, while Section Three chronicles the overlap and interplay between aesthetics and adjacent fields of ethics, political theory, and legal studies. Interestingly, this organization partly mirrors the way that feminist scholarship in the visual and literary arts unfolded in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s: first, with the rediscovery of women artists and writers from past history; second, with an analysis of the subject matter of their works, focusing on the use of the female body and women's experiences in the context of a dominant tradition of historical and philosophical emphases on women's beauty; and third, the natural expansion of feminist scholarship in aesthetics into adjacent fields of inquiry.

We begin our selection of twelve offerings with a poem, perhaps more aptly labeled a poetic essay, written by Patricia Locke. "Incommensurability" is a fictional narrator's response to the writings of Immanuel Kant that takes as its model the artwork of performance artist and Kantian scholar Adrian Piper. Locke's poem expresses admiration for Piper's alternative to "the coolness of Kant" by means of her "challenge to the purity of reason" (page). The poem's narrator considers Piper a kindred creative spirit who also studied Kant in graduate school and was inspired to challenge his views philosophically and artistically (1997). Interestingly, Locke's poetic response to Piper's work (and to Kant's) itself serves to blur the line between art and philosophy, poem and essay. In another sense, Locke's poem provides a model for the next two essays, both of which seek to re-contextualize the work of women artists.

In the second essay in this section, art critic Eleanor Heartney analyzes the work of some contemporary women artists, Hannah Wilke, Renee Cox, Kiki Smith, Janine Antoni, Petah Coyne, and Lisa Yuskavage, all of whom grew up Catholic. Heartney questions why women raised as Catholics tend to

create artwork that deals with sexuality in ways that the larger culture reads as transgressive. She borrows a complex notion from theologians, the “Catholic imagination,” which, fitted to her purpose, is characterized as “a form of creative consciousness which is essentially ‘incarnational’ and that proceeds by thinking through, rather than against, the body” (4). The figure of the Virgin Mary figures prominently in her analysis, providing the touchstone of debate for issues of identity and the representation of sexuality. Replete with several contradictory natures, the Virgin is associated with strength *and* submission, motherhood *and* virginity, humanity *and* godliness. Heartney explores how the worship of the Virgin (known as Mariology) influences the work of these artists. Their artworks provide a way of overcoming divisions thought to separate body from mind, feelings from thoughts, senses from cognition, and sexuality from rationality. In this way, the work of Wilke, Cox, Smith, and the others resonates with themes in Piper’s work.

Following Heartney’s essay, Michelle Meagher examines large-scale paintings of female nudes by Jenny Saville: work that continues to explore many of the issues of female flesh implicit in the works of Catholic imagination already surveyed. Meagher’s essay repositions the powerful paintings of the Scottish painter within a new framework: a feminist aesthetics of disgust. Saville, one of the artists in the infamous 1997 *Sensation* show of young British artists, paints huge canvases of opulent female nudes. Her paintings contain richly colored terrains of flesh, amplified by layers of texture from intricate brushwork. As Saville describes it, this work forces the viewer to step back from the canvas; even so, one is faced with “large expanses of puckered and folded skin, pendulous breasts, and formidable thighs” (24) that elicit sensual—even visceral—reactions. In a cultural context where we, as viewers, are accustomed to unending images of thin bodies, of “perfect” flesh and bodily perfection, Saville’s bodies confront and confound. They challenge cultural norms, eliciting not admiration and desire but disgust. Meagher’s analysis of this work seeks to answer the question Saville herself poses, namely, “Why do we find bodies like this difficult to look at?” Appealing to current discussions of fat pride, Meagher directs us to the way in which this work addresses the problem of “experiencing oneself as disgusting” (24). In a culture enthralled by narrow definitions of beauty, Saville’s women require a radically different way of theorizing about female beauty and its appreciation.

The authors of Section Two turn from analyzing the work of specific women artists to a more direct examination of the fundamental dichotomies between mind and body, spirituality and physicality, and between the rational and the sensual/sexual self at work in so much of Western European art. On one level, these five essays can be read as a series of responses to early writings on the body by Sandra Bartky (1990) and Susan Bordo (1993). Some of these authors follow through on examining the ways cultural practices of displaying the (female)

body constrain women's lives. Others investigate the myriad ways women abuse their bodies for the sake of beauty. Interestingly, we also see in this group of essays an emerging tendency to take issue with early feminism's proclivity to focus primarily on the destructive dimensions of beauty and its demands on women's lives. What emerges is an opening up of feminist attitudes toward traditional processes of feminine "beautification," a search for approaches to beauty that allow women to enjoy its positive, albeit controversial, virtues.

In "Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification," Ann Cahill analyzes a particular process of feminine beautification: "dressing up." She uses an example from her own life—preparing with her sisters for a family wedding—to challenge the assumption that such rituals necessarily objectify women, turning them into objects displayed for the viewing pleasure of men. Cahill offers a story of female camaraderie chronicled through the conversation of these sisters during hours spent fixing hair, putting on makeup, getting decked out in fancy clothes, and generally enjoying both the rituals themselves and the companionship these rituals allow. Locating herself between familiar feminist criticisms of beautification practices and simplistic celebrations of female adornment, Cahill characterizes these and other beautification rites as a possible mode of creating (and enjoying) a distinctly feminist (inter)subjectivity. For Cahill, it is the communal, collective, and shared aspects of these beauty practices that provide the basis for an alternative account of pleasure, one that captures both the embodied *and* the aesthetic aspects of these experiences.

In contrast to Meagher's analysis of paintings of robust bodies, Sheila Lintott offers an examination of unnaturally thin bodies, in fact, those bordering on starvation. In "Sublime Hunger: Eating Disorders Beyond Beauty," Lintott provocatively explores the human attraction to the sublime, as evidenced by women whose extreme control over their bodies through excessive dieting results in their reported experience of intense feelings of the sublime. She believes that her argument, if persuasive, helps to explain why women abuse their bodies in such profound ways. They do so not only because they seek to be paradigms of beauty within a culture obsessed with thinness but also because such bodily control (far beyond their reaching the beauty-ideal) brings them to felt experiences of the sublime—yet another type of pleasure, although one tinged with danger and fear. The person suffering from an eating disorder adopts an aesthetic by which she feels satisfaction from her internal achievement of control over body; she is not necessarily guided by the external ideals of beauty and weight. Lintott's invocation of the original Kantian notion of the sublime informs her analysis and lends credence to her conclusions.

In "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetics of the Black Female Body," Janell Hobson begins with the description of tennis pro Serena Williams at the 2002 U. S. Open. Dressed in a black spandex body suit that highlighted her muscular body, Williams's "tackiness" and "inappropriate display of sexuality"

caused a media frenzy (87). Hobson interprets this event as a reminder that the exhibition of the black female body—particularly its buttocks (“batty”)—is steeped in a history of representation that goes back as far as the nineteenth century. Turning her attention first to the case of Saartjie Baartman, an African woman known as the “Hottentot Venus” and displayed for public consumption in Britain’s freak shows, Hobson examines discourses of sexual desire for the black female backside. She analyzes how this desire frames the body as sexually grotesque: a deviation from the categories of (white) beauty. It is against this historical and theoretical background that Hobson then turns to the work of contemporary women artists: two photographers, Carla Williams and Coreen Simpson, and the dance troupe Urban Bush Women. In their photographic works, Williams and Simpson, Hobson argues, “struggle to re-present black female bodies differently” (88), working against the grain of the culturally imposed categories of the grotesque and the deviant. Urban Bush Women, too, provide a site of beauty and resistance where the repositioning of the black female body, particularly the “batty,” is successful and influential.

The next two essays, Richard Shusterman’s “Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*: A Pragmatist Reading of a Feminist Classic” and Joanna Frueh’s “Vaginal Aesthetics,” turn away from the external form of the body—as something to be looked at or represented—to the body as experiential, the locus of lived experience. Here as elsewhere in his work, Shusterman follows the pragmatist tradition of William James (1907, 1976, 1983) and John Dewey (1981, 1987) in celebrating the embodied self, the physical body, as the organizing core of experience. In an approach to aesthetics Shusterman calls “somaesthetics,” the body plays a crucial role. It is both a site of meaningful aesthetic expression “where one’s ethos and values are physically displayed” (107) and the locus of aesthetic feelings, the pleasures of listening, touching, looking, etc. So understood, the body and its senses are “crucial to the aesthetic project” (109).

It is against this background of pragmatist aesthetics that Shusterman turns to feminist work on the body, in particular, Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1989). In Beauvoir’s hugely influential work Shusterman seeks support for the emancipatory potential of the cultivation of the feeling, sensing self through exercise, sport, and other bodily practices designed to increase somatic awareness. Many may find Beauvoir an odd choice for such a project. Her negative characterization of the body, especially the tendency to see the female body as an “obscure, alien thing,” (Beauvoir 1989, 29), a fleshy prison, is well known and pervasive. Yet one of the interesting things about Shusterman’s analysis is his attention to the tension in Beauvoir’s work between this negative view (a view he attributes to Jean-Paul Sartre’s influence [1993]) and the more positive view Beauvoir purportedly inherits from Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1986). From this latter perspective, the body “is the instrument of our grasp upon the world” (Beauvoir 1989, 34) and in this sense may deserve the programmatic attention

somaesthetics demands. That in 1949 Beauvoir herself ultimately came down on the side of a more pessimistic picture of the female body—as constraining rather than expanding women’s possibilities—Shusterman regards as not surprising. Nor does he intend to argue that personal efforts at cultivating strength and self-awareness are any substitute for the collective political action Beauvoir regarded as so important. The value of Shusterman’s essay lies, rather, in its directing us to those aspects of Beauvoir’s philosophy that may bear fruitfully on the changed circumstances of contemporary women’s lives.

“Vaginal Aesthetics,” Joanna Frueh’s essay, is an innovative hybrid: part expository essay, part memoir, part literary performance. Frueh seeks to present the vagina and the female body as art, as an aesthetic object worthy of admiration. An alternative to a long tradition of viewing the vagina as “an abjectly repulsive organ” (144)—as “unaesthetic”—Frueh’s playful essay invites, prods, and inspires the reader to think about the aesthetics of the vagina (and other female genitalia) as something other than absence, “an emptiness,” “a hollow,” “a hole” (143). The torrent of images and references at work here immerse the reader in the language, sights, sounds, and feel of the female anatomy. The result is a *tour de force*, an expedition through history, psychology, medicine, and art that winds its way through Frueh’s own past and present connection to the delights of the female body.

The contributions in Section Three by Anne Eaton, Amy Mullin, Ryan Musgrave, and Teresa Winterhalter close the volume by bringing aesthetics into conversation with feminist work in ethics, politics, and the law. The first essay in this section, Eaton’s “Where Aesthetics and Ethics Meet: Titian’s *Rape of Europa*,” begins with a now standard question, namely how best to balance moral reservations about a work of art with our admiration of its aesthetic merits. This issue has played a prominent role in discussions of the canon (of what should and should not be taught in the undergraduate curriculum) and has generated a significant literature among both feminists and contemporary aestheticians. The painting at hand, (Tiziano Vecellio) Titian’s highly regarded *Rape of Europa*, provides Eaton with a complex and suggestive case study for examining separatism and other typical responses to the problem of unethical art. Eaton’s own position is a strong version of ethical criticism: ethical defects ought rightly be seen to diminish the work. Titian’s esteemed work is judged “ethically defective” in that it depicts Europa not only as a willing victim (implausibly, one for whom rape is pleasurable) but also in a way aimed to use her helplessness and fear to arouse the viewer’s sexual desire. In defending this claim, Eaton appeals to David Hume’s subtle account of how “want of humanity and decency” (Hume, 246) can diminish or lessen artistic merit. Whether or not one ultimately wishes to adopt the strong version of ethical criticism Eaton endorses here, her essay is a model of close reading, marshalling a wealth of visual detail in support of its claims.

In “Feminist Art and the Political Imagination,” Mullin takes up the topic of political art. She takes issue with two common beliefs. The first is that self-consciously political art, for example, feminist art, is rarely if ever as “good” aesthetically as its nonpolitical artistic counterparts. The second is the belief that, while the combination of art and politics is unproblematic, analysis of such artwork need not focus on the artistic features of the work or on the interaction of artistic and political features, but merely on the work’s politics. Using a functionalist account of art adopted from Robert Stecker (2003, 2000), Mullin argues that both beliefs rest on a misunderstanding of political art. In response, Mullin attempts to develop a conception of the political imagination that allows us to perceive “that collaborative work with communities, socio-political research, and reflection upon the political dimension of one’s life can stimulate and enrich the artist’s imagination” (206). The result is a principled aesthetic defense of activist artworks—and political art in general. Like Eaton and many others in this volume, Mullin uses a variety of examples in support of her philosophical analysis. In particular, she examines several examples of activist art: Suzanne Lacy and Carol Kuwata’s *Underground* (1993), Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge’s *Pulp Fiction* (1993), and Peggy Diggs’s *Domestic Violence Milkcarton Project* (1991–1992). Although the conclusions she draws extend beyond feminist art per se, they easily and fruitfully apply to feminist activism and artmaking.

Musgrave’s “Liberal Feminism: From Law to Art” follows with attention to an area previously little explored, the impact of feminist jurisprudence on feminist work in aesthetics. As Musgrave points out, when feminists (rather late in the game) came around to discussing art and aesthetics they framed their agenda in terms of classic political liberalism. The vocabulary of equality and “rights” and strategies of equal access developed to handle women’s access to education and employment became a “fitting tool” to protest unfair practices in the arts. Musgrave tries to show, however, that the liberal assumptions of feminist work in aesthetics extend beyond concern with the status of women artists. The liberal bent of feminist work in aesthetics has, she argues, resulted in a view of art that has several drawbacks. Among these is a tendency to undervalue the art object itself in favor of once ignored, but now prominent, contextual factors, for example, the circumstances of the work’s production and reception. Another is the risk of “disempowering” art, of settling for treating art as mere individual expression, equivalent to personal style. Lastly, Musgrave maintains, the liberal strand of contemporary aesthetics privileges politics over aesthetics, valorizing easily accessible or popular arts for their assumed “progressive” qualities. While hardly confined to feminist aesthetics, these dispositions emerge from a strand of liberalism that Musgrave’s analysis does much to illuminate.

The last contribution in this section, Winterhalter’s “What Else Can I Do But Write?” Discursive Disruption and the Ethics of Style in Virginia Woolf’s

Three Guineas,” is a fascinating study of the connection between Woolf’s narrative and political strategies. Winterhalter’s argument is that in *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf deliberately manipulates the rhetoric of her essay in favor of the pacifist political position she herself endorses. Using multiple voices, Woolf critiques the authoritarianism of fascism and patriarchy in ways designed “to model the narrative practices she argues must be envisioned to prevent war” (237). While seemingly narrowly focused on one essay (albeit an important one) by a single (albeit important) author, Winterhalter’s essay contains far broader philosophical and feminist implications. It breaks new ground in demonstrating how the aesthetic textures of Woolf’s text can be understood not as mere writerly or rhetorical excrescence but as “purposively enact[ing] a moral position to which she is deeply committed” (237). As Winterhalter observes, in Woolf’s “breaks with expository convention, she can be seen to manipulate rhetorical technique to move her plea for a pacifist world beyond mere social platforming into a performative prose that emphasizes the ethics of decentralizing authorial power” (237). Woolf’s accomplishment, as Winterhalter’s essay so compellingly demonstrates, lies in having successfully created an ethics of style. In so doing, Woolf provides a model for feminist writing and the making of art of the kind envisioned throughout the essays collected here.

Before concluding, it is worth noting that the essays collected here represent only a small sampling of the broad range of topics authors suggested to us by way of their submitted essays. As guest editors, neither of us expected that our call for papers two years ago would elicit such overwhelming response. We had over fifty submissions, confirming our belief that feminist work in aesthetics continues to attract substantial interest among philosophers, art historians, literary theorists, film scholars, and many others. This work is rich and varied, boding well for the future of this area of feminist inquiry.

We wish to express our gratitude to all those who contributed to this project, not only our published contributors and our many reviewers but also those women (and most contributors *were* women) who submitted work not included here. Finally, we are especially grateful to the journal’s editors, Nancy Tuana and Laurie Shrage, and to the editorial board who approved our proposal for publication. We would like to dedicate this special issue to Carolyn Korsmeyer and Hilde Hein, who inspired—and continue to inspire—us in our scholarship. We hope that many feminist scholars will follow the lead of these pioneers in continuing to explore how gender affects our understanding and appreciation of art.

To that end, let us close by pointing to two important areas still little touched by feminist inquiry in aesthetics. The first is the history of aesthetics itself. Aside from the work of Kant (for example, see, 1987) and Hume (for example, see 1985), feminists working in aesthetics have shown little interest in the history of their discipline. Plato’s (1952) theory of artistic inspiration, Aristotle’s (1947)

theory of tragedy, medieval theories of beauty (see, for example, Eco 1986), Friedrich Schiller's (1967) theory of aesthetic morality, and Iris Murdoch's (1950) work on the relationship of morality and literature all remain mostly unexplored terrain. As the case of Murdoch illustrates, women have played a prominent but little acknowledged role in the history of twentieth-century aesthetics. As one of us has argued elsewhere (see Devereaux 2003), the work not only of Murdoch but also Susanne Langer (see, for example, 1942, 1957), Susan Sontag (see, for example, 1978, 1982, 1990), Eva Schaper (see, for example, 1983), and Mary Mothersill (see, for example, 1984) merits further investigation. While few of these thinkers would have identified themselves as feminists, a feminist investigation of their contributions promises to reveal new dimensions of this work and its relationship to the "canon" of aesthetics. We wonder, too, whether there may be other important women who wrote and thought about the processes of artistic creation, theorized about art and aesthetic response, or engaged in critiques of the institutions and culture of an art world that excluded them and what they might have to contribute to our understanding of the history of the discipline and of where we are now.

A second under-investigated topic is the feminization of aesthetics itself, that is, its marginalization as a "soft" discipline within the larger, more "male" province of philosophy. The question of how and why aesthetics came to be characterized in these terms and how, if at all, this gendered characterization affects feminist work in the discipline, remains to be asked. We hope that the present volume will help to open the door to these and related investigations, work likely to be of value not only to aestheticians but to philosophers and others interested in the study of the arts and their varied and important role in human experience.

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