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THE MAN WHO INVENTED CHRISTMAS
FILM ADAPTATIONS OF DICKENS' *A CHRISTMAS CAROL*
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A Christmas Carol is now over 175 years old. Written in 1843, it is certainly the most televised of Dickens's works and equals if not beats, its closest rival, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) for cinema releases. It's had a huge influence on the way we understand the Christmas festival. It was written at a time when the festival was being revived after centuries of neglect. And its impact was almost immediate. *A Christmas Carol* quickly achieved iconic status, far more so than any of Dickens's other Christmas stories. You have to have been living on some far-off planet not to have heard of the story – the word 'Scrooge' has come to represent miserliness and 'Bah, Humbug' is a phrase often resorted to when indicating someone is a curmudgeon. Even, Field Marshall Montgomery concluded his Christmas Eve message to the Eighth Army on the battlefield with 'Tiny Tim's blessing.

In 1836 Dickens described Christmas at Dingley Dell in *The Pickwick Papers* in which of course one of the most famous of the interpolated tales appears, *The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton* and for those who know the tale, the miserable and mean Gabriel Grub is not a million miles away from Scrooge. Both *Mr Pickwick's Christmas at Wardle's* (1901) and *Gabriel Grub: The Surly Sexton* (1904) were used as the basis for silent films at around the same time as the first silent version of the 11 minute long: *Scrooge: Or Marley's Ghost* which was released in 1901. Here, and we played it earlier, Scrooge is played by Daniel Smith. Both *Mr Pickwick's Christmas* and *Scrooge* were made by the same British director Robert W Paul for the same company. But the first Dickensian film adaptation has to go to its close rival *Oliver Twist*, entitled *Death of Nancy Sykes* [sic] in 1897 produced by the American Mutoscope production company.

Other silent film versions of the *Carol* followed which proves more than anything that it was expected that most of the audience could fill in the obvious gaps because they already knew how the story went.

In the cinema, *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* have been about equally popular with filmmakers, but on television *A Christmas Carol* far outstrips all the others, although this becomes closer if you deduct the number of parodies of *Carol* perpetuated in comedy series such as *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* or even appearances of obvious Scrooge-like figures in long running television series as Christmas specials such as *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* (1969) in an episode entitled *The Ghost and Christmas Past*, *The Odd Couple*, 1970, in an episode entitled *Scrooge Gets an Oscar*, or *Moonlighting*, 1981, which cast Cybill Shepherd as Scrooge in an episode entitled *It's a Wonderful Job* (as much a homage to *It's a Wonderful Life* as to *Carol*). There are musical versions, operatic versions, ballet versions and the list goes on.

Increasing industrialisation, movement of people to cities had gained momentum as Dickens's writing career began and the writing of the *Carol* was a response to the rising price of bread and increasing poverty, and hunger among the very poorer classes. These were the 'hungry forties'. For Dickens himself who had experienced his own economic shocks as a child, poverty was never far away. Another push to his fertile imagination came when he received a copy of *The Second Report (Trade and Manufactures) of the Children's Employment Commission* from the social reformer Thomas Southwood Smith. He was appalled and infuriated by its descriptions of child labour and promised Smith that he would write 'a very cheap pamphlet' called 'An Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor Man's Child'. But shortly afterwards, he wrote to Smith saying that he would defer the production of that pamphlet 'but *rest assured* that when you know [these reasons], and see what I do, and where,



and how, you will certainly feel that a Sledge hammer has come down with twenty times the force—twenty thousand times the force—I could exert by following out my first idea.’¹ This piece was *A Christmas Carol*.

So, there’s a strong political thrust to the story. How far does this come through in film adaptations? And are we looking for exact fidelity to the original text, or an attempt to bring the text up to date to contemporary times to highlight contemporary issues?

Most film versions stress the need to enjoy and celebrate Christmas fully. Scrooge’s participation in the joy of Christmas at the end is usually treated as the moral of the story. Scrooge’s life is symbolic of the dislocation and isolation of the displaced urban dweller of the 1840s. One of the few film adaptations to pick up on this point is probably the best-known version, made in 1951 (Renown Pictures, UK, 86m) and starring Alastair Sim. The character Mr Jorkins is created for the film and is played by Jack Warner (later famously the eponymous *Dixon of Dock Green* in the long-running television series). Fred Guida in his excellent book on *A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations* notes why the screenwriter Noel Langley (who had contributed to the script of *The Wizard of Oz* and later wrote the screenplay for, and directed *The Pickwick Papers* [1952] starring James Hayter) had gone beyond the original novel: ‘What is most important is how Jorkins injects a contextual note into the film that is absent in virtually all other versions and that informs, but does not directly figure into, Dickens’s original text – namely the unrelenting juggernaut of change unleashed by the Industrial Revolution.’

Jorkins tries to persuade Mr Fezziwig to sell him his business arguing that he ‘will never get a better offer. This is the age of the machine and the factory and the vested interests. We small traders are old history, Mr Fezziwig, dodos.’ The younger Scrooge overhears this conversation and is persuaded to leave Fezziwigs and join Jorkins’ firm, where he meets Jacob Marley, who he finds of like mind:

MARLEY: The world is on the verge of new and great changes Mr Scrooge. Some of them, of necessity, will be violent. Do you agree?

SCROOGE: Oh, I think the world’s becoming a very hard and cruel place, Mr Marley. One must steel oneself to survive it and not be crushed under with the weak and the infirm.’

Dickens felt that Scrooge represented a mindset that was at odds with humanity itself.²

Scrooge is so central a character that many films use the title *Scrooge* or a variation of it, rather than its actual title, *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge is a part that is coveted by many mainstream actors, so naming the film *Scrooge* can help to highlight the big name attached to the part. They include not only Alastair Sim but also Frederic March (1954), Basil Rathbone (1959), Mr Magoo (1962, in the first animated version of the tale), Sterling Hayden (1964), Albert Finney (1970, in a rather underrated musical version), George C Scott (1984), Michael Caine (1992 in a Muppet version), Jack Palance (1998), Patrick Stewart (1999), Kelsey Grammer (2004), Jim Carrey (2009) Christopher Plummer (2017) and many others.

Alastair Sim for me is the perfect Scrooge but reviews at the time weren’t so sure. One reviewer called him ‘less a tight-fisted, squeezing, wrenching miser’ than simply ‘a dour dyspeptic’.³ On the other hand, *Picturegoer* magazine commented that Sim ‘brings to his characterization the touches of comedy that Dickens embedded in

¹ *The Pilgrim Edition: The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. 3, Edtd. By Madeline House, Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 461. dated 10 March 1843, p.

² Guida, Fred, *A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations: A Critical Examination of Dickens’s Story and Its Productions on Screen and Television* (USA, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000), p. 107.

³ *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1951.



the miserly skinflint, while not neglecting the dramatic impact'.⁴ Sim does, I think, convey Scrooge's unwillingness to be intimidated. While he is frightened by the appearance of Marley and the other ghosts, Scrooge does fight back. He refuses to be cowed by them – thus 'there is more of gravy than of grave' shows his true spirit and this jokey semi-pun reveals the humour of the text which in the hands of less talented actors can be lost. Scrooge may be 'a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster' but he's also the figure who wants, even as an older man, to join in the dancing at Fezziwig's: 'During the whole of this time, Scrooge had acted like a man out of his wits. His heart and soul were in the scene, and with his former self.'⁵ He's a very physical presence in a world where movement is emphasized. It's important that Scrooge is seen throughout the film as worth saving – a man who had promised much but who has become hardened by the unforgiving environment of his surroundings.

In some film versions the character's back story is barely sketched in. We don't always see Scrooge seated alone at his school during the holidays, spurned by his father, until he is collected one year by his warm-hearted sister Fan. But again, in the Alastair Sim version, Scrooge's back story is even further filled in as we learn that Scrooge's father had blamed him for the death of his mother at his birth. His elder sister Fan, who is actually younger than him in the original text, also dies in childbirth. So, Scrooge's antipathy towards his nephew is partially explained as he subsequently blames Fred for the death of his sister, as he was blamed by his own father. Scrooge's immediate need to apportion blame means that he leaves before he can hear his beloved sister's dying words asking him to look after her child. By leaving these details out, some versions (such as the earlier 1935 version with Seymour Hicks) make it impossible to understand how Scrooge became the kind of person we initially see. Hicks was a renowned Dickensian actor of the theatre and he appeared in two film versions, one in 1913 and later, in 1935.

One aspect of the back story does appear in the 1935 version (Twickenham Film Distributors, UK, 78m) with Seymour Hicks. Here the Ghost of Christmas Past shows young Scrooge's rejection by his fiancée Belle when she overhears him refusing to give a young couple more time to pay their debt. He tells her that, as a woman, she should not interfere in the world of business. This version later reflects the text precisely when it shows Belle as a happily married woman with a room full of children – 16 at least, how very Victorian, assuming they are all her own. Her husband is a loving, successful man who has just seen Scrooge sitting alone in his office through the window. The emphasis here and in Belle's earlier rejection of Scrooge is that his life's choice will mean that he will always be alone, without the benefits of that institution the Victorians held so dear, the family. In the 1951 Sim version, with her name changed to Alice, we see his former fiancée tending to the poor as a spinster rather than become the wife and mother that Dickens describes in the story, thus leaving the door open to the reformed Scrooge finding happiness with her again.

Some versions change the order of events in the story, not always to good effect. In the 1935 version, Scrooge's redemption comes too early, before Ghost of Christmas Present appears. At the end he not only supplies Bob with the turkey but also gives him Boxing Day off as well, which was very advanced of him as it wasn't an official Bank Holiday until 1871. But the 1935 film is very watchable, especially since it depicts a London that is as close in time to Victorian London as we can actually get without being in the 19th century. It even has a scene of Bob Cratchit sliding down on the icy road on Cornhill. It contains a wonderful sequence, moving from lighthouse to sailors to Scrooge's nephew, showing how they all keep Christmas - a sequence often omitted in later versions. But there is no scene showing the lonely schoolchild Scrooge, and no Scrooge's sister, and so we have no sense of how Scrooge fell into the emotional vacuum of his later years. Interestingly this is one of the few versions to show Tiny Tim lying dead in his bed (Patrick Stewart's is another one), a reference which is in the text itself when Bob sits down next to Tiny Tim's bed and 'kissed the little face.'

⁴ *Picturegoer*, 24 November 1951.

⁵ Dickens, Charles, *The Christmas Books*, Vol 1 (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 46, p. 78.



This 1935 film is notable for a rather bizarre extended scene of the Lord Mayor's banquet, with a rather comic turn of two under-chefs testing the wine with rather too much relish. This only features in a single line of the text: 'The Lord Mayor in the stronghold of the awful Mansion House gave orders to his fifty cooks and butlers to keep Christmas as a Lord Mayor's household should'. The mountains of food are contrasted with the poor outside of the kitchens who are generously thrown scraps by the kitchen staff. The scene is rounded off with a loyal rendition of God Save the Queen in which the poor join in. This is not a version that shows the social division between rich and poor intended as central by Dickens, rather the contrary.

Compare this Lord Mayor's scene with the 2009 Jim Carrey version (Walt Disney, USA, 96m) which again shows the preparation for the Lord Mayor's feast but with the starving kids outside the window forced to compete for the scraps, thrown dismissively by the chef, with a dog. The emphasis is one of social division, much closer to Dickens's original intentions.

The first American sound version of the film in 1938 (MGM, 69m) was meant to star Lionel Barrymore, who had often played Scrooge in radio adaptations, but he was crippled with arthritis and had to be replaced by Reginald Owen. This MGM version dispenses with much of the hard-hitting social and political messages – there are no figures of want and ignorance but instead centres on a reformed Scrooge who proclaims that he loves Christmas. There is an emphasis on the slide down Cornhill, everyone is sliding – Fred is desperate to slide but is prevented by his fiancée, until the Vicar enjoys a sneaking slide when he emerges from the church. It is much more about the joy of Christmas. Fred, Scrooge's nephew is engaged but his marriage cannot take place until he is able to support a wife. The reformed Scrooge makes him a partner in his firm. It also qualifies as having the fattest Bob Cratchit ever, played by Gene Lockhart – certainly someone who could give up on a few meals to help out his supposedly starving family. Is this a response to the growing storm clouds of war across Europe – a need to celebrate Christmas rather than a reminder of social deprivation?

No film versions were made during the Second World War, and the centenary of the story's publication in 1943 passed by with very little publicity. In fact, American film companies did not produce another film version of *A Christmas Carol* for another 40 years, although versions were made for television. However exactly one hundred years after the publication of the *Carol*, a short story, "The Greatest Gift", by Philip Van Doren Stern, was privately printed and given to friends for Christmas. This was made into a film in 1946 by Frank Capra and was *It's a Wonderful Life* (Liberty Films, USA, 135m) known as Capra's Christmas Carol and reviewed by James Agee, in the *Nation*, journal as '... one of the most efficient sentimental pieces since *A Christmas Carol*.' George Bailey, the James Stewart character, appears as a latter day American Cratchit, the hero of the film, while the parallels were underlined by the fact that the avaricious and wicked Mr Potter is played by Lionel Barrymore.

Capra admitted that *A Christmas Carol* was one of his favourite books. He actually owned a proof copy among his collection of rare books.⁶ But I think the link goes further between this film and Dickens's text. Capra's film shows the impact that a good person's life can have when he touches other people's lives positively, even though the James Stewart character does not realise this himself. It is the supernatural element again, this time in the form of Clarence the Angel, Second Class, who gives him 'a chance to see what the world would be like without you ... Strange isn't it?', he continues, 'Each man's life touches so many other lives.'⁷ The fact that this is all achieved by an angel, not ghosts, highlights the very Christian aspect of the film. In Scrooge's case, he has to learn how to touch other lives and does so in the end, the obvious example being that Tiny Tim did in fact live in the end. Other parallels are also evident – the slide down Cornhill is reflected in the young boys sliding on the ice which leads to George's brother falling through the ice and being saved by him. The point being that when Bailey/Stewart is shown a version of life as if he had never been born, his brother dies in the icy water and cannot save the troops in the Second World War, as he, in his turn, is not alive to save them. At the end George

⁶ McBride, Joseph, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992)(p. 332, 522, 647

⁷ Ibid, p. 523.



Bailey/Stewart shouts that he wants to live, surely another nod to Scrooge's desire to go on living so that he can make good his past errors.

How many film versions raise the wider issue of social inequality and poverty? How many are as hard hitting as the 'sledgehammer' that Dickens promised in terms of its political criticism? One of the specific references to look for is the appearance of the children underneath the cloak of the Ghost of Christmas Present – symbolic representations of WANT and IGNORANCE. Not all versions have these: the 1935 Hicks and the 1938 MGM versions do not, for instance. Directors often delete the scene with the Ghost of Xmas yet to come, in which Scrooge's housekeeper, laundress and the undertaker go to Old Joe's the rag-and-bottle shop to sell some of his belongings. Of course, the scene shows that Scrooge's unreformed life has left him without a protector after his death – that he is truly alone with no one to mourn him and protect his dead corpse. Again the 1951 version goes a little further and shows wretched tubercular children picking at the materials in the pawnbroker's shop to sort them through, adding to the earlier scene of a horrifyingly real presentation of the allegorical children of Want and Ignorance.

But film versions of *A Christmas Carol* usually treat the story as an opportunity for Victorian nostalgia, focusing on the Victorian Christmas and celebrating a traditional version of the festival and the Christmas spirit. Poverty and social criticism would be rather jarring in this context and are usually left out. Dickens's social vision becomes a psychological one, with Scrooge's redemption not linked to a wider social context. Still, the story is so well known that there are a number of attempts to update it. One recent example, in book form, is *Donald Trump Presents: DT's: A DT Christmas Carol, being A Ghost Story of Democracy*.⁸

A 1975 version has one of the first female Scrooges. But unfortunately, *The Passions of Carol* (Ambar Films, USA, 76 mins) is a pornographic film which features Carol Screwge (spelled S C R E W G E), the tyrannical proprietor of a sex magazine. This is a rather weird film which shows Carol being taken through Soho by a phantom ghost with a spooky high-pitched background theme. *Variety* praised its generally inventive execution of 'the Dickensonian [sic] plot recreation' but continued that it was 'just another N.Y. -originated hardcore entry'.⁹

There's also a raft of recent American tv versions many of whom have female leads where the moral of story appears to be that a female Scrooge is really a desiccated career woman who needs love to reform her. So for example *Ebbie* (1995, Lifetime, USA, 96m) plays a cold-hearted business woman who works through Christmas or *Ms Scrooge* (1997, Cable Network, 87m) has Cicely Tyson playing a modern-day Scrooge whose life has been blighted when her father lost all his money in a Grocery Store venture. There are many more including a *Barbie* version made in 2008.

Of greater significance is *Carol for Another Christmas*, 1964 (Telsun Foundation Inc, USA, 84m), produced by Rod Serling, who conceived the cult series, *The Twilight Zone*. It's an anti-nuclear propaganda play, sponsored by the United Nations, specifically by the Telsun Foundation (standing for Television Series for the United Nations), an organisation founded in an attempt to tackle widespread hostility towards the United Nations amongst the American people. Directed by Joseph L Mankiewicz (who incidentally produced the earlier 1938 version), this had music by Henry Mancini, it included Sterling Hayden, Robert Shaw, Eva Marie Saint, Ben Gazzara and Peter Sellers. This is a propaganda film, directed against American isolationism after the Second World War and in support of the UN's mission to try to avert a nuclear war. It concerns a Daniel Grudge (aka Scrooge), a man of considerable wealth and power, whose mourning over his son Marley's death in a foreign war has led him to adopt a strongly isolationist point of view. Just as Dickens calls for 'charity, mercy, forbearance, and

⁸ Donald Trump Presents: DT's: *A DT Christmas Carol, being A Ghost Story of Democracy*, (Pub by Crooked Penguin & The Failing Ebury Press, 2017)

⁹ *Variety*, March 19, 1975, p. 36. Quoted in Guida, Fred, p. 198.



benevolence', this version calls for engagement and talking with one's fellow man as a means of avoiding war. His nephew Fred tries to persuade him to support a cultural exchange programme which he rejects on the grounds that America should help themselves first. The Ghost of Christmas Past is a First world war soldier who shows Grudge the tombs of all the soldiers of all nationalities who have died, and then shows him the site of Hiroshima where children, affected by the nuclear bomb are dying; the Ghost of Christmas Present sits at the head of the table feasting but shows Grudge the starving refugees displaced by war; the third ghost shows him a post-apocalyptic world devastated by nuclear war but still there are madmen denying the efficacy of working together to find a solution. It is only Grudge's black servant, Charles, who tries to change minds and he is shot for it. Grudge asks about his own fate, but he is refused an answer, surely because his question highlights the selfishness that produced the devastation in the first place. Charles is the Bob Cratchit, and in keeping with the time it was made, the reformed Grudge is shown on Christmas morning eating a meal with his black servants.

Scrooge (1975) a mere 20 mins in length, has Ron Moody portraying a detestable television chief. At one point Scrooge is decried by representatives from a Citizens' Study Group of Mass Media and Social Responsibility who express their shock at the sensationalism and trivialization of television 'to gain the necessary ratings response, audience increases, greater profits, a larger slice of the market'. But in a clever reworking of the text, Scrooge responds with 'Is there not an OFF-SWITCH on every television in the land?' Produced with an unbelievable small budget, even at the time, of £423, it was a pilot film based on an idea of a then student at the Royal College of Art in London, Norman Stone, who later directed *Shadowlands* (1985).

This may have informed the more commercial *Scrooged* (1988, Paramount, USA, 97m). Largely played for laughs, the social criticism centres on the role of the media, and the Scrooge character, named Frank Cross (Bill Murray), is a ruthless leader of a US media giant. It opens in Santa's workshop, which is attacked by some faceless enemies wielding machine guns. Lee Majors, of the *Million Dollar Man* fame joins Santa Claus to help protect the workshop. We presume there is a resulting bloodbath though we do not see it. In fact, of course, this is one of the cynically commercial 'seasonal' [sic] offerings from the Murray's television company. The potential of the violence in this opening scene is reflected later in the 'Tiny Tim' figure who refuses to talk since he saw his own father gunned down in front of him. His mother, the Bob Cratchit figure, is Murray's personal secretary and is coping as a single mum with 4 children. She is hardworking, moral and dedicated to her job but her bonus for the year from her Scrooge-like boss is a towel. The ghost of Christmas Past is portrayed as a cigar-chomping New York taxi driver.

It is a muddled film with lots of elements that do not work. Murray's conversion at the end into a decent human being, who meets up with his former girlfriend, who runs a soup kitchen for the homeless, not unlike the Sim's version where the Belle/Alice figure helps the poor in some type of charity institution, is not really very credible. In the background the television company is rehearsing for a live broadcast of *A Christmas Carol* with buxom, sexy dancers and American actors with entirely false English accents – perhaps a homage to Dick Van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*. A reference to the 1951 Alastair Sim version is made when the mute boy watches it on tv. Of course, in the end he finds his voice to say, 'God Bless US Everyone'.

I supposed I should reference the Muppet version which is fun but does have little of the social criticism of the original text and omits the children of want and ignorance. Its only reference to the poor is a shivering rabbit wrapped in newspaper, although the mice do ask for cheese. Michael Caine makes a perfectly reasonable Scrooge and there is a nice little in-joke of the name of a shop in the background being Micklewhite (Caine's actual surname).

In 2009 the *Carol* was produced as a 3D computer-animated fantasy with Jim Carrey as Scrooge and in fact he also voices all the ghosts, perhaps indicating that they are an extension of Scrooge himself. It is very much based on Alastair Sim's earlier portrayal and portrays a very physical Scrooge. It has lots of fog in keeping with a film set in Victorian times. Because it is an animated version, it can easily portray the coldness that exudes from Scrooge. I have already alluded to this version before in the dismissive way scraps are thrown to the beggars outside the Lord Mayor's dinner. This is a Disney version, but it is surprisingly hard-hitting: the dead body of



Marley in 1836 – they get the date right – where Scrooge is so mean that he even takes the pennies from Marley’s eyes as he lies in his coffin. Because it is animated it includes a very physical Cornhill slide. There is a very scary phantom scene outside Scrooge’s window as Marley’s ghost leaves it. It stays true to the original text – and do note Dickens’s portrait hanging on the wall of the Cratchits’ house. This version is the ‘sledgehammer’ that Dickens promised. The children of ignorance and want are shown clearly as closer to animals than children but it goes further and shows them growing up as a criminal and a prostitute/madwoman. Here Scrooge’s grave is open with red fire at the very bottom, indicating that he is destined for hell, thus emphasising perhaps for a religiously inclined American audience a Christian context that is not pursued in the text.

A Christmas Carol has been endlessly adapted and I’ve only been able to indicate a few versions of historical interest or ones that I particularly admire. For many film makers it is purely an excuse to portray a Christmas that is filled with Victorian nostalgia and so they tone down the social criticism. There is no reason to allow a good story to be marred by scenes of poverty and want, as MGM’s lavish 1938 production shows. It can come as no surprise that my particular favourite has always been the 1951 Sim version – this adds to the social criticism which reflects the continuing austerity of post-war Britain so tellingly reflected in George Orwell’s 1949 novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; just as Dickens’s *Christmas Carol* resonates with a time of increasing industrialisation. The Beveridge Report had come out in 1942 aiming to eradicate the ‘five giant evils’ two of which were want and ignorance. This film version was a timely reflection on progress achieved. The 2009 Jim Carrey, another ‘sledgehammer’ version, was made at the time of economic crisis in USA following the bank failures of the previous year.

But there is always another version just around the corner and I see that this Christmas there’s a new adaptation on BBC television with Andy Serkis as Scrooge. Will it reflect a time of austerity and anxiety or will it be a chocolate box version of Victorian nostalgia? We’ll have to wait and see.

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