

MYSTICAL IMAGES IN THE ROMANTIC ERA ART WORKS: Through Ancient Legend of the Giselle Ballet to Picturesque Canvases by C.D. Friedrich

IMAGENS MÍSTICAS NAS OBRAS DE ARTE DA ERA ROMÂNTICA: da Antiga Lenda do Balé de Giselle às Telas Pitorescas de C.D. Friedrich

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Abstract: The article focuses on a comparative analysis of the Romanticism works by A. Adam and C.D. Friedrich. The study aims to comprehensively describe the Giselle ballet and the paintings by C. Friedrich, jointly analyzing them from the standpoint of mystical beauty as reflected in the Romanticism trend in 19th-century art. This study is notable for being the first attempt at such a joint analysis. The author highlights innovations originating in the ballet theatre and the pictorial art of the period, which achieved a natural balance in the spatial organization principles between all components of performance and painting. It is demonstrated that these works cooperate at the junction of a figurative romantic idea, serving as a powerful psychological tool.

Keywords: Theatrical Interpretation, Stylistics of Romanticism, Landscape, Picturesque System.

Resumo: O artigo foca em uma análise comparativa das obras românticas de A. Adam e C.D. Friedrich. O objetivo do estudo é principalmente pautado pelo fato de ser a primeira tentativa de analisar conjuntamente o balé Giselle e as pinturas de C. Friedrich, proporcionando uma descrição abrangente a partir da perspectiva da beleza mística refletida na tendência romântica da arte no século XIX. O autor destaca as inovações surgidas no teatro de balé e na arte pictórica da época, que proporcionaram um equilíbrio natural nos princípios de organização espacial entre todos os componentes da performance e da pintura. Demonstra-se que essas obras colaboram na interseção de uma ideia romântica figurativa, atuando como uma poderosa ferramenta psicológica.

Palavras-chave: Interpretação Teatral, Estilística do Romantismo, Paisagem, Sistema Pitoresco.

Introduction

The cultural and historical unity of a particular period includes similar moods in various types of creative activity. The artistic language expressiveness issue has always been a controversial point. It would be of certain interest to consider connections and dependencies of different genre solutions similar in their figurative and psychological aspects as to their internal correlation and integrity. The question may arise as to the need in analyzing the type of correspondences, rapprochements and divergences between

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heterogeneous art areas being chronologically united by the same period within one stylistic trend. It is rather clear that the Giselle ballet by A. Adam and the paintings by the German artist C.D. Friedrich present no obvious direct similarity, yet their creators' range of interests is allied. C. Friedrich created his landscapes at the same time when the Giselle ballet was staged. It was a trend infinitely distant from the baroque luxury and noisy extravaganza. In the 19th century, the modernizing tendencies in theatre and painting redressed a natural balance in the spatial organization principles of art works – among all components of the performance and the painting (Bianchini, 2023; Pereira, 2018; Bondarenko et al. 2022). The solution was to reject the purely constructive approach of the stage box, adopt new solutions, and embrace the ability to arrange the scene applying a picturesque spatial method (Togaibayeva et al., 2021). An attempt to create an appropriate visual solution within the Romanticism stylistics was made in the scenery and entire atmosphere of the Giselle ballet. Having perceived the Romanticism figurative stylistic system in the landscape genre, C. Friedrich creatively transformed traditions in theatrical and decorative painting and at the same time shifted the center of gravity to solving pictorial problems and subordinating them to compositional logic. At a time when Romanticism was still emerging on the ballet theatre stage, it instantly adopted the interaction traits emulated by the landscape painting, literature and choreographic drama itself, which was manifested in creating the majestic romantic drama (Zafeiroudi et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, C. Friedrich was the most prominent exponent of the German Romanticism and concurrently its most decisive reformer. The picturesque landscape method by C. Friedrich appeared to be one of the most illustrative examples in reflecting the stage Romanticism concept.

Thus, the purpose of this article is principally determined by the fact that it is the first attempt to jointly analyze the Giselle ballet and the paintings by C. Friedrich, and to provide their comprehensive description from a standpoint of mystical beauty reflected in Romanticism trend in art in the 19th century.

To achieve the results, the following tasks were set:

- determine the interpretation peculiarities in ideological and philosophical concept within the semantic and figurative compositional space of the specified art works;
- identify the core models for creating pictures of nature and principles of their implementation under the scenic and pictorial frames;
- display the association patterns related to the major natural states in the context of choreographic and pictorial works concept.

References

Philosophers and art critics have turned to the study and analysis of the Romanticism ideas as evidenced by their works (Berkovsky, 2001; Vanslov, 1988; Zhirmunsky, 1996). The available sources on the ballet Romanticism and creative activities by C. Friedrich predominantly include papers and books by foreign authors. The author was drawn to the topic by the mystery riddle in Romanticism, romantic fiction, play and interaction of expressive forms, as well as the comparison of Russian artistic experience with its German counterpart; yet, the question on artistic and choreographic relationships and interactions was not raised. The Giselle ballet has often been the subject of ballet criticism. Newspaper and magazine articles provide an opportunity to acquaint oneself with the reviews on the ballet staged by various theatres around the globe; their authors mostly consider its dance and performing side (Emelyanova, 2012; Naumova, 2016; Randy; Aksenova, 2017). Publications about C. Friedrich are presented as a conversation about his work in general as well as display the analysis of his paintings (Bialostocki, 1977; Börsch-Supan, 1975; Wolf, 2006). Among publications dedicated to the artist, there are papers exploring the landscape genre, which is the main trend in C. Friedrich's creative activity (Azadovsky, 1971; Mikhailov, 1989; Zeri, 2001). It should be additionally underlined that German Romanticism analysis based on the example of the Giselle ballet second act and the fine art works presented by C. Friedrich's landscape painting creativity has never been the main subject of a scientific research.

Materials and methods

The study sources included text and photographic materials provided by theatre museum archival funds of A.A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatrical and Musical Art, The Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (RGALI), as well as video recordings of the Giselle ballet of various years, a direct analysis of modern staging solutions, references and encyclopedias. To study C. Friedrich creative activities, the works presented in museum collections were studied – predominantly German ones.

The comparative analysis method was applied as the primary one as it is indicated in the topic wording to present the material (Mabrouk et al., 2023). Under the study, the analytical method involves a parallel examination of images created in choreography and painting alike. The complex analysis method considers the connection between the ballet

drama performance and stage design in their correlation to the images on C. Friedrich's paintings. Such an approach to the study associations and parallels between contrasting yet simultaneously adjacent works within the synchronous and diachronous consideration apprehends bountiful meanings. When analyzing the artistic images of nature as a component of an individual (choreographic and pictorial) poetical and symbolic model of the mystical beauty, the main line of their mutual consideration was laid by a single direction developed in the 19th century; within its boundaries, similar creations belonging to diverse art types were born.

Results

Semantics of the Giselle ballet and paintings by C.D. Friedrich

Giselle, or Willis (fr. *Giselle, ou les Willis*) is a “fantastic ballet” in two acts by composer Adolphe Adam on the libretto by Henri de Saint-Georges, Théophile Gautier and Jean Coralli based on the legend retold by Heinrich Heine. The tale intertwined with the Slavic legend about brides who died before their weddings and rose from their graves at night to quench their passion for dancing, as it was not satisfied during their lifetime. Therefore, the love story of a peasant girl and a noble gentleman harmoniously fitted into the romantic atmosphere of the era. The plot also provided a possibility to generate an unconventional stage drama immersed rather in creating an intimate integral world of a grievous rural cemetery where fog disappeared at night and an old belief revived than noisy joy with numerous variegated exits and dance processions. In his writings, H. Heine wrote on elemental spirits the following:

Willis are brides who died before their weddings. The poor young creatures cannot lie quietly in their coffins. In their dead hearts, in their dead legs, there is still that passion for dancing they could not quench during their lifetime. And, at midnight, they leave their graves and gather in crowds on the roads. And, woe be to the young man who meets them! He must dance with them, they embrace him with an unbridled thirst for fun, and he dances restlessly until he falls dead. Dressed in their wedding dresses, with flower grafts and fluttering ribbons on their heads, with sparkling rings on their fingers, the Willis dance in the moon light just like the elves (Heine, 1904, p. 140).

Figure 1 - "Giselle" by A. Adan. Stage version of the Bolshoi Theater. Scenography by R. Perziola. 2023



Source: Natalya Voronova, 2021

However, their faces are white like snow, they are young and beautiful. The girls laugh so terribly merrily, so criminally graceful, they nod their heads in such a mysteriously voluptuous manner, they promise so much ... it is impossible to resist these dead bacchantes (Heine, 1904, p. 146).

This central plot line of the second act enabled the Giselle ballet to acquire the status of a legendary performance and remain the undisputed pinnacle of the romantic style. From a sentimentally beautiful story about a deceived love, Giselle gradually turned into a poem of the betrayed trust and love stronger than death. In the same way, a pastoral sunny rural nature of the first act was transformed into a mystical darkness of the village cemetery; at night, ghostly Willis appear among the graves in the moonlight – brides who died before their weddings. They are dressed in their wedding dresses.

Figure 2 - C.D. Friedrich. "Graveyard under Snow." 1826. Museum der bildenden Kunst, Leipzig.



Source: ALLARTCLASSIC. Caspar David Friedrich romanticism, n.d.

The images of cemeteries, crosses, roadside crucifixes, distant cities and ships floating in the sea depths are the central theme of C. Friedrich. His canvases present a *mélange* of natural scenery inhabited by lonely characters with philosophical reflections on the life purpose. The aching feeling of loneliness and a sense of being lost in a vast space and time seem to be duplicated and developed in the stage interpretation of the *Giselle* ballet. C. Friedrich including the image of the man into his landscapes as he sought to justify his behavior rather with the laws of nature than religious standards. The plot device and story line in the *Giselle* second act appeals to the dignity of the human personality and demands a reasonable clarity of behavior, a firm choice in determining the decision from it. While the ballet proclaims a concept to actualize the topic and make viewers contemplate thereon, C. Friedrich believes the issue to be too abstract. The *Willis* and *Giselle* changed, they became distrustful, and a naive idea of a joyful life purpose become a thing of the past. Transition from the first act to the second one is vividly paralleled with a former naive human conviction and a cruel reality of mystical belief. Evidently, the libretto author is a person of a colorful imagination: along with general philosophical reflections, his text contains a specific content. The clear position set forth

in the legend facilitates to understand the author's subsequent and a frequently complex course of the choreography. In his canvases, C. Friedrich does not express such definite judgment as to his characters' nature. Still, similar to H. Heine, the ballet libretto author, he elaborated on the issue troublesome for him, the laws of a changing and simultaneously unchanging historical process. They both believed in the immortality of the soul, visions and miracles; they willingly picked up the idea of the nature as an eternal mystical phenomenon. The two authors can be labelled cosmic creators. Still, each of them followed their own nature. A man is ruled by a blind and cruel soul, and, after his death, he disappears into oblivion. People are only a part of nature not its lords; their conventional thoughts like pursuit for wealth, fame, and court vanity deserve contempt. C. Friedrich presents a person inclined to follow the laws of nature and perceive it in an exceptional way. The mystery of the inner world emanated by the Romanticists comes from a deliberate understatement. On the contrary, in the ballet, analysis strives for gaining an exhaustively clear knowledge of the human soul, and yet fails to reach it. C. Friedrich presents mysteriousness while the Giselle ballet dwells in mystery.

Compositional and Scenographic Structure of the Giselle Ballet Second Act of and Paintings by C.D. Friedrich

Under context of the issues discussed, C. Friedrich focuses a particular interest on considering the compositional and scenographic structure of the Giselle ballet second act and paintings, as it becomes the milestone feature for the idea that a romantic atmosphere coincides with a mystical beauty. The shapes of the dancers twirling on the stage become subordinate to the geometric form due to an elaborated choreography. Suffice it to recall the Gothic principle of transferring sculptural functions to an architectural structure; while, in this very case, everything changes its places – the bodily form is transformed into high matters of the Gothic style linearity. It can be observed in mise-en-scenes arrangement, through open and closed movements of the dancers – Willis grouped in a multi-faceted elusive flexible movement, in directions developing in various planes and heights.

Figure 3 - "Giselle" by A. Adan. Mariinsky Theater. St. Petersburg. Edited by L. Titova. Production designer Y. Samodurov.



Source: МАРИИНСКИЙ ТЕАТР. Санкт-Петербург, Мариинский театр, n.d.

Figure 4 - C.D. Friedrich "Monastery Cemetery in the Snow".1819. Alte und Neue Nationalgalerie, Museum Berggruen, Berlin.



Source: reproduction by Tatiana Kutomanova, 2013.

Though, similar to the canvases by C. Friedrich, the isolation method is indirectly present in the drama stage space. However, it is violated in the ballet stage direction, which is expressed in the numerous pieces of disappearance and re-appearance of the performers, their movement seems to go beyond the curtains. C. Friedrich's canvas frames as well as the stage curtains put no special obstacles to the movement, it easily rushes forward. The "theatrical behavior" of his characters is not immediately evident as

it is primarily achieved due to the combining various compositional logic aspects: linear and spatial one along with light and shadow one. In the ballet, the white figures of Willis, as if phosphorising through the moonlight in the darkness, dance against the background of grave crosses to reveal the ambiguity of the ongoing action arisen on the verge of a visible and imaginary reality. This symbolic arrangement module shapes the mood of a mystical romantic beauty in both cases.

Figure 5 - "Giselle" by A. Adan. Kremlin Ballet. Moscow. Ballet master-director A. Petrov. Artist S. Benediktov.



Source: KREMLINPALACE, n.d.

In C. Friedrich's paintings, the compositional principle is manifested even more profoundly when he deliberately builds plans and lighting and includes the characters' figures in natural motives to force them to silently contemplate its unusual states. It is appropriately to assume that, when creating his canvases, the artist was influenced by the following theatrical performances: *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819-1820, Old Masters Picture Gallery, Dresden), *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, (abt 1818, the Oskar Reinhart Collection, Winterthur), *On a Sailboat* (1834, The National Art Gallery, Oslo), *Wanderer over the Sea of Fog* (1818, Hamburgener Kunsthalle), *Moonrise (Two Men on the Shore)* (abt 1835-1837, Hermitage, Saint Petersburg), etc.

Figure 6 - C.D. Friedrich. "Moonrise over the Sea". 1822. Old National Gallery. Berlin.



Source: WEB Gallery of Art. Wikipedia, n.d.

It can be observed that the canvases primarily connect two forms of the image theatricalization (planning and light). “Light on the stage.., sets or actors – it is all or almost everything. Light can save everything or destroy everything” (Kozlinsky; Frese, 1975, p. 118). Principles and methods on including a light source in the compositional and color structure of the art works are broadly similar. The presentation of one natural reality – moonlighting in a landscape and a performance – becomes a story line playing an essential part in implementing their ideological concept. The moon image in the works is essential in expressing both the author's position and the attitude of the author-producer and author-artist to the characters. It will be discussed in detail in the last section hereof.

C. Friedrich often inscribed human figures with their backs turned to the viewer into the landscape background. Their forward glances open up a distant perspective. In addition, the artist seeks to attract the viewer to what is happening, to turn them into a character, which is a theatrical technique too.

A completely different principle similar to a theatre curtain appears in the following canvases by the artist: Ruins of the Oybin, (1840. The State Hermitage Museum), Ruins of Eldena, near Greifswald, (1824, Old and New National Galleries, Das Museum Berggruen, Berlin), The Grave of Ulrich von Hutten (1824), where he created a monumental architectural ensemble as he supposedly combined the interior of the hall with a stage, where a powerful portal akin to the gates of a Gothic cathedral dominates and serves as a majestic backdrop to launch the performance. Such a curtain without a ramp significantly differs from the technique considered by us despite the fact that the

theatrical method nature and the tasks it sets before the artist remain the same. Here, C. Friedrich remains within the limits of the compositional solution reconstructive concept, though, this time, it gets a divergent expression. As if the “real” architecture was transferred to the small stage of the artist's canvases, which added to its scale the grandeur of a large performance and removed the museum plaque, the accentuated convention distinguishing the pictorial solutions of the ancient theatre (Khodakovsky, 2003).

Figure 7 - C.D. Friedrich "Two Contemplating the Moon". 1825-30. Metropolitan Museum of Art. United States.



Source: THE MET. Two Men Contemplating the Moon, n.d.

In a number of other works by C. Friedrich, the key to construct the story line is the arch forming a breakthrough into the picture plane being similar to the stage surroundings and leading the viewer's gaze into the depths as in *The Gazebo* (Neue Pinakothek Munich), *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon* (1830-1835), *Chalk Cliffs of Rügen* (abt 1818, the Oskar Reinhart Collection, Winterthur).

Figure 8 - "Giselle" by A. Adan. Ballet Theater of classical choreography. Edited by M. Lavrovsky Moscow 2020.



Source: Shuparskiy Roman, n.d.

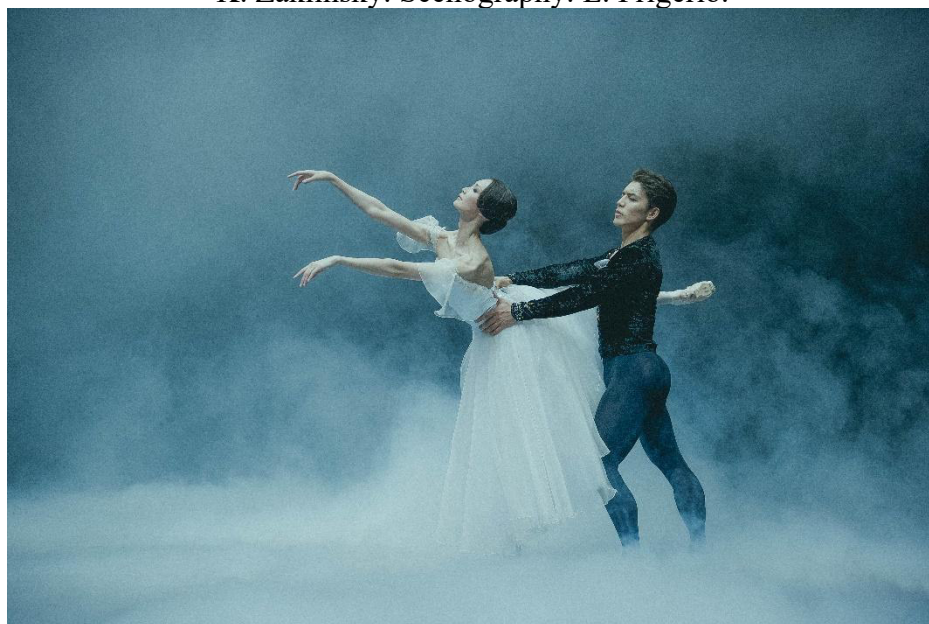
The presence of the portal framing the wide-open stage area is ambiguous. It is also a kind of the performance enclosure delivering an independent character to the theatrical action, complying with the classical traditions of decoration. It is also a generalized image to concentrate the major story lines to drama solutions. In addition, it performed a technical function – an integral part of the entire curtain system. A special arrangement of the portal curtains can narrow the stage mirror and the illusion of a deepened space provided that the principle of creating two stage atmospheres is consistently implemented: more muted and gloomy foreground is combined with a brighter background.

The Mysticism of Nature in the Giselle ballet compared to the Landscape Interpretation by C.D. Friedrich

Now, it is only necessary to take one-step to proceed to the analysis of the nature representation in the stage and painting by C. Friedrich in accordance with the general spirit of his creativity and the nature interpretation in the Giselle ballet second act. C. Friedrich called himself a co-author of the nature, as it becomes his permanent companion, despite the fact that, sometimes, a gap is formed between the images of architectural ruins and human figures, but the picturesque motive stereotype is triggered in this case. Pierre-Luc-Charles Cicéri designed the first ballet sets. The Giselle set design is based on the free composition principle – the emphasized winding lines of the rural cemetery are arbitrarily transformed into various artistic interpretations, yet, at the same time, they do not appear on the stage floor. In ballet, the conceptual complexity of the compositional dance form seems to be at its highest. The artist, his models (performers)

and potential viewers are all brought to the stage of the unparalleled pictorial performance at once. Despite a clear geometry in the construction, the dancer groups seem to be ghostly formations contradicting everything material and creating an illusory picturesqueness. The landscape image space and all characters in action assembled together, every gesture and glance are imbued with duality – they are simultaneously ghostly, yet, due to the plot, they correlate with reality and the representation concept and, thus, are flesh and part at the same time.

Figure 9 - "Giselle" by A. Adan. Astana Opera Theater. 2019. Ballet master - director. K. Zaklinsky. Scenography. E. Frigerio.



Source: Astana Opera, 2019

Likewise, C. Friedrich's landscapes present no collision of two opposite worlds but their unity. His perception of nature reflected something new that manifested itself under the influence of the Romanticism ideas, namely: *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (1809-1810, Old National Gallery, Berlin), *Cross-in the Mountains* (1807-1808, Old Masters Picture Gallery, Dresden), *Cross and Cathedral in the Mountains* (1812, Fine Arts Museum of Dusseldorf), *Monastery Graveyard in the Snow* (1826, Museum, Leipzig). A lonely traveler is lost in a white snowy silence to instil a dreary horror with his seemingly hopeless loneliness. The same sharp, almost graphic contrasts in the tree silhouette images, the same feeling of the world being torn apart and detached are presented in the canvas *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-1810, Old National Gallery, Berlin), *A Walk at Dusk* (1837) in which someone appears from an unknown place and for an unknown reason.

Figure 10 - C.D. Friedrich "Wanderer over the Sea of Fog". 1818. Kunsthalle, Hamburg.



Source: TIQETS, Hambúrguer Kunsthalle, n.d.

The infinity of imperceptibly moving time materializes in the fog-shrouded spaces of the 1820s paintings. In a subtle light glow of ochre shades, the images preserved by memory appear, and frozen figures often unconnected to each other show up as if they were listening to themselves and time. Friedrich's fine, richly nuanced, almost monochrome paintings with a spectacular inclusion of light spots and a similar monochrome dark blue space of the Giselle scene possess a specific meaning associated with the symbolism in interpreting the entire landscape pattern of the second act.

For the artist and the choreographer, painting is a state of mind in this case. The peculiar beauty of Friedrich's paintings is deliberately cold and impassive, similar to the atmosphere of the Giselle ballet second act. Facing it, just like the eternity, human feelings become silent due to their powerlessness, and the mind leaves the sinful earth.

With the first rays of the rising sun, the white ghostly Willis disappear. The light shadow of Giselle disappears too, but she will always live in Albert's memory as an eternal regret for the lost love – a love stronger than death (The Bolshoi Theatre, 2020).

Light and color arrangement acts as a means of manifesting the inner personal world – as a tool to accuse and present sorrow in ballet and the self-denial and contemplation in the paintings by C. Friedrich, which is poured in the mystical mystery of the universe.

Conclusion

In the romantic era, the national landscape as a natural form of spiritual culture was organically included in the art works structure. In this sense, stage and artistic creativity was in line with existing traditions. The image of nature was a crucial component of C. Friedrich's paintings and closely associated with the author's philosophical and aesthetic concept formation. Nature in the Giselle ballet is not so much a means of artistic expression, yet it is one of the moral categories to form the essence of understanding the female lead as a human being and her world.

Giselle's affinity to the natural world and her perceptual pattern as to the environment become peculiar criteria for determining the degree of her spirituality as well as her position adjacency to the choreography director positions. As one can see, the romantic trend cannot be attributed to only one type of artistic creation, therein lies its independence as it is synthetic – it concentrates its efforts of many representatives of literature, painting, and theatre around itself. It is an organic connection between the art types.

The romantic concept in Giselle and the romantic mindset of C. Friedrich is a very peculiar, in some way a close world, still in some way a very distant one from us, it is exciting and mystical. Dancing ghosts – Willis, can harmoniously blend into the artist's landscapes, and the nature depicted in his paintings can become a decoration for a ballet. The prevalence of a picturesque landscape scenery on the stage becomes the dominant element of the performance itself. It is one side of the contact artistic analogies, while the other one is the transformation of choreography into a landscape painting.

It should be emphasized that our description of the mystical beauty ideas in the works of the Romanticism era based on example of the Giselle ballet and paintings by C. Friedrich could not aspire to completeness yet it may be of certain use for understanding the spiritual environment the authors of the art works contacted with.

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