

The cultural geographies of landscape¹

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Abstract

The concept of cultural landscape has been at the core of the scientific concerns of generations of geographers and geographical understandings of landscape have also influenced the ways in which modern landscape has been conceived in cognate disciplines. This paper, a modified version of the author's Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Cultural Geography at Wageningen University, will briefly reflect, with the help of some biographical hints, on the nature of Geography and in particular on the 'power of landscape' for spatial theory and spatial analysis. In the final part of the paper a particular attention is given to the relationship between the cultural landscape and tourism and travel, envisioned as key expressions of the spatialities of the 'Modern'.

Keywords: cultural geography, landscape, spatial theory, modern travel and tourism

Introduction: Geography, Cultural Geography

Preparing an Inaugural Lecture is a tricky endeavor, since it is a presentation that tries to do many different things at the same time. It ought to be an academic performance, possibly of high profile, but also a way of introducing yourself and your subject to a broader audience. It should be moderately entertaining but also partially biographical. And being entertaining through an autobiographical account is, indeed, a dangerous exercise as we all know.

Ultimately, it is about how you prefer to read this event as part of your career path: as a moment of arrival, but also perhaps more importantly as a fresh departure. So I decided to write my Inaugural Speech – and the present

¹ This paper is a revised version of the Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Cultural Geography given by the author at Wageningen University, on May 24th 2012. A few passages appeared in Minca, C., 2007a. Humboldt's compromise: or, the forgotten geographies of landscape. *Progress in Human Geography* 31. (2): 179–193 have been incorporated, albeit in a modified version, in the second part of this paper.

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paper that represents a revised version of it – as a conversation of sorts, a conversation including a few hints about my work and my career, but also a few thoughts about the ways in which I see my own field, Cultural Geography, and its contribution to the study of Landscape(s) at Wageningen University and in broader disciplinary terms.

This paper is organized in two main parts. The first briefly addresses the question of Geography, and in particular Cultural Geography, and how I personally came to it. The second discusses how Cultural Geography is central to the understanding of the field of landscape studies, with reference to some key historical trajectories and to some of my most recent research projects (*Photo 1*).

Maps and images of faraway places have populated my life since my childhood, also as a reflection of the fabulous tales that my grandfather ‘nonno Giovanni’ – who spent most of his life sailing around the world on board of large mythical (at least for me) ships – would tell me in detail after every return from the Orient. Brought up in Trieste, a border city on the Cold War frontier, geographical imaginations of a potential clash of civilizations – with the Communist Other just beyond the border – colonised my early cultural identity as a reaction to a logic of ‘us versus them’ that penetrated every space of the quotidian.



Photo 1. The author at a geographical landmark

In the same way and for the same reason, geography and maps have been with me since my first steps into the educational system. People, real people, real subjects are *always* implicated with maps in complicated ways, however, they are neither really *part* of the maps, nor entirely external to them. And this is true for all cartographic readings of the world – a world here intended in the Heideggerian sense of the term; maps as a system of signs, as a spatial language simply cannot include the subject who crafts and reads them, since in their attempt ‘to objectify’ the reality which they intend to represent, they need to produce an external gaze, an external – and often invisible – watching subject.

This is the fundamental ontological stance guiding what geographers FARINELLI, F. (2003), OLSSON, G. and (2007) and many others call the ‘cartographic reason’ or that American historian Timothy MITCHELL famously described as ‘*The Metaphysics of Representation*’, that is, the belief in the possibility of knowing and understanding the world on the part of a subject that must be positioned externally to that same world (MITCHELL, T. 1988). Or putting in other terms, the relationship between the modern, grand representations of the world and the world represented is never a simple and linear one; since spatial representations, all spatial representations, are not only inherently ‘cultural’, sometimes even ideological, but they also entertain an unstable and troubling relationship with the real world, out there, to which they claim to refer to.

The belief in a linear and reliable relationship between representations of places, people, landscapes, cultures and those very same places, people, landscapes, cultures, this belief guided one specific strand of the modern project for so long has been deconstructed and problematised by now. The once apparently peaceful waters of all stable and reassuring mappings of people, cultures, borders, rivers and mountains – put side by side as if they were fixed geographical objects of the same category – have now been shaken up – in geography and elsewhere – by the winds of critical social theory. Two books, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (CLIFFORD, J. and MARCUS, G.E. 1986), *Cliand Colonising Egypt* (MITCHELL, T. 1988), among many others, have been crucial in re-conceptualising culture in Western academia, and also in Geography.

But let me return for a moment or two to my early adventures, to my first steps into the fascinating realm of geography with a story I often tell my students in order to introduce them to some of the arcane rooms of geographical thinking. When a teenager, still living in Trieste, I had a rather colorful map of Europe in my room, on the wall right in front of my bed. On that map, I used to mark my first independent travels – independent from my parents but also from the tour operators, which again was a naïve but genuine political stance of sorts. That map, however, had another, perhaps more important, function: it was a space – not only a representation of space – it was an actual and material

space on which I used to draw my hypothetical future routes, routes loaded with exotic images and promised 'real life' experiences.

That map soon became a plan – all maps are by definition implicit plans, as I said, they all incorporate a spatial ideology of some kind – on which and from which – I learned to draw expectations, self-representations, personal identities, travel fantasies, but also to interrogate the deep motivations which were moving my interest far away and then still mysterious lands.

Those real and imagined geographies produced in my room, and other mappings like this one encountered in my early explorations, ended up translating into a life project, into a key element in the construction of my cultural identities, but also of my future professional choices. Perhaps, those rather banal maps were the embryonic sites for the future decision to become a professional geographer and, by default, for spending most of my life trying to make sense of some key questions which began buzzing in my mind precisely in those distant days (*Photo 2*).

One of these questions emerged in full force during my numerous and intense travels already when I was a university student. Despite all my dreams, my thirst for ever new explorations, my interest for different people and cultures, at the end of each trip, I was caught by a vague but pervasive sense of dissatisfaction. I always felt that there was something unaccomplished,



Photo 2. Postcolonial tourist mappings

something missing. Those explorations were never what I expected them to be. So, I guess, in those moments, without even realizing it, I decided to spend the rest of my life trying to understand what that gap – between the representation of places and my actual experience of those very same places – really consisted of. I soon found myself immersed, then, into some of the key questions of modernity.

Modernity is intended here mainly as a specific set of theories about how to understand and represent 'the real'. Modernity is intended as an epistemological battleground, as a way of framing and making sense of the world around us. Modernity is transversed as an epoch by tensions and paradoxes, by romanticism and positivism, by nationalism and cosmopolitanism, by cold and rigid maps but it is also a geography of culture and feelings, both of which are equally crucial elements, for example, in the constitution of the extraordinary spatial formation which we call the nation-state.

Furthermore, in that imbroglio of representations, calculations, explorations, projects, and metaphors that made modern culture as we know it, I encountered a few spatial concepts that catalyzed my own attention and that eventually became key tools of my scientific investigations: the concepts of *landscape*, of *region*, of *cartography*, of *place*, to name a few; but also of *community*, of *environment*, of *population* and ultimately, of course, of *space*.

All these concepts, all these metaphors, have played a key role in the emergence of the Modern project. They have also been at the core of the discipline of geography over the past two centuries or so. And since then, since my first hesitant steps into the intricate but fascinating forest of modern thought, the question of how modern spatial representations are related to real places, the places in which we live, has been at the center of my scientific preoccupations, and of my theoretical and empirical work.

Human Geography is thus not (just) about maps, although for very long maps have been considered as a sort of laboratory for armchair geographers. Human Geography is rather about spatial thinking, about a specific way of understanding reality through spatial theories and spatial categories. It is about thinking in spatial terms of social interactions which determine our respective lives and make our places, our living environment what they are.

“Geo-geography” literally means geo-writing, the writing of the Earth, an act which includes thought and action, description and prescription at once (DEMATTEIS, G. 1985; FALL, J.J. and MINCA, C. 2013). Geography is about the representations of those relationships in space, but also about the actual concrete spaces which shape and are shaped by our thoughts and our everyday practices. Geography is thus also about understanding how power, politics, culture, the social, the cultural, the living environment are inscribed in space, and how they are always the result of specific ways of thinking space, how the social fabric produces and is produced by specific places and landscapes.

The classic German geographer Walter CHRISTALLER, for example, famously envisioned in the 1930s – through his central place theory – a spatial grid which, putatively, would adequately describe and help organize some key functions in the production of our living environment: the market, the administration, the transportation system (CHRISTALLER, W. 1941, 1966).

He also asked to help Heinrich Himmler to plan the spatial re-organisation of occupied Poland based on his neat and reassuring geometries, fantasizing a perfect new eastern frontier where Aryan families of farmers and soldiers would create ideal communities in a balanced Lebensraum, vital space (see BARNES, T and MINCA, C. 2013). Interestingly, his central place theory was adopted with enthusiasm by many geographers and planners after the war, both in the US and Europe, and is still taught in many universities around the world – incidentally, my first lecture ever, at the University of Trieste in 1988, was on CHRISTALLER.

Leaving aside the obvious historical and political issues related to his involvement with the Nazis, a key question for contemporary geographers is, for example, what the relationship is between this spatial grid, these plans for new living spaces and more in general, the everyday life and the ways in which people experience their own places. How these people fit in this grid? How these projections represent their actual lives? What is included and what is excluded from these geometries and according to which principle? Indeed, a tricky and fascinating set of questions about the workings of representations and especially of spatial representations (*Fig. 1, Photo 3*).

The perception of too many migrants in a public park, the calculations concerning the relationship between space, resources and population in one region, the reactions of a local community to urban restructuring or landscape planning, the geopolitical imaginations which prepare the ground for the invasion of another country in the name of peace, the decision of millions every year to spend their holidays in Italy – all these issues are founded on some sort of spatial thinking. Academic geography then provides a set of well-consolidated analytical tools which enable us to think critically about the nature and the development of these very spatial practices. This also explains why geography has been such an important science in the shaping of the modern project, especially from the beginning of the 19th century onwards.

From the emergence of the European bourgeois nation state, to the new cartographies of colonialism, from the spatial fantasies of nationalism and empire, to the visible and invisible spaces of the postindustrial city, just to name a few, geography has played an important role in shaping ideas, plans and even resistance to hegemonic projects, trying to privilege certain interpretations of space and society while silencing others.

Cultural geography is today one of the fundamental branches of human geography and in many ways the geographical response to the so-called

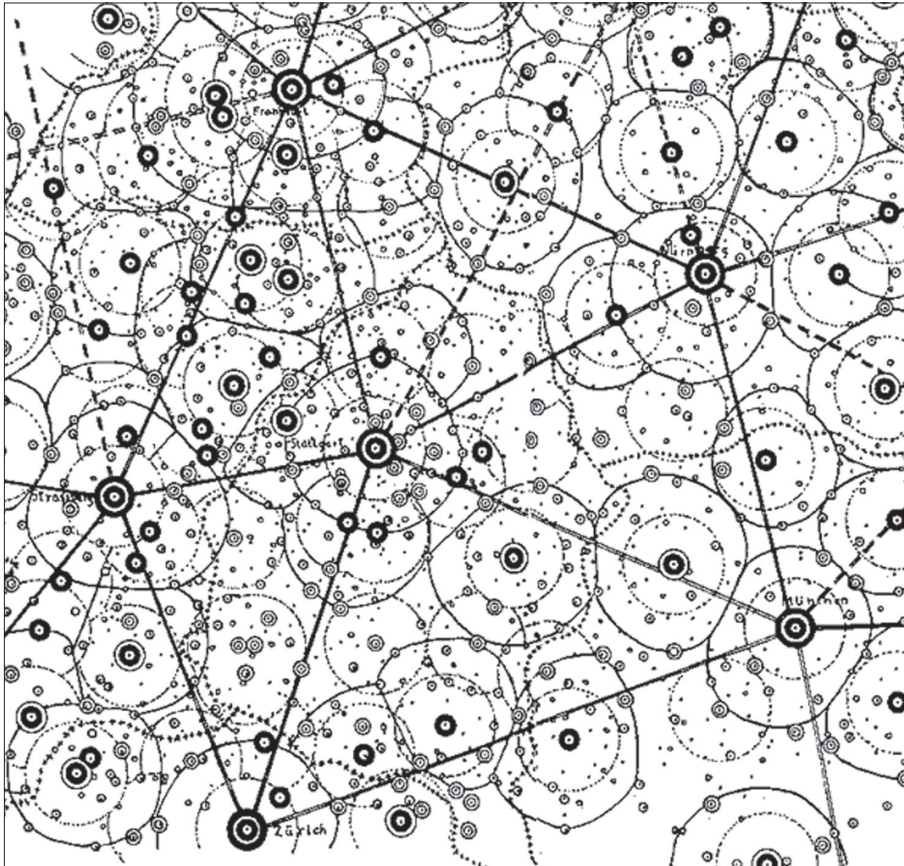


Fig. 1. CHRISTALLER's grid... (and see Photo 3)

cultural turn that swept all social sciences from the 80's onwards, under the influence of the new-born field of Cultural Studies (see, among others, ANDERSON, K. *et al.* 2003; MITCHELL, D. 2000). The cultural turn in geography has had two important effects: the first one was to align the discipline with cutting edge debates on social and cultural theory; the second was to provide new concepts and methodologies to other fields strongly concerned with the reintroduction of space and spatial thinking into their own analytical categories. This explains why cultural geography has become so central to the discipline today, but also why cultural geography and its conceptualisations have influenced many other cognate disciplines.



Photo 3. ...and the everyday

The concepts of landscape and place have occupied center stage in this critical rethinking of the role of culture in geography (see CRESSWELL, T. 2004). Culture has thus been reconsidered as a *process* instead of something existing out there, waiting to be studied and described like in those anthropological museums so popular in the 19th century. Place has been reinvented as a site of multiple and negotiated meaning – instead of a hypothetical fortress of fixed identity (CRESSWELL, T. 2004; also MASSEY, D. 1993). Landscape has been radically re-theorised: as a way of seeing, as a text, as a space of practice and performance, as a multisensorial experience of the living environment (WYLIE, J.W. 2007). These last considerations bring me to the second part of this paper, focused on the cultural landscape.

The Cultural Landscape

Landscape is a rather ambivalent and polymorphous concept in popular discourse. But it is often a rather confused and imprecise concept in science as well. For many, landscape seems to be about everything – often treated as

synonymous with place, site, or even space. The conceptual confusion about landscape is so widespread that in some academic circles the idea of simply dismissing the concept all together has gained some currency. Why this confusion? Where does it come from? Is it a weakness or a strength of the concept? Perhaps it is worthwhile, then, to spend a few words on the genealogy of the concept, to see how cultural geography has been trying to make sense of its inherent ambivalence as a scientific tool. Landscape is maybe the only spatial metaphor able to refer to both an object and its description; to recall, at once, a tract of land and its image, its representation (FARINELLI, F. 1992; also MINCA, C. 2007a).

“We should beware attempts to define landscape, to resolve its contradictions; rather we should abide in its duplicity” (DANIELS, S. 1989).

As Denis COSGROVE famously suggested, landscape appeals at once to the material and the representational, to both art and science, and this is what made it such a powerful concept, assigning it such a vital role in the history of Modern European culture (COSGROVE, D. 1984, 2003). More importantly for my argument, landscape, in genealogical terms, lays right in the gap between modern spatial representations and our experience of the world.

“The idea of landscape is the most significant expression of the historical attempt to bring together visual image and material world” (COSGROVE, D. 2003).

The concept of landscape in fact challenges the distance, the separation between a scientific representation of the world and our perception of that same world every time we gaze out of our window (FARINELLI, F. 1992).

I believe the *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (see *Photo 4*) by Caspar David Friedrich, often used by geographers for teaching purposes is extraordinarily useful in illustrating a crucial passage in the scientific history of the concept of landscape in western thought. Friedrich here describes in very powerful terms what I would call the subject of the landscape. He does so in 1818, in when that act can be considered as an extraordinary romantic gesture. And the date is not irrelevant. Indeed, this is also a very inspiring description of a quintessential passage in the production of modernity, or better yet, of a specific understanding of modernity and its spatial theories.

The subject at the top of the mountain is admiring the landscape – a beautiful sight, for sure, dramatic and inspiring – but also a space with no clear borders, something produced by the very position of the viewer, something subjective and objective at the same time, something in constant change. The watching subject, here, is at once admiring the landscape as an object, as something detached, *and* as something of which he is part.

Friedrich makes the watching subject visible, in all his duplicity of being internal and external to the production of that landscape. However, according to Franco FARINELLI (1992) and see also MINCA (2007a), from that moment



Photo 4. Wanderer above a Sea of Fog (painted by C.D. Friedrich, 1818)

onwards, by and large, the subject of the landscape will tend to disappear from sight. That individual-who-watches-and-creates-the-landscape will disappear from the landscape painting, but also more importantly, from the scientific understandings of landscape, and landscape will be more and more often depicted as an object void of people, or at best, with people depicted as objects on a stage – the eye will be frozen in space and time, and made invisible.

This is the beginning of a tradition in landscape studies that will travel throughout two centuries and will remain with us up until the 1980s, when

in geography and in the social sciences in general, this episteme will be seriously challenged (see MITCHELL, D. 2001; 2002; 2003). In fact, it has been broadly accepted in the academic literature by now that the landscape ideal is based upon the construction of a specific modern subject: a subject who, by virtue of his strategic and perspectivist position, is able to “read” the territory, gazing out upon the space which lies in front of him and assigning absolute primacy to the visual; a subject who, endowed with the interpretative lens of the landscape perspective, is able to grant *meaning, order, value* to a specific piece of land. The fact that the Modern has been marked by the hegemony of the visual is a broadly accepted claim in today’s social sciences (see, among others, ROSE, G. 2012).

The dominion of perspective and of the “truth of the eye” was part of the emergence of the new spatial theories that accompanied, between the 1700s and the 1800s, the progressive dismantling of the aristocratic *ancien regime* and its epistemologies; epistemologies that were to be putatively replaced by a neutral and scientific vision of Nature and the world. At the beginning of the 1800s, according to FARINELLI, the realm of landscape was no science but was still “that of aesthetic appearance” (in MINCA, C. 2007b, p. 435).

It is thanks to one of the “founding fathers” of modern geography, Alexander von HUMBOLDT, that the concept of landscape (1848) is transformed, for the first time, from an aesthetic to a scientific concept. And it is precisely the aesthetic impulse of bourgeois culture, which imposes the transformation of artistic sensibility into a “science of Nature” (FARINELLI, F. 2003). This is why it is precisely the concept of landscape that is chosen by Humboldt as the ideal vehicle to convey the protagonists of the emerging and increasingly powerful European bourgeoisie towards the realm of scientific knowledge (FARINELLI, F. 1992, p. 203).

The subject of scientific landscape, in its original Humboldtian interpretation, then, was conceived as an ideal projection, a conscious abstraction; yet at a certain point in time, this subject – as I said – disappears from view. With the consolidation of the new academic geography of the nation state, and in particular the German and the French positivistic traditions of the 1800s, which will culminate with Sigfried PASSARGE’s *Landschaftskunde* (1920) and the new *Géographie Humaine* (1922, 1926) inaugurated by VIDAL DE LA BLACHE, P. at the beginning of the 1900s, the subject is removed from the landscape just as the eye is removed from the field of vision.

As many have argued, with the triumph of the new cartographic gaze, the subject becomes no more than a theatrical spectator. It is within this context that we witness the affirmation of the landscape as an object – as a spatial container of immobile things – in geography and beyond geography (MINCA, C. 2007a, p. 191). It is an idea of landscape which will prove immensely useful – indeed, indispensable – to the consolidation of the nation-state and its

progressive (geo)metrical appropriation of the territory and all its living subjects. This landscape-object furnishes the nation state with a useful model for an orderly and meaningful composition of the various “parts” of that same world.

The direct, tactile experience of sites of national “heritage” becomes, from the 19th century onwards, an essential support for a new rhetoric of antiquity and a shared past which emplace belonging within landscape. Landscapes, in the popular perception, become thus icons of the state and the nation, rendering them even more essential to establish a certainty – and to ensure continuity – to their interpretation: quite the opposite intention from that assigned to the landscape ideal by von HUMBOLDT.

Landscape, I shall argue, is an ideological concept. It represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature (COSGROVE, D. 1984, p. 15).

The landscape, I would argue, is one of the central elements in a cultural system, for as an ordered assemblage of objects, a text, it acts as a signifying system through which a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (DUNCAN, J.S. 1990)

It is this largely forgotten legacy which accounts for the reason why, still today, landscapes often continue to be represented as objects, as simply a collection of endlessly reproducible images – all the while people and governments expend great time and energy in order to invest those images with meaning, emotions, sentiments and, above all, a sense of belonging. The rather confused use made of the concept of landscape by, for example, the heritage industry, contributes, then, to conflating an object with the process of its production; landscape is often presented both as “a space with some inherent qualities” *and* as a perspective, as a visible tract of land *and* as an experience laden with existential meaning. Most recently, critical landscape studies have begun to challenge and re-think the hegemony of the visual, not only in its central role within the structuring of modern thought, but also in the ways in which landscape has been – and continues to be – conceived. Recent critiques, in particular, ‘emphasize the duality and provisional nature of sight: the returned gaze, the capacity of its subjects to manipulate, obscure, subvert or deform visual order’ (COSGROVE, D. 2002, p. 265).

Indeed, the predominant focus of landscape studies on visualization has been criticised for having largely ignored landscape’s multi-sensorial and embodied qualities. Such recent work is also marked by wider concerns with practice: that is, with what is done in the landscape and what is done with landscapes by people rather than what is represented (WYLIE, J.W. 2007). It is such concerns that have paved the way to also rethinking the role of other



Photo 5. People performing landscapes (Venice, Italy)

senses – and other dimensions – in the landscape experience beyond the visual (*Photo 5*). This, naturally, raises a whole series of questions about how to study people’s feelings, meanings and values evoked by landscape, how to render into scientific interpretations their practice of landscape (BERQUE, A. 1995).

What does landscape become when it is performed, put into practice? How do people actually treat such an ambivalent concept? Cultural geographers have thus begun to unravel these questions by investigating what actually occurs in certain “canonical” sites for the observation and reproduction of landscape, by doing “deep” ethnographic work in sites profoundly shaped by the practice of landscape in order to see how people actually perform the landscape (see also EDENSOR, T. 2001; 2006).

I have personally incorporated these methodologies in several recent projects, together with some of my students. In these projects we explored the practices related to the powerful idea of tourist landscape and tried to make sense of all the striking contradictions which we experimented in different locations around the world: in Asuke (Japan); in Varanasi (India), in Marrakech (Morocco), in the Lake District in the UK and more recently, of course, in the Netherlands where the idea of cultural landscape is so important.

I am now drafting a new research project in collaboration with some Japanese colleagues in order to investigate the role of ideas of landscape and identity in the reconstruction of the coastal areas of Northern Japan devastated by the Tsunami in 2012. What this ethnographic work has by and large shown is that landscape remains an extraordinary powerful project, a powerful metaphor to think the space(s) of culture and the living environment they shape. But also that landscape means many different things in different places that its interpretations – and the practices which it mobilizes – are, indeed, always context-based.

What we have learned is that there is no single definition of landscape valid for all situations and places; landscape, as a concept, has travelled and continues to travel, something our research was forced to incorporate in all empirical cases. Even more importantly, landscape cannot simply be considered as an object, a piece of land with some particular characteristics. Rather, we should ask how we do perform landscape, we change landscapes, we invent landscapes, we destroy landscapes, we qualify landscapes, we embody landscapes. We could say that landscape is a fascinating process through which we translate ideas, perspectives and plans into stone – but also into ways to observe and assess those very stones.

Conclusion

I do believe in geography, in the importance of thinking space critically, in the social relevance of understanding the places and the landscapes which make our everyday life and the theories that produced and continue to produce them. Our own life experience is indeed shaped by spaces that we, as people and scholars, contribute to change and hopefully help improve in the name of social justice and the development of a better quality of life for all.

That is why I believe that we should recover von HUMBOLDT'S lesson again and bring the subject back in the landscape. Because the scientific landscape was not originally conceived to freeze people and places in some abstract space, but rather to fill in the untenable distance between the spatial representations of the world which populated modernity and our everyday experience of it. To provide a metaphor is capable of actually including people and their lives in our ways of thinking space.

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