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Towards Translation Design A New Paradigm for Design Research

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Abstract: In this paper we explore the concept of translation, starting from the assumption that it constitutes an essential reference for design culture. We assume that a designer (and in particular a communication designer) is a “translator”, since he realises a continuous process of mediation, transfer and re-transcription between the systems of departure and arrival. This perspective leads us to suppose that the application of the “translational paradigm” within the design domain can generate new design sensitivities and new research opportunities into language and into the processes of transferral between different supports and media. We believe that design has specific affinities with the field of translation on several levels and, at a general level, has at least two main shared characteristics, one relating to content and the other to process.

If design is translation, what are the nodes of pertinence and the implications in terms of research?

Keywords: communication design, translation paradigm, interdisciplinarity

The Translation Paradigm for the Field of Design. Design is translation

The paper summarises an interest in the field of design for translation cultures, accepting an extended meaning of the total concept of translation (Torop, 2000), and considerably broadening the spirit of traditional “forms of translation” (Holmes, 1988). In this sense, we understand both de-verbalising and non-textual forms of translation, and all those cases in which translation studies specifically place the emphasis on non-literary texts or on the intersection between literary and non-literary texts (film scripts, for example).



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The evolution of this relationship can be traced back to the idea of producing texts beyond the linguistic limits recurring in the development of semiotic studies (Snell-Hornby, 1988). The evolution of translation theories and studies (Steiner, 1975) is briefly represented by what are commonly known as three generations: the first is “translation science”, which is limited to the word as a terminological transposition; the second corresponds to “translation theory”, which evolves from interlanguage relations to intertextual ones (Nergaard, 1995); and the third generation seems focused on disciplinary identification and, under the name of translation studies, it categorises translation as intercultural communication (Holmes, 1988). The evolutionary development in the field of translation studies marks the passage from “text” to “culture” (Snell-Hornby, 1988).

These generational passages have allowed us, on the one hand, to overcome the stereotypical elements that overshadowed the debate within translation studies in the past, such as the principles of faithfulness, transparency and equivalence, which drew attention to the real problems of interlanguage textual translation. What is more important, as far as we are concerned, is the crossing of “a line in research focused on the different relationships between a system of departure and arrival” which would have “led translation theory to a dead end” (Toury, 1980).

These references have given way to an intercultural dimension of translation; this means that the dialogue between cultures has to involve the meeting of various disciplinary fields which are contiguous or which bear some kind of affinity. In this sense, a genuine paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) must be recognised, one which makes the translation principle an open system.

Consequently, the process that has crossed translation theories has made plausible those interdisciplinary contact points that are the prelude to the construction of a translation paradigm that can be adopted by other study fields, and has multiplied them. Along the same lines, if translation studies and theories show that they have established a programmatic expansion of the field over the years, other disciplinary fields—and particularly design and design culture, as far as we are concerned—have also been affected by a cultural turn, shifting their traditional study subject and extending their interdisciplinary scenario.

The design field, within the wider area of design disciplines, now comprises those theories and practices which, having different but related fields of application, and involving different tangible and intangible systems and objects, share the same cultures, methods and basic formative processes. In particular, it is communication design that reveals itself as the area considerably closest to translation culture: it looks at the design of objects and communication systems and, being an activity that mediates between different languages, it implies continuous transferral of supports and media. It shows specific affinities with the field of translation on several levels and, at a general level, shares at least two main characteristics, one relating to formation, or purpose, and the other to process.

The formative characteristic postulates the communicative nature of translation: "From a theological point of view, translation is a communication process" (Levy, 1967).

The process-related aspect highlights the translation procedure, like that of design, as a system of continual options: "From the practical point of view (...) translation is a decision-making process: a series of a certain number of consecutive situations—of moves, like in a game—situations which force the translator to choose between a certain number of alternatives" (Levy, 1967).

The translation dimension seems indivisible from the design process: the act of designing and the act of translating can be identified under a shared performance principle.

If the interdisciplinary relationship between the fields of culture of design and translation studies seems to refer to an ideal common translation platform, the translation paradigm assumed in the field of communication design studies prompts a definite incentive in foundational terms, promoting contributions to the theory and practices of design.

Nodes of Pertinence. Translation towards communication design

Some nodes within translation studies highlight their proximity to relevant themes in the field of design and lay the foundations for a common paradigm. Thanks to these nodes, we can identify the assonances and first connections between the two different fields of study.

We ought to start out by looking at how much the history of translation theories (Nergaard, 1993) and the anthropology of translation (Bettini, 2012) have restored in terms of constant change in time.

It is also helpful to remember the different meanings of the term "translation", starting from those used way back in the classical period (Osimo, 2015:1): for the ancient Greeks, it was associated with the verb to transport (*metafero*), but also to paraphrase and, lastly, to denote the operation of transcribing (*metagrafo*); for the Latin peoples, it was correlated with the text obtained in the receiving culture and associated with the activities of copying (*vorto*) and transcribing (*transcribo*), but also with the activity of translating at narrative level in order to produce a legible text (*converto, transverto and imitor*).

In the sphere of semiotics, too, it is possible to enumerate the many nuances of the concept of translation, starting with the first important theoretic expression in Jakobson (Jakobson, 1959). Translation is distinguished here in terms of *intralanguage translation*, or reformulation, which consists of an interpretation of verbal signs using other signs in the same language; *interlanguage translation*, or actual translation, which consists of the interpretation of verbal signs using another language; and *intersemiotic translation*, or transmutation, which is represented by an interpretation of verbal signs using non-verbal signing systems (Jakobson, 1959).

The classic arrangement of Jakobson's semiotics follows further elaborations within the sphere of translation studies (Osimo, 2015), which, in short, uses the term translation to mean the transposition of a text from one natural language to another (*interlanguage translation*); the transposition of a work from one artistic form to another (*intersemiotic*

translation); the transposition of a text from one form to another within the scope of the same natural language (*intralanguage translation* or paraphrasing); the reference of a text to a prototext, or transposition of the someone else's words into the words of the author (*intertextual translation*); the verbalisation of a thought of an idea—writing, conversation (*verbalising translation*); or the assimilation of a verbal text—reading, listening (*de-verbalising translation*). It is with the field expansion implemented by translation studies that the area of reference of “translating” extends so much as to allow the identification of pertinences within the field of design.

If language skills are based on an acknowledged “grammar of options” (Bell, 1997), this forms the backbone of translation. It is in this sphere that we create that control of transformations that lies at the basis of the act of translation. And the claims made by Levy (Levy, 1995) in “Translation as a decision process”—a study which also has the merit of highlighting the process-related aspect of translation—reveal this aspect as a further theme for the generation of the convergence with the field of study of design cultures. Not only the act of design in general, but also—and particularly—all those transferrals from one language to another that are typical of what we call “translation design”, seem to be based on a grammar of options in the broad sense.

The consonances with the field of design culture multiply when the theories of translation bypass “literalism”—the idea of literal translation, or translation to the letter; the main meaning of “loyalty”; the conception of an “original” text; the very idea of a “source” text—in favour of a circularity and a reciprocity of interaction between texts to translate and translation texts. Even the referral to memetics (Dawkins, 1976)—the principle of transmission and reproduction of culture and information – within the traductological sphere (Salmon, 2003:155) opens up scenarios that converge with communication design. Hence the overcoming of a rigid and schematic vision of the principle of equivalence found an outlet in Skopostheorie (Reiss & Vermeer, 1984): the centre is occupied by the purpose of the translating act, “the translator’s coherence with his project (...) and the concept of “loyalty” can only be used relatively in relation to this coherence: no longer to the original but to the project” (Salmon, 2003: 118). In this case, too, there is a clear signal of proximity to the methods and cultures of design.

In turn, the principle of inter-culturality means that “never more so than in this decade has translation been talked about as intercultural communication” (Nergaard, 1995:16). The recognised intercultural nature of translating “stems from the claim that translation regards cultures more than languages, stems also from the fact that, among all the difficulties and all the aspects to consider, language is probably the least important” (Lefevere, 1992: XIV).

The idea of translation as “an act of communication that takes place between cultures” (Nergaard, 1995:16) implies a further effect that also concerns the design field.

Consequently, numerous passages among different cultures, including those that we call “visual cultures” and “digital cultures”, for example, or visual manipulations and medial hybridisations (Manovich, 2010), can be recognised as translation passages. In this case we

are very close to the themes of communicative access, design of access (Baule, 2009) and design of the interface (Anceschi, 1993), as the design of mediation devices for interaction between different worlds. In these cases, there is also a theoretic proximity with the hermeneutic perspective of translation, seen by Gadamer (1960) as dialogue and cancellation of the conflict between opposites.

The very theme of the invisible nature of translation, according to the stance taken by Lawrence Venuti (1995, 1998), is connected to the invisible nature of translators.

Paradoxically, the translator seems to be “visible” only in negative terms: he shares the presumed faults of the author, but not the merits. In particular, the undisputed merit of translation studies is that of having clearly defined the paradox by which, at least in the West, translators, the people who allow cultures to open up, evolve and find new methods of thought and expression, are excluded from adequate social, economic and affective recognition (Salmon, 2003).

The invisibility of the translator corresponds directly to the invisibility of the designer in his anonymity: alongside certain duly and emphatically “signed” authorial projects, the invisibility of the translator is a frequent rule, especially in the communication design sphere, albeit within a context in which the figure of the designer seems to apparently enjoy personal recognition and social prestige. Within the design sphere, the matter of visibility implies, as a counterthrust, a forced authorship, such as to guarantee maximum visibility and media success, to the detriment of a design based on the principle of the right measure.

Transitions of the Discipline. Communication design towards translation

The Communication design is a discipline that has changed over time in relation to the development of the historical, social, economic, technological and productive contexts: not only has there been a quantitative and qualitative explosion of the types of content (multimedia, multimodal, generative), and a multiplication and complexification of the technologies and channels of production, distribution and fruition of the artefacts, but there has also been a passage from an “artisan” way of doing things, aimed at the organisation of visual components and printing processes, to a dimension of dynamic, articulate, plural design research, focused strongly on the user.

Among the critical aspects and highlights of this transition, Pizzocaro (2015:28) notes “the increase in flexibility of the different disciplinary areas of design, the boundaries of which often seem to be blurred; the emergence and advancement of a conspicuous area of experimentation in relation to the experiential components of the products, which integrate with the physical components of the materials; the absence of a clear demarcation between products and services; the consolidation of research methods aimed specifically at grasping and interpreting peoples’ needs and desires”.

The values that focus research within the plurality of interrelation and reference technologies are numerous and sometimes interconnected, and include information (Sless,

1992; Bonsiepe, 1993; Frascara, 2015); the display of data of complex spaces (Tufte, 1997; Wood, 1993); multimediality and multimodality (Anceschi, 1996); interaction (Anceschi, 1996; Lowgren & Stolterman 2004; Moggridge 2007); critical reflection (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012; Dunne & Raby, 2001; Mazé & Redström, 2007; Schön, 1983; Senger et al., 2005); user centrality (or experience) (Frascara, 1997; Mitchell, 1993; Norman & Draper, 1986; Pizzocarò 2015); crossmediality or transmediality (Flusser, 1997; Jenkins, 2008; Manovich et al., 2014); synaesthetic perception (Marks, 1975; Riccò, 1999); communicative access (Baule, 2012); services (Manzini, 1993; Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011), and collaborative participation in design activities (Poggenphol, 2004; Sanders, 2013). In short, from a research model founded on a single discipline, we now find ourselves looking at a “research programme” structured on an integrated system of disciplines focused on different segments of society.

This first reference framework reveals different levels of complexity which require the designer to have a strong cultural barycentre and the ability to plan numerous points of view and then switch from one to the other.

Our research starts from the basis according to which the configuration (the unifying nucleus of communication design) forms the catalysing element of a series of transformative possibilities (or translation practices), which allow designers to put different disciplinary spheres, application contexts and users in touch with each other.

As reported by Cross (2007b: 25) when quoting the work of Hillier and Leaman (1976), it is as though the designer has a sort of artificial language which has transformation properties: “in effect, the designer learns to ‘speak’ a language—to make a useful transaction between domains which are unlike each other (sounds and meaning in language, artefacts and needs in design) by means of a code or system of codes which structure that connection.”

The communication designer is comparable to the figure of a “translator” in that, via configuration and transferral procedures, he performs a continuous mediation activity between the elements of context and the diversity (geographic, cultural and physical) of the players involved. He not only performs a task which is linked to the aesthetics of products or the way they are staged, but also makes the contents available for use in terms of legibility and hierarchy, contributing to determining their articulation through graphic editing operations, renewing the possibilities of communicative access to contents (tangible or intangible), and creating tools for sharing knowledge and facilitating its dissemination.

In other words, the communication designer has specific abilities and transversal skills, which are implemented in the interpretation and organisation of content (from a perceptive and semantic viewpoint); in their transferral from one context (physical, geographic, organisation or cognitive) to another; and in the invention of “new interpretants and social habits” (Zingale, 2012: 31) which renew our relationship with things but, above all, the relationships with and among people.

Mechanisms of translation and interpretations are also implemented within the design process itself: Tomes, Oates and Armstrong (2015: 3) affirm that the processes of “translation” from verbal to visual and from visual to verbal (intersemiotic translations) are

essential in every design phase: “the outputs of individual creativity are progressively negotiated to a mutually satisfactory outcome, first with other designers and subsequently with the client. In this process the ability to articulate verbal meanings associated with visual design, and conversely, to interpret verbal messages in visual terms is a core skill. Viewed in this light, the whole of the design process is directed towards the achievement of a mutually acceptable visual “translation” of the brief, and it is achieved along the way through the medium of lesser translations from the verbal to the visual and back again.”

The concept of translation applied to the sphere of design and the design of communication must not be confused with translation in its pure sense (as practised by publishing houses [Eco, 2003]), or with the concept of prefiguration (*Vorstellung*, which is the ability to present the mind with an image of something which is not in front of the eyes [Zingale, 2012]).

By translation, we mean a “transformative design activity” (*Darstellung*, meaning presentation through ostentation, which implies a shared and intersubjective dimension [Zingale, 2012]) aimed at reformulating, translating or, more often, transmuting contents from one text to another. The goal is to generate new expressive interpretations, contaminations, simplifications or expansions of the source text within an inter/multi/transcultural dimension.

This brings us closer to the ethical dimension of communication design, which affects the value, meaning and content of communication artefacts and their impact within a social context: “the ethics of responsibility, in the technological society, assumes a wider dimension: it means to change the projective dimension of the project. The quality of the single communicative artefact, a starting condition, can no longer be independent from the general quality of communicating and from the perspectives of the communication as a whole” (Author, 2007: 57).

This first formulation of the concept of translation opens up the way to numerous other distinctions. To further analyse the relationship between design and translation, it is necessary to make some assumptions as to the design articulations that are more sensitive to the translation paradigm. We have identified (without claiming to have been thorough) three spheres of research which have as their guiding thread a close relationship with the skills of communication design.

3.1 Translation for social change and criticism.

This research perspective is related to a complex series of matters that concern the catalysing role of design within the social, political and cultural context. In this sphere, a series of translation processes is aimed at the development of “resistance tools” (Author, 2012), “critical reflection tools” (Dunne & Raby, 2001; Sengers et al., 2005) and “co-participation tools” (Burns et al., 2006), to acquire and introject a critical dimension into the design activity which makes reflection, active intervention in society and change possible. This is generally the activation of an ethical “translation” project, to be considered here in its most profound meaning of remedying, putting right, correcting, helping to understand,

reviewing, rereading and educating in order to generate transformation and social innovation.

Sangiorgi and Scott (2015) have identified four approaches “that present slightly different understandings and build on different theories and assumptions about what triggers and sustains social and systemic change as well as what designers can do within these processes:

- *critical practices in design*: objects become the provocative materialisation of a critical reflection conducted by the designer and are considered as the medium to elicit a similar critical reflection and possibly behaviour in users and observers;
- *design for social practices*: the critical reflection is instead at the basis of any kind of practice-oriented design intervention as it helps to recognise the elements that constitute and perpetuate existing practices and possibly inspire ways to ‘de-link’ them and trigger change;
- *transformation design*: here the critical approach and reflexivity are qualities that both designers, as facilitators, and project participants need to develop to challenge existing power relationships and develop the knowledge and skills to envision, initiate and sustain change processes;
- *design for social innovation*: here designers identify and support promising practices and open innovation processes that manifest, sometimes in an implicit way, critical perspectives towards the current modes of production and consumption as well as towards existing power structures in decision making.”

What emerges from these four approaches is that their common denominator is represented by the substantial mediation activity carried out by the project operators, and this allows the tangible possibility of translating critical thought into action, and the production of awareness and real social change.

3.2 User-centred translations.

“User-centred design is a process, non-exclusive to the design of interfaces or technologies, in which the needs and limits of the addressees of the end products of the products, services and processes are held in consideration during every phase of the project. This is a design method characterised by multilevel problem-solving processes which require the designer to analyse and predict how a user will use a product, and how to verify the behaviour of real users” (Pizzocaro, 2015).

In spheres of research closer to communication design, the value of the centrality of the user is flanked by the management and organisation of knowledge. The aim of information design (Bonsiepe, 1993; Frascara 2015; Sless 1992) is to interpret and translate information into analogical artefacts (product labelling, instructions, contracts, policies, letters, bills, forms, statements, highway signs, public information symbols, etc. [Sless, 2014]) and/or digital artefacts (interface design, design of information bodies, design of audio-visual means [Bonsiepe, 1993]). More particularly in the sphere that concerns the design of graphic interfaces for IT systems and electronic devices, approaches to the design interface are

numerous, but they can also include intersemiotic data and information translation processes.

Quaggiotto (2012: 39-40, paraphrased) distinguishes three spheres of research: the recent translation of human-computer interaction, which is proposed as a transdisciplinary approach to the problems of design and the methods of interaction between the end user and digital technological systems; the information architecture that plans the arrangement of information, its categorisation and breakdown, in order to facilitate access and rediscovery by users; and lastly, the sphere of visualising information (information visualisation, visual data mining, visual info retrieval, knowledge visualisation), the aim of which is the visual portrayal of information through encoded forms of symbolisation, deriving from statistic and scientific visualisation.

In short, in both the analogue and digital spheres, the translation of the source information, its encoding in data form and attention towards the addressee are essential within the design process. As maintained by Frascara (2015:5): “information design is of necessity user-centred. It is ethical because it recognises ‘the others’ as different from the designer and deserving respect in their difference. These differences require that one considers as one of the first priorities the knowledge of the people one is addressing. This is why there are no recipes for information design: there is knowledge to be applied, but its application must always be framed by paying due attention to who is the public, what one is talking about, why one addresses them, and where, when and through what media.”

The centrality of the user, the recognition of “other” as a subject who is different from the translator, is one of the main values of the translation process. As maintained by Oittinen and Ketola (2014: 108): “as an innate part of the translation process, translators build a mental model of what the new target audience may be like: what their motivation is to read the text, what they will use the text for, how much they already know about the subject matter, and so on. Translators are then able to adapt their translation choices according to the anticipated needs of these receivers.”

The communication designer plays an essential role in interpreting and translating information “in order to develop specifications or principles to guide or inform the design development of product and services. They also apply their tools and methods in the evaluation of concepts and prototypes” (Sanders & Chan, 2007).

3.3 TRANSLATION FOR PARTICIPATING IN AND SHARING EXPERIENCES.

“Participatory design attempts to involve those who will become the ‘users’ throughout the design development process to the extent that this is possible. The participatory mindset reflects the Scandinavian way of thinking—that it is obvious that those who will be affected by design be included in the design process. [...] Generative design research focuses on the creation of tools that non-designers can use to express their dreams (or fears) for the future. These expressions inform and inspire designers to make things that people really need (and at many levels of need). Some designers become inspired to make tools that the people can use to make their own things” (Sanders & Chan, 2007: 1).

As confirmed by Osimo (2015: 86) “a translator is someone who, in the system, takes on the role of representing the culture of the confine. He is an individual (or it is an entity) that is, first and foremost, aware of the difference between a culture inside his system and that outside it. Once he has this metacultural awareness, the translator finds himself between two extreme poles of the cultural mediation strategy: one consists in trying to incorporate others inside himself and the other consists in taking possession of others.”

Participatory design starts from the assumption that everyone is creative and that everyone can play an active role in the design of solutions aimed at changing society; “this mindset contrasts with a user-centred mindset that recognises researchers and designers as being the experts and relegates the people being served by design to be the research subjects and/or the recipients of the designed object” (Sanders & Chan, 2007: 1).

Cultural diversity and communicative activity are the sustaining values of participative design and, in this sphere possibly more than any other, translation practices in which the communication designer plays a significant role emerge. Cultural mediation is achieved through the design of “generative tools” (or communicative artefacts), which make it possible to open up communication, involving all the players concerned (designers/researchers and stakeholders), Sanders (2013: 71), distinguishing them into making tools and techniques (collages, maps, models and mock-ups created by non-designer participants), and telling tools and techniques which verbally support and guide the exchange of information and explanation (stories and storyboarding, diaries, images for self-observation, documentaries and movie-making, experience timelines or maps, paper spaces, cards, and voting dots).

Conclusion. Implications of research

“The translator is an expert in the thoughts of others and in ways of expressing them. The translator is an expert in the boundary between his own way of life and of seeing the world (his own “culture”) and other people’s way of life and seeing the world (seven billion “other cultures” plus seven square billion possible combinations). The translator is an expert in nuances of sense, in the art of adaptation and adapting” (Osimo, 2011: 293).

Bringing the figure of the translator close to that of the communication designer means starting from the assumption that the design activity is distinguished by a series of translation activities of which we are relatively aware. Certain types of transfer typical of the design process within the communication design sphere are:

- *graphic translations*, from manual writings to mechanical and digital forms of writing, comprising the transferral of signs and writings from signs to signs, from alphabets to alphabets, using endosemiotic methods;
- *illustrative translations*, with de-verbalising forms comprising *visual translations* from text to image (using intersemiotic methods) and from image to image (using intrasemiotic methods);

- *intersupport, intermedial or transmedial translations*, from a tangible support and/or from one format to another, particularly all the mutations or declinations of artefacts in transition to digital, which contemplate a specific multimodal recording practice;
- *synaesthetic translations*, as a method of translation from oral verbal language to written language (verbal and/or figural) and vice versa, from oral verbal language to sign language and vice versa, and from written language (verbal and/or figural) to tactile language and vice versa;
- *intralanguage translations*, which concern the semantic behaviour and the transformation of the artefacts on the basis of specific cultural, social, market and mass-media storytelling connotations;
- *interlanguage intersemiotic translations*, as a method of translating the verbal signs of a language through figural language.

According to this perspective, translating means making the contents of a communication process accessible, identifying the most pertinent form of expression for a new medium; but it also means having the ability to move in an increasingly interlinguistic and intercultural universe, made up of a variety of cultures, supports, systems and languages that cohabit and communicate with one another.

Our research intends to promote, in founding terms, the meeting of two components, the cultures of design and of translation (in the terms of translation studies), recognising the specific function which communication design, in particular, occupies as a mediator of design cultures for communication artefacts. In other words, the aim is to explore a sphere which is growing today at a national and an international level in response to the need for those translation models and processes necessary to the converging culture of contemporary society (Jenkins, 2006; Uricchio, 1997). Specifically, the continuous shift of the frontiers between disciplines, fields of know-how and production models requires increasing design skills capable of developing as processes of translation between different codes and registers, making it necessary not only to define the linguistic and interpretative sphere, but especially the critical and analytical thresholds of those who plan communicative artefacts.

Tackling the theme of translation within the domain of communication design suggests for the future a complex task which will be undertaken on various levels:

- theoretic-scientific research, in relation to the cultural contribution of translation studies, to the contributions of semiotics and to those of media studies or cultural studies;
- analysis of the different declinations of translation within the processes of configuration of communicative artefacts in the analogue and digital spheres;
- research through didactic experimentation to contribute to the detection and encoding of “translation models” within the scope of communication design;

- research finalized to build a bridge between the national scientific community and the major international organisations interested in defining a joint path founded on an original and transdisciplinary approach to the theme of the relationship between communication design and translation.

In essence, we think that the concept of translation can be a distinctive characteristic of design culture: design can be intended in terms of translation and all design process involves translational pathways. In the specific area of communication design, these translational pathways require first of all an in-depth knowledge of the scriptures and languages of representation, but also a real translational sensibility which, through inclusive acts, enables the overlapping of the linguistic world, originally distant.

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