

AUTOPOIESIS AND SACREDNESS IN THE DIGITAL SOCIETY: THE BIRTH OF THE METAVERSE

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Abstract. The Metaverse, as the apogee of Society 5.0, opens an iconic and transcendental horizon for exploring the capabilities of human innovation and synergy, giving the knowledge society a new, spiritually connected dimension. The article explores the emergence of the metaverse as an autopoietic entity within the contemporary risk society, arguing that digital transformation facilitates the convergence of separate social systems. In light of Luhmann's theories, the metaverse is examined as a solution to the latent risks of reflexive, late and liquid modernity. The analysis draws on the thought of Baudrillard, Durkheim and Marx, applying their concepts to assess the potential positive and negative repercussions of the metaverse. The article draws a parallel between the structure of magic - characterised by individualism - and that of religion - intrinsically communitarian - suggesting that the metaverse would benefit from following this communitarian model to sustain a collective spiritual dimension, in contrast to the hyperstimulating satisfaction of selfish desires. The conclusion invokes theologian Paul Evdokimov's vision of the limitations of cataphatic theology and the invigorating potential of apophatic theology that calls for the plenitude of the parousiac life, including in the context of interdisciplinary dialogue.

Keywords: Metaverse, Autopoiesis, Risk Society, Apophatic Theology, Social Systems Theory.

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1. Introduction

Today's society is defined by the concept of reflexive (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994), late (Beck, 1992) or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). If classical modernity was constructed in antithesis to the spirit of traditional society, pinning its hopes on scientific knowledge and technological progress, reflexive modernity appears as a response to classical modernity. In the resulting risk society (Matthewman, 2016) dangers are anthropogenic, and science and technology take on an ambivalent role, according to Ulrich Beck. Risks that are now global, irreversible and uncompensable are produced as a side-effect of the achievements of collective reason. At the same time, the means of observing, conceptualising and resolving contemporary crises is also provided by science and technology. Thus, rational knowledge and the forms of its application take on a central but

controversial role in contemporary society, where through reflexivity they are continually re-evaluated.

Digital technologies occupy a special place in relation to society as they support the fluidity of change characteristic of liquid modernity. The evolution of digital technologies enables the coupling of material reality through ubiquitous interfaces that produce massive data, used to reconstruct a virtual counterpart on which complex operations are performed that have an effect in the physical world. The power of digital hyperspace to simulate reality in order to estimate latent dangers is therefore the indispensable core of the risk society. We can argue that there is a correlation between reflective modernity and the emergence of the Metaverse (Dwivedi et al., 2022) as a digital system based on Industry 4.0 technologies such as artificial intelligence and extended reality, digital twin simulations, big data analytics, blockchain consensus and internet of things communication. The metaverse is a hyperspace of mediated interaction with other users or with elements of the virtual environment that can represent or control entities of the real environment. Once digital technologies gain the complexity to move from the forefront to the service of society through invisible integration, the evolution of the Metaverse may become a natural extension of the human footprint. If these become reality, the Metaverse will be iconic for Society 5.0 (Polat & Erkollar, 2020) defined as a human-centric knowledge society, which is the next iteration after the information society.

This paper aims to analyse the digital transformation and convergence of social systems, starting from the emergence of a single interface in relation to humans represented by the Metaverse, in order to assess the potential evolution trajectories of the new system. In the first section, reference will be made to systems theory, through which the digital system can be conceptualised as an autopoietic social system, which reproduces and organises itself according to intrinsic principles as the complexity of digital network communication increases. The second section will discuss two perspectives on the religious system that can help create a structural analogy to describe the functions that are performed by the digital system. Finally, some ideas will be drawn on how the Metaverse should be built so as to allow the spiritual human to participate in the hybrid reality.

The aim of this work is to expand and update Orthodox Christian spirituality in the digital sphere from the most fundamental level of its structuring. Thus, we can draw a parallel with the revelatory theological syntagma that represents the coming together of the two beings of the Savior without confusion, without change, without division, without separation (Sonea, 2011). This will remind us that man when stepping into the Metaverse must not leave behind his spiritual side or subordinate it to the digital, but the latter shall mirror the former. And in order to conceive a Metaverse that allows the communication of all human dimensions and in which man can show his spiritual beauty, let us follow what

Mircea Eliade said: *"The sacred and the profane are two ways of being in the World, two existential situations assumed by man throughout his history. [... They are important] for any researcher who wants to know the possible dimensions of human existence."*

2. The Metaverse and the Autopoiesis Quality

The Systems Theory formulated by Niklas Luhmann (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito, 2021) under the Constructivist paradigm explains the social system in terms of communication, just as the human psychic system can be explained by the dynamics of thoughts. Its radical perspective is that the author proposes the idea that people, as psychic systems, do not form society but its environment, society being based exclusively on the phenomenon of communication. He formulates his explanations by appealing to second-order cybernetics which allows the conceptualisation of systems as observers, their own or for other systems, in contrast to first-order cybernetics which only allows the conceptualisation of observed systems.

According to the author, society has gone through multiple phases, changing its structure as internal complexity increased due to the emergence of new methods of communication other than face-to-face oral communication. Writing allowed the emergence of social memory as a type of memory distinct from mental memory, and enabled the spatial and temporal reorganisation of communication sequences. The effects were intensified by the invention of the printing press, and the advent of computers facilitating multimodal communication. Society went through the stage of segment-based structure, where the system was reproduced in each unit such as the family or the village. This led to the need for hierarchy and the emergence of society organised on the basis of stratification by status. Then followed another structure based on the centre/periphery distinction to accommodate the new complexity through centralisation.

Luhmann's theory focuses on the fourth stage, the functionally differentiated society, which is based on interdependencies between subsystems specialising in communication in distinct domains such as science, religion, law, economics or art. These systems do not communicate with each other through the transmission of information, since according to Luhmann's theory they are closed and operate only on the basis of internal codes that they understand. These functionally differentiated systems therefore exhibit autopoiesis, and self-renew their constituent elements, their internal structure, their processes and themselves. They are capable of these operations through an increased complexity that allows self-reference by perpetuating the system/environment distinction. Systems are therefore dependent on their environment made up of other systems with their

own internal logic, but they are not determined by them, each one self-determining itself. When other systems cause irritation to the system in question, it adapts not by operations referring to the environment, but by operations on itself.

According to second-order cybernetics, systems can observe other systems but still do so through the logic relevant to the observing system. There are therefore structural couplings between systems, but these are very limited as systems are self-referential and communicate in different codes. A social event can therefore be perceived simultaneously by several systems in their own code, and the processing of the event by each of the systems will propagate as a chain irritation through the existing structural couplings, amplifying and generating a multilateral crisis. It should be noted that if one communication system suffers, for example the religious system is disrupted by the scientific one which processes reality through its own references, the function of the former remains unsatisfied and, as a consequence, people remain spiritually isolated in the example given. It is important to ensure that one system does not suppress the communication of another, and this can be achieved by developing structural couplings and observing them. In the above example, through a structural coupling between science and religion, science can observe the beneficial effects of faith in medicine by conceptualizing the psychosomatic harmonization taking place, and religion can observe the transcendental significance of order from the sub-molecular universe to the macro-cosmos.

Luhmann (Baecker, 2006) witnessed the emergence of computing and network systems, and although he considered them prone to error, he made some remarks about changes that may occur in the future. He predicted the decline of face-to-face interactions through the emergence of human dependence on digital terminals that will be mobile and the dependence on digital operations in various sectors of society performed by vulnerable digital systems without a switching protocol on analogue operations in case of failure. But the sociologist's most important statement is that the current functionally differentiated systems belonging to classical modernity are based on the asymmetry between experts and the general public, and that this dividing line was to be erased by digitisation. From a spiritual point of view, with the limitation of the authority of experts who absolutise the immanent at the expense of a holistic approach, the importance of intimate and personal experience increases in the horizon of knowledge. However, without the new hybrid system accommodating a spiritual-religious communication, people will seek to compensate through pseudo-spirituality for the felt void, and this would spiral into an involution of the Metaverse.

Society, analysed through systems theory, was to be restructured by a new digital order with the emergence of new communication processes. According to Luhmann, computational systems could have the counterpart of intrapersonal

psychological systems, of course except for the phenomenological area of subjective experiences. At the same time, according to the sociologist, network systems would correspond to the very society that is based on interpersonal communication and from which culture arises through the phenomenon of emergence. He also draws an important analogy between magic-religious systems and art and computer systems in terms of the surface/depth relationship. In religion, people move from the immanent by reading symbols accessible to the senses to the transcendent they wish to access, in order to bring higher order to the lower levels of the world. In magic, too, the immanent/transcendent relationship is used, but for the purpose of controlling the lower world by taking over the pseudo-transcendent. Finally, in art, the immanent is enriched with the beauty of transcendent meanings, accessible to the enlightened human spirit. Luhmann saw the immanent in the screen, i.e. the interface, and that which is not accessible to human reason through the complexity of binary operations as analogous to the transcendent. He pointed out that the immanent/transcendent relationship specific to religion and the arts is now redefined by digital systems.

Luhmann described the advent of writing and then of the printing press as comparable to catastrophes that destroyed the society that then regenerated itself through autopoiesis, and now the advent of computers brings with it a new hybrid society. Psychic systems, which are conscious, and which can participate in the communication of the collective system, which has no self-consciousness, have evolved symbiotically for thousands of years, and now both systems are coming into contact with unconscious digital systems, capable of interacting with both man and society. Through digitisation, the real world acquires a counterpart in virtual reality, and in the process produces the emergence of artificial intelligence and the third iteration of the internet, the Metaverse. It appears that functionally differentiated systems in classical modernity that communicated through loose structural couplings can now converge into a hyperconnected system in the Metaverse supported by synthetic intelligence (Althabawi, Zainol, & Bagherib, 2022). Crisis-like events have until recently propagated through interdependent systems, amplifying but not resolving, as systems were weakly connected in terms of structural couplings of bilateral intelligible communication. Today, through digitisation, strong structural couplings allow an interdisciplinary approach to crises. It can therefore be said that the Metaverse emerges as a response to the complexity of latent dangers present in the risk society. In this hyperspace with a new ontology, science and technology acquire a new relationship with man and society, the reflexive process of knowledge being mediated by the digital sphere, which paradoxically offers both a reductionist observation of the world through binary code and a holistic one through commensurability and multimodality.

The creation of the Metaverse can be viewed through Hegel's dialectic (Horst & Miller, 2020) of the growth of the universal along with the particular

through their interdependence. Thus, once the world was reduced from qualitative to quantitative through money represented in base 10, paradoxically an expansion of material culture emerged. Similarly, the digital can be compared to the reduction of the world to base 2, and the emergence of the Metaverse can therefore be understood as the evolution of the space that hosts the culture of the hybrid society. The issue raised by Luhmann of redefining the immanent/transcendent relationship in digital society is relevant to the structure that the Metaverse will embody. In order for digital hyperspace not to diminish spirituality it is necessary that the human psyche can have elevating experiences through/alongside hybrid communication. Therefore, the Metaverse must be designed to promote spiritual values both through its interface on the surface in a comprehensible way and through its internal structure operating at a subtle archetypal level.

3. The Metaverse and the Spiritual Dimension

Any system maintains its existence through the homeostasis of processes that rely on negative feedback mechanisms to stabilise. Negative feedback inhibits a process, while positive feedback enhances it. Positive feedback loops may also be present, generating rapid localised developments, but the integrity of the system is perpetuated by the limitation of processes by negative feedback loops. In the interaction between conscious and digital systems, the analysis of structural couplings is of real interest to anticipate, supervise or direct the evolution of the Metaverse to become a space conducive to spiritual development. Next we will analyse the dynamics of the evolution of the Metaverse, drawing two parallels with theories of classical sociology, discussing on the basis of adapted iconic quotes.

3.1. The Metaverse from the perspective of Karl Marx

There is a risk of saying that *the Metaverse "is the sigh of the tormented creature, the sensibility of a heartless world, as well as the spirit of spiritless orders."* bringing into question Karl Marx's (1844) analysis of religion instrumentalized by the bourgeois class as the *"opium of the masses"*, which perpetuated suffering precisely by alleviating it. According to Marx, it can be argued that hopes for the afterlife were meant to perpetuate the homeostasis of the capitalist system. The frustration of the proletariat was redirected through religion from a potential revolution to a momentary alleviation of suffering. In the absence of religion, oppression and frustration would have self-amplified through a positive feedback loop, leading to the collapse of the capitalist system. However, in the presence of religion, oppression and relief created a negative response loop

that maintained the continuity of the capitalist system and, consequently, the oppression of the proletariat.

Virtual reality is a potential "opiate of the masses", as people can avoid reality, spending their lives in simulacra and missing the opportunity to truly live and self-actualize through communion. Jean Baudrillard (1994) argues that the utopia we create in our virtual world is tantamount to death, as we no longer want the real experience of something, but the experience of being told about the experience of something. The author paradoxically explains how the real disappears in hyperspace, not because it is missing, but because it is over-reproduced. So, if the Metaverse originates in the desire to escape from everyday reality, its development will also encourage the decline of authentic interactions, which will again accentuate the desire to escape from the new spiritually impoverished alienating reality. The danger is that people may become tolerant of an increasingly "heartless" reality, satisfying their happiness-seeking impulses with illusions, generating the perpetuation of a system based on "soulless conditions".

Marx's thesis requires an important clarification, because a genuine faith based on a weaponized religion that teaches about the height of universal human dignity provides both the best mechanism for stopping the acceptance of oppression and the best mechanism for stopping the escalation of conflict. We can also say that religion encourages self-experience through ritual or people's interactions with their neighbours and society. If Baudrillard describes virtual reality as offering a mediated experience of material reality, we can also say that religion uses elements of immediate reality to capture an even more intimate but sometimes forgotten human reality. In fact, authentic religion itself heals man's alienation from his own nature and opposes excesses that emphasize form and diminish essence. At the moment, in a hyperspace where the multiplication of elements is infinite, existing solutions only succeed in protecting the economic value of objects and not in restoring a spiritual meaning. This is achieved in the Metaverse through blockchain technologies that introduce an artificial deficit by stopping multiplication in order to monetize hyperspace, but without offering a sustainable solution to rebuild a virtual world as a continuation of the real world enlivened by the spiritual dimension.

3.2. The Metaverse from the perspective of Emile Durkheim

It is possible to state that *the Metaverse "is a system of notions by which individuals have represented the society to which they belong and the obscure but intimate links they maintain with it"*. Bringing into question Emile Durkheim's (1915) analysis of religion as a phenomenon describing the complexity of the symbiosis between the individuals and society. Durkheim conceptualized society as an emergent reality, beyond the individual consciousnesses or their sum. He

drew a parallel between the totemic principle, as a representation of divinity, and the ancestral clan. Through this analysis, Durkheim succeeded in affirming the indisputable truth of religion as the binding force of collective consciousness. In his attempt to define religion, the sociologist states that it brings together symbols that divide the universe into two separate worlds, under the sign of the sacred and the profane, and contains the representation of the nature of the sacred and the relations between the sacred elements and each other or with the profane.

Then Durkheim makes the important observation that a definition based solely on the phenomenon of representing the universe in a bipartite way is true for both religion and magic. However, he argues that the distinction lies in the fact that magic does not bring people together in a community based on collective experiences, saying that "there is no Church of Magic", since followers do not need to be in communion to practice this art. Durkheim states that one could say that what the magician is to magic, the priest is to religion, but the religious community is much more than a fraternity of priests, encompassing the whole society of believers. So, religion contains the very structure of society, the complexity of the synergy of human consciousness in the collective consciousness. Through religion, therefore, man succeeds in rediscovering something deeper than immediate reality, as Durkheim believes is proved by the immemorial longevity of the phenomenon, even if the explanatory elements have a supernatural rationale that is not supported by everyday reality.

This parallel between religion and the Metaverse is not intended to express a close link between the two phenomena. Religion does not preach about a virtual hyperspace, and the Metaverse does not have a manifest spiritual function. Instead, both are emergent social phenomena and exert a force on the dynamics of society. It is of interest to understand how these systems come into being and how they interact with the other systems with which they are structurally coupled. Returning to Baudrillard's (1994) simulacra, we can thus draw a parallel between virtual reality and magic which has the function of relating to the sacred without rebuilding the unity of society and the cosmos. We can thus wonder if the symbolic representation of society is not the quintessence that can inspire the hyperspace of the Metaverse to be a place where we can find ourselves.

4. Towards a Human Centred Metavers

Religion and magic are socially emergent systems with totally distinct structures that once dominated society and subordinated any operations that were to be further differentiated into functionally specialized subsystems. These primordial systems can be compared to the digital system which, like magic and religion, subordinated and embedded through digital transformation many of the

functionally specialized subsystems. We can therefore compare magic to the anti-human Metaverse version and religion to the spiritual human-centred version.

Magic aimed to control nature by subduing the pseudo-transcendent with occult techniques, and the achievements of science that we take as the norm today would surely have impressed an observer as supernatural not long ago in history. So today we have the power to transcend natural human limitations, but we often use these technologies to hyperstimulate trivial and selfish desires, similar to the way magic is used. Classic examples are virtual reality perceived as more attractive, social networks used as a substitute for traditional relationships, and internet content that corresponds to users' basic instincts. All the negative aspects mentioned are based on the sensitivity of beneficial but maladaptive psychological structures to the artificial environment that produces imbalances. Magic fulfils the function of giving man confidence that he has control over nature, life events, or other people, giving him temporary emotional stability. But this did not directly motivate him to produce an inner change within himself with effects manifesting in his relationship with his fellow human beings and the environment. However, a spiritual context catalyzed transformation at the level of collective consciousness and here we are today as *homo viator*, journeying towards the integral restoration of our own microcosm and macrocosm.

So, there is hope that from a hyperspace of individualism characteristic of magic, we can evolve towards a Metaverse according to the communitarian and transcendent structure of the Church. Religion, though sometimes erroneously conflated with magic, has a system with a very distinct structure. Religion is par excellence the system of human transformation through communion with the Church, offering the way to acquire emotional stability on condition of inner change. In Orthodoxy, asceticism is not seen as a rejection of the world, but as an attempt to love with greater depth, sincerity, and intensity. Love is the motive and goal of asceticism. Christians are called to imitate divine love in their relationships. Religion provides a unifying structure for society, divinely transmuting the interaction with otherness and the rest of nature. In ritual it symbolically encodes intrahuman and interhuman complexity so that it can be reproduced in the practitioners' selves and in their relationships with each other. Most importantly, religious faith and practice brings people together in the Church and reveals the transcendent through the immanent: "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20). In this way, the community expresses and reactualizes its devotion to the Divine, uniting at the most intimate level and working as a collective consciousness to bring the sacred into immediate reality. Thus, the Metaverse centered on the spiritual man must follow the unifying structure of religion. This does not mean replacing the Subject of worship or moving ritual into the virtual, but creating a

space that can embody the structure of the Church as a united religious community to reactualize the sacred in the immanent.

The convergence of digital technologies, through interoperability, leads to an increasing ability of hyperspace to accommodate the complexity of human society in a natural way, as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, traditional interactions. Artificial intelligence is an evolving structure that reflects the world with the resolution of the data it is served. Extended reality represents a continuum between augmented elements of physical reality to total immersion in the virtual. Ubiquitous interfaces allow communication through real-virtual mapping within the limits of present multimodality. Blockchain technologies are used to create a consensus that can be joined by both humans and autonomous virtual entities that can represent elements such as the environment or archaeological treasures. Hyperspace can be used to coordinate complex human activities, and to the extent of participation by free conscious choice these can be soteriological in nature. Contemporary problems can be solved in the hybrid society to the extent that the Metaverse succeeds in encoding the fabric of human society within itself and accommodating processes that promote social sustainability including the spiritual dimension.

Until now, society has been based on communication as an impersonal system, but one that provided unity to individual consciousnesses. Biological separation has been overcome by the living word, spatio-temporal separation by writing, numerical disparities by the printing press, and the limitation of verbal language is now augmented multimodally. It does not follow that augmenting the communication system through digital mediation would implicitly bring about dehumanisation. History from the dawn of time to before the digital age has witnessed degrading social systems and people who did not seek human dignity for themselves either, not following the Christic model. Just as Luhmann explained that the advent of writing developed the capacity for reflection so that we could become critical of the self or society, a new digital system created in interaction with man, if it took on negative features, could bring to light the hidden shortcomings of society. If the system amplifies a negative process, it is likely to produce a system breakdown, as Luhmann explained that society is an autopoietic system, rebuilding itself, but only with human participation. Amplified latent evil becomes visible and disturbing compared to constant and normalised evil. For the self-aware human, both joy and suffering lead in distinct ways to an awareness of a higher potential. This longing based on sacrifice, dedication and service can simultaneously refine the Metaverse and rebuild the relationship with self and society, i.e. it can restore the eschatological community of the Church.

The great Russian theologian Paul Evdokimov (1973) said even before the digital age that *"Life has no more mysteries: you can only initiate yourself in the field of techniques. [...] What else can evoke that mysterium tremendum, that*

*intuition of the sacred place that accompanies the feeling of the sacred?". He was referring to the desacralized society which, because it has shown that it can control through technology the immanent which is used as a symbol in cataphatic theology, has thus tragically lost sight of God. Positive theology is limiting because it can only describe the manifestation of the Divine Being in the world, who remains essentially unknowable, descriptive concepts being able to take on the appearance of idols. Evdokimov argues for the need to turn to negative, apophatic theology in order to approach the profound mystery of God, which transcends our ability to define or describe. In building Metaverse and Society 5.0 let us therefore follow Evdokimov's advice of universal participation in the fullness of parousial life: *"The scholar, the thinker, the artist or the social reformer will be able to rediscover the charisms of the kingly ministry: as a 'priest', each will be able to transmute his research into a sacerdotal work, into a sacrament that transforms every form of culture into a theophanic place."**

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to analyse the emergence of the Metaverse in the context of the risk society, sociologically conceptualised as reflexive, late or liquid modernity. The transition from an information society to a knowledge society depends on the structuring of a Metaverse that can accommodate the spiritual dimension. Society 5.0, which is a digitally hyperconnected society centred on the spiritual human, is the blueprint for the development of a Metaverse harmoniously integrated with society.

At the heart of this work is an in-depth exploration of the Metaverse as a frontier of reflexive modernity, shedding light on its possibilities and risks in the context of a changing society. The Metaverse is not only a technological entity, but also a cultural and spiritual complex that challenges us to rethink the structures of community and unity. We must therefore take special care to cultivate this new digital territory with the same deliberative intention with which we would build any functional and unifying society.

This paper draws on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory to conceptualize the emergence of the Metaverse as a result of the convergence, through structural couplings, of the current functionally differentiated social subsystems. The Metaverse, as an emerging system that exhibits autopoiesis and encompasses all other systems, can therefore be compared to other systems that once supported all areas of life, namely the religious system and the magical system.

This analogy is maintained throughout the paper, recalling the sociological analysis of the religious system. Together with Baudrillard's thesis on simulacra and simulations, in which the author equates the virtual with the killing of the real, two opposing views are brought into question, that of Marx in which religion has

the role of maintaining social division, and that of Durkheim in which religion represents the very unity of society. At the same time, Durkheim characterises magic in opposition to religion as an individualistic system.

The paper proposes the idea that the Metaverse must follow a socially unifying structure following the example of the Church in order to be able to incorporate the spiritual structure of the Christic communion. The Metaverse must also distance itself from the current magical structure of cyberspace individualism based on trivial hyperstimulation. This requires a transition from a space of consumption to an environment of self-giving, divine intimacy and spiritual ascent.

In conclusion, the words of theologian Paul Evdokimov are not only a conclusion to this work, but a starting point for further dialogue between technology and spirituality. He calls for overcoming the false dilemma of cataphatic theology in relation to science, technology and culture by appealing to apophatic theology, which takes a humble and open approach to the mysteries of life. This universalizes participation in the re-creation of the theophanic world, where technology does not replace the Divine, but reflects and celebrates it in each new dimension we create.

The conclusions drawn here are not only of academic interest, but also reverberate in everyday life, in the way we connect, learn and develop spiritually in an expanding digital landscape. We therefore invite deep reflection on how integrating spirituality into the Metaverse can enrich the human experience, rather than diminish it. Every technological innovation comes with the promise of a new beginning, and the Metaverse offers a unique opportunity to reinvent and reintegrate spiritual values into a contemporary context.

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