POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AT THE MOVIES 2

By

RYAN M. NIEMIEC • DANNY WEDDING

Using Films to Build Character Strengths and Well-Being

2nd Edition
About the Authors

Ryan M. Niemiec, PsyD, (pronounced “Knee-mick”) is education director of the VIA Institute on Character, the global, nonprofit positive psychology organization that educates people about the latest science and practice of character strengths. Niemiec is a licensed psychologist, certified coach, and international workshop leader. He is adjunct professor at Xavier University. His specialty areas are character strengths (research and practice), mindfulness meditation, and positive psychology movies. He has written a number of articles and book chapters on these topics, and is author of *Mindfulness and Character Strengths* (2014) and coauthor of *Movies and Mental Illness* (2010). In 2011, Niemiec received the Distinguished Early Career Contribution Award from the American Psychological Association (Division 46). Niemiec received a specialization in film studies from Michigan State University, and is the film editor of *PsycCRITIQUES*, and consulting editor for the *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*. Niemiec’s signature strengths are hope, curiosity, fairness, appreciation of beauty, love, and perspective.

Danny Wedding, PhD, MPH, is associate dean for management and international programs for the California School of Professional Psychology (CSPP), Alliant International University. He is based in San Francisco, but oversees psychology training programs in Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Mexico City. Wedding is the editor of *PsycCRITIQUES* and the series editor for *Advances in Psychotherapy: Evidence-Based Practice*, a collaborative effort between Hogrefe publishers and the Society of Clinical Psychology (Division 12 of the American Psychological Association). He is a former APA Congressional Science Fellow and a former Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Fellow, and he is the past president of three American Psychological Association divisions: Media Psychology, Clinical Psychology, and International Psychology. He is also the coauthor or coeditor of 13 books and numerous articles and book chapters. Wedding’s signature strengths are zest, love of learning, curiosity, gratitude, kindness, and love.
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Ryan M. Niemiec
VIA Institute on Character
Cincinnati, Ohio

Danny Wedding
California School of Professional Psychology
Alliant International University
San Francisco, California
For Rachelle

For my loving and lovely wife, whose character strengths complement and enhance my own, and fill me with profound gratitude and love to be so fortunate to have found a woman of such remarkable character.

RMN

For Karen

I hope we watch
the next thousand films together.

DW
Praise for the Book

“This book is both accessible and rigorous. Reading it will not only help you better understand the field of positive psychology, it could actually make you happier.”

Tal Ben-Shahar, PhD, bestselling author of Happier and Being Happy; formerly teacher of the largest course at Harvard University – “Positive Psychology”

“This almost impossibly impressive compendium has everything anyone would ever want to know about goodness, truth, and beauty in film, whether classic or contemporary, mainstream or indie, domestic or international. The second edition completely outdoes the first.”

Dean Keith Simonton, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis, CA; Author of Great Flicks and coeditor of The Social Science of Cinema

“Positive Psychology at the Movies is true to the spirit of positive psychology. Psychologists have often focused on the negative effects of watching movies so it is refreshing to have the potential benefits of film celebrated so enthusiastically and inspirationally. Niemiec and Wedding do a splendid job of exploring hundreds of movies, both famous and obscure, that reflect those essential virtues, like courage, wisdom, and forgiveness, that characterize what Aristotle calls ‘the good life.’ This book can help readers see more of the possibilities in film and in life.”

Stephen “Skip” Dine Young, PhD, Professor of Psychology at Hanover College, Hanover, IN; Author of Psychology at the Movies

“Niemiec and Wedding are masterful in using positive psychology, one of the most influential movements of the 21st century, to guide our awareness and appreciation of films. The compelling VIA Classification, which highlights the salience of wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence, enables the reader to more fully comprehend and learn from the movies and the strengths of the characters. Upon reading this outstanding book, scholars will be motivated to hone our understanding of the evidence-base for positive psychology and its practical applications, educators and clinicians will have a more powerful and meaningful guide for teaching students and clients about the value of this psychological perspective, and film watchers will be stimulated to engage in a process of personal growth so that they can flourish.”

Nadine J. Kaslow, PhD, ABPP, President of the American Psychological Association (2014); Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, GA

“This beautiful book is essential reading for anyone interested in films, human virtues, or positive psychology. Niemiec and Wedding’s new and expanded edition works on multiple levels. It is a research-based, engaging introduction to positive psychology for students and professionals; a marvelous guide to using film as a tool for demonstrating and discussing key issues in virtues and character strengths; and a treasure-trove of new and wondrous movies to revisit and discover. The authors continue to be the leading voices for analyzing movies via a psychological research lens.”

James C. Kaufman, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Learning Research Institute, California State University, San Bernardino, CA; President, American Psychological Association’s Division 10 (Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts)

“Making movies is an art. Selecting and appraising movies that tell us what makes life worth living is a craft skillfully mastered by Ryan Niemiec and Danny Wedding in Positive Psychology at the Movies. In mastering this task, Niemiec and Wedding have integrated the oldest human attribute – storytelling – with the most popular contemporary pastime – movies. Their integration allows readers to spot the silver linings amid dark clouds, letting readers organically relate it to emotions, actions, habits, and attitudes that keep our spirits invigorated to be good to ourselves and others.”

Tayyab Rashid, PhD, CPsych, Psychologist and Researcher, University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada
In Memoriam
Christopher Peterson (1950–2012)

The world of positive psychology was shocked and saddened by the unexpected passing of one of positive psychology’s founders, Christopher Peterson.

Not only do people resonate with Chris’s adage that summarized positive psychology – “Other people matter” – but we’ve found people universally knew and believed deeply that “Chris Peterson mattered.” We listen closely to how people talk about other people, and the truth is, there is not a single person in positive psychology we can think of who had more positive, grateful, and respectful comments made “behind his back” than Chris. This is true of scientists, scholars, practitioners, educators, students, and the general public. Chris affected them all, strongly. Perhaps a measure of how well we have influenced others is: What do people say about “who you are” behind your back?

Chris Peterson was the leading figure in the world in character strengths research, following his leadership with Martin Seligman of a team of 55 scientists who created the groundbreaking VIA Classification, ushering in a new science of character and well-being. After that, positive psychology was forever changed. Chris was an accomplished researcher (one of the 100 most cited psychologists in the world), award-winning professor (he won the prestigious Golden Apple award for outstanding teaching at the University of Michigan), and successful author (Character Strengths and Virtues, 2004; A Primer in Positive Psychology, 2006; and Pursuing the Good Life, 2013).

Chris, for one last, belated time, we want to say, for all that you have done for psychology, positive psychology, and the world: Thank you. You have a solid and meaningful place in history. Positive psychology will remember you fondly. Forever.
Foreword to this Second Edition

It is impossible to follow in the footsteps of a giant of positive psychology, Christopher Peterson, who wrote the foreword to the first edition of *Positive Psychology at the Movies*, but who sadly passed away in 2012. He coauthored the VIA Classification model of psychological strengths and virtues that is the driving conception behind this book.

I will not attempt to replicate Chris’s unique insights and erudition in positive psychology, but will simply express my unconditional positive regard for this new edition that I have enjoyed immensely.

This is the most important book about the movies of our times. Once read, you will never see movies the same way again. Few books about film are written by psychologists, and none with the insights and inspiration of Drs. Niemiec and Wedding. These docs know movies! Their popcorn bills must be enormous, but as they are positive psychologists, I assume their healthy exercise commitments are enormous too.

The outstandingly unique feature of this book is that it is organized and conceptualized from a major psychological perspective – positive psychology, which provides a coherent conceptual lens for film analysis. Positive psychology is a highly popular contemporary perspective or movement that lends itself beautifully to filmic discussion, given its focus on such movie mantras as justice, courage, love, forgiveness, humor, leadership, and judgment, to mention but a few. There are few movies that cannot be considered from an enlightening positive psychology perspective. As a life-long lover of film, this volume has changed my viewing of the most creative visual art form of the past 100 years. I now look more closely at character as revealed, or not, in the movies I see. I now have many more avenues for understanding films than I did, and a much richer vocabulary with which to discuss them.

Niemiec and Wedding intend this volume to be pedagogical, to teach us about character strengths and virtues and for us to learn to enhance these features in ourselves based on the film experience. Films as teachers, films as self-help, films as perspective challenging, films as catalysts in the struggles for self-understanding – they’re all here! The greatest struggle of our times is our confrontation with horror. The horror of violence, terror, torture, slaughter of the innocent, poverty, hopelessness, despair, and more. Our success in combating that horror has been mostly minimal, and movies have well-portrayed these failures. Positive psychology in the hands of Niemiec and Wedding offers hope in this confrontation, through positive psychology movies that can strengthen us in our attempts to make the world a better place and ourselves, of course, better people. We need such movies, and the blueprint this book offers.

This volume is a remarkable manifesto on the meaning of movies and their contributions to a positive life. It raises sharply our psycholiteracy about film and at the same time advances a most positive agenda that all can embrace.

Frank Farley, PhD
L. H. Carnell Professor,
Temple University, Philadelphia
Former president, American Psychological Association; and the Society for Media Psychology and Technology; Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts; and Society for Humanistic Psychology
June 2013
My foray into positive psychology began in early 2000, when I answered a phone call from Martin Seligman. “What do you want to do with the rest of your life?” he asked. Momentarily surprised, I thought that – finally – I was going to hear a marriage proposal! But that did not seem plausible, so I asked about him and his family. All was well, he said, so I waited for the rest of the conversation. Seligman asked if I would be willing to relocate from the University of Michigan to the University of Pennsylvania and spend a few years working with him on a new initiative in positive psychology: describing, classifying, and measuring important strengths of character. I thought for a few seconds and then replied “Let’s make it happen.”

Impulsive decisions can be terrible ones, but this particular one was the best decision of my professional life. Working in the field of positive psychology indeed appears to be how I will spend the rest of my days. What I am doing is pleasurable, engaging, and meaningful – the hat trick of happiness.

Our project was supported by the Mayerson Foundation in Cincinnati, which created a nonprofit organization named the Values in Action (VIA) Institute (now called VIA Institute on Character). As the years have gone by, “VIA” has crept into common use with positive psychology circles. It refers of course to the Institute that continues to support and disseminate the work. It refers to the Institute’s website (www.viastrengths.org). It refers to the classification that Seligman and I created of 24 widely valued positive traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). VIA also refers to various assessment devices created by Nansook Park and me to measure the strengths in the classification: self-report surveys, interviews, informant reports, and content analysis schemes (Park & Peterson, 2006). To date, almost 1,000,000 people worldwide have completed our online VIA self-report surveys, usually in English but also in Spanish, Chinese, and German.

Although an explicitly labeled positive psychology is but a decade old, it has matured enough to attract criticisms, among them the charge that positive psychology is nothing new. To be sure, the interests and goals of positive psychology long predated its christening, and a number of topics with sustained research lineages are now mainstays of this new field, e.g., giftedness, life satisfaction, and optimism. So is there really anything new here? I think so. “Positive psychology” is both novel and valuable as an umbrella term, an overarching perspective that allows previously separate lines of work within psychology to be seen as interrelated. “Positive psychology” is also novel and valuable as a psychological lens on topics that are central to the good life, about which psychology often has had too little to say.

Positive Psychology at the Movies by Ryan Niemiec and Danny Wedding is a wonderful example of how positive psychology affords ways to make sense of movies that show what is best about people. Millions of us watch and rewatch movies, share and discuss them with our friends and family members, and feel inspired by their characters and their stories.

I am flattered that Niemiec and Wedding found our VIA Classification useful enough to structure their book, and I will be sure in the future to cite Positive Psychology at the Movies as compelling validity evidence for the classification and more generally for the perspective of positive psychology.

This is a good and smart book, but I trust that its authors will forgive me if I say that you should not read it in one or even a few sittings. That would be like reading a cookbook from cover to cover while never venturing into your kitchen. Rather, read a bit, and then stop and see some of the movies they discuss, familiar and unfamiliar. Use their insights to enrich your understanding and enjoyment, not only of the movies but of yourself.

Christopher Peterson
University of Michigan
February 2008
Preface

This book is about character strengths – yours, ours, and those of the most important people in your life, as well as the people you pass in the street every day. It’s about spotting these strengths in yourself and in others. It’s about learning to use these strengths in a more balanced way to elicit greater well-being, deeper engagement with life, and better relationships. Movies are one way – and a good way – to get there.

While we were writing this book, we were reminded of something that Nobel Laureate and physicist Sir William Bragg stated: “The important thing in science is not so much to obtain new facts as to discover new ways of thinking about them.”

This book represents a new way of approaching movies and a new way of approaching and accessing those qualities that are best in us – those qualities that make us human.

There are hundreds of thousands of accessible movies that speak to what is strong in human beings. We hope that the discussion and cinematic examples in this book will provide the reader with new ways of thinking about strengths and what constitutes a fulfilling life; we also hope it will help our readers identify ways to change their lives for the better.

Following an Introduction that gives the reader a background to positive psychology, character strengths, and the world of cinema, we discuss the portrayal of specific character strengths in movies. Each of these chapters describes strengths according to the VIA Classification developed by Christopher Peterson, Martin Seligman, and 55 scientists in a seminal text classifying six virtues and 24 strengths, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Classification in its most updated form (courtesy of the VIA Institute on Character) is shared below:

1. **Wisdom and Knowledge** (cognitive strengths): creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective
2. **Courage** (emotional strengths): bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest
3. **Humanity** (interpersonal strengths): love, kindness, social intelligence
4. **Justice** (civic strengths): teamwork, fairness, leadership
5. **Temperance** (protective strengths): forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation
6. **Transcendence** (spiritual strengths of meaning): appreciation of beauty & excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

This VIA Classification offers a common language for discussing what is best in human beings. It provides a framework for us to discuss these positive personality characteristics that are universal to the human experience. We discuss movies that portray characters who develop and maintain these character strengths and who use these strengths to overcome obstacles and adversity. Our approach and this core structure are maintained throughout the book; in each of the core chapters, we try to balance film discussion, related psychological research, and practical applications.

Positive psychology is a bridge merging scientific research with practical self-help; said another way, this is science-based practice. Scientific research is not only the foundation of positive psychology but also the means by which the field will progress and prosper. Therefore, we found it important to begin each chapter with a brief description of the given strength’s core concepts and some of the important research relevant to the strength being discussed. We highlight recent and important studies to help the reader understand the depth of each character strength before he or she begins to view films that focus on that strength.

In addition, scattered throughout the chapters, the reader will discover important theories that are relevant to the field of positive psychology; these theories focus on well-being, and whenever possible, we describe the links between the theories discussed and relevant films.

We include an International Cinema section in each strength chapter. We pay particular attention to international cinema because we believe world cinema has a special ability to convey important messages and themes that transcend culture and national boundaries. *International cinema, world cinema, and foreign films* generally refer to films from a country other than one’s own; therefore, we focus on non-US films in these sections (including films that are not foreign-language films, but which come from the United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia).

This new edition has substantially changed from the original book in a number of important ways:
1. We have added over 400 films, bringing the total in the book to around 1,500 movies.

2. We have added three new chapters in an attempt to be more inclusive of other important areas of positive psychology, including the robust work on mindfulness, resilience, meaning, and well-being. The new chapters also cover positive emotions, engagement, achievement, and, in particular, positive relationships.

3. There are several new appendices we have added because of the feedback of our readers (for example, we now have an appendix that lists positive psychology movies for children, adolescents, and families).

4. The research sections have been “beefed up” substantially with the addition of several hundred new references to support the points being made.

5. We agree with Aristotle’s (2000) notion of a golden mean when it comes to virtuous living or strengths expression. Thus, we comment on the overuse and underuse of each character strength and movie examples therein.

6. We have made substantial changes to every exemplar in each chapter. We have either offered a new exemplar for the character strength or changed the existing exemplar to fit a new structure. The new structure includes a description and rationale of the protagonist’s various signature strengths, a section on strengths dynamics (how the strengths play out in different settings, are overused, work in combination with other strengths), benefits the character experiences when using the strength, and an explanation of how the character copes with adversity by means of strengths use.

7. In addition to Hogrefe offering an exciting new look with the cover design and an integration of around 90 images from movies scattered throughout the book, we have added two charts on the inside covers – one is a grid of the VIA Classification where the character strengths are shown as pathways to well-being – namely, positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and achievement (Seligman, 2011). The second image, courtesy of the VIA Institute, is a circumplex model displaying each character strength on two continua (Peterson, 2006) – strengths of the mind or heart and strengths that are more strongly intrapersonal or interpersonal.

We are often asked how we selected films for inclusion in this book (and for our book, Movies and Mental Illness, 2010). With both books, we have emphasized an eclectic approach in our selection and categorization of films. In addition to searching for films in our own extensive databases, we viewed and commented on every film included by the American Film Institute (AFI) on their list of Top 100 Inspiring Movies (see Appendix I: 100 Years … 100 Cheers: America’s Most Inspiring Movies), and many of the films in the AFI’s top 100 movies of all time and their top heroes of all time. We felt these were important because they are not arbitrary, but rather have been voted on by some of the world’s leading film scholars. We reviewed films found in specialized DVD clubs (e.g., the Spiritual Cinema Circle), and the databases and lists of other movie enthusiasts from around the world. We paid special attention to Academy Award winners and nominees in each category. We reviewed those movies that won awards at film festivals, particularly winners and nominees at Cannes and Sundance. We listened carefully to suggestions made by participants in monthly movie discussion groups, eminent positive psychologists, colleagues, students, film seminar groups, and bloggers. With each film, we systematically assessed whether it met any of the criteria for a positive psychology film (see Chapter 1). Those films that did not appear to meet any of these criteria were eliminated from consideration; some wonderful films (e.g., A Clockwork Orange) were deliberately excluded for this reason. Films that might tap into a character strength, but which did so only superficially without substantial depth or meaning were also excluded (e.g., romances with formulaic portrayals of love, or comedies with contrived humor).

Some of our objectives for this book include the following:

1. Viewers will practice the skill of strengths-spotting, which will help them more easily recognize character strengths in themselves and others.

2. Viewers will be inspired toward self-improvement or toward acting more altruistically with others. These are explained later as the effects of cinematic admiration and cinematic elevation. This is certainly consistent with the feedback we have received from many individuals who have been forever changed because of a film.

3. Practitioners and educators will use this book to teach and inspire clients and students about positive psychology and character strengths. In fact, some educators have used the first edition of this book as the primary textbook for their positive psychology courses. We believe this
new edition will serve in that role even more effectively than the previous edition.

4. Researchers will use this book as a catalyst to validate, analyze, and advance the concepts of the positive psychology movie, the powerful effects of elevation and admiration, the process of strengths-spotting, and the many interventions offered in each chapter. Students may be well-positioned to conduct this research for their theses and dissertations.

5. In a more general way, we hope the reader will view movies in a fresh way, a way that opens up new avenues of flourishing and how to live a good life.

At the same time, we understand the clear limits to what movies can offer. We remain informed by the comment Alfredo makes to Toto in one of the all-time classic films, *Cinema Paradiso*: “Life isn’t like in the movies. Life … is much harder.” Despite all the benefits movies have to offer, we are humbled by their limitations.

We recommend the following strategy for using this book. First, review the introductory chapter and then proceed to whichever strength or topic area most piques your curiosity. Then use the appendices to select films that will help you learn more about a particular strength.

We do need to warn the reader: Occasionally, our discussions contain “spoilers.” These are intentionally included at those points in which we feel the spoiler will enrich the discussion’s content and depth; nevertheless, we hope this will not detract from the viewer’s pleasure upon viewing the films we discuss.

We welcome your feedback and suggestions. Feel free to visit our websites and blogs, and do take time to e-mail us your thoughts. But most of all, happy viewing!

**Ryan M. Niemiec**
rmjn@sbcglobal.net
http://www.ryanniemiec.com
http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/what-matters-most
http://www.psychcentral.com/character-strengths

**Danny Wedding**
dwedding@alliant.edu
http://www.moviesandmentalillness.blogspot.com

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Acknowledgments

Books, like movies, are only possible because of the effort of hundreds of individuals, many of whom will never be recognized for their influence. Here are some that will be:

Our deepest gratitude goes out to our loving families, friends, and colleagues who have supported our work, tolerated the inordinate time we spent watching films, and shared our enthusiasm for debating the merits and shortcomings of movies. These individuals have not rejected or ridiculed us when we have pulled out a light pen in the movie theater, opened a laptop while sitting on the couch watching a DVD, or insisted on viewing two or three movies back-to-back. Special thanks goes to Ryan’s precious (and understanding!) wife, Rachelle Plummer, to whom this book is dedicated, and to his son Rhys Evan, who as an infant enjoyed sleeping for 2 hours while Ryan held him with one arm and typed on a laptop with the other arm while watching positive psychology films.

Our publisher, Rob Dimbleby, believed in this idea years ago and enthusiastically supported the project and ever-so-gently twisted our arms to write this new edition (it didn’t take much!). We believe this book forms a perfect bookend for our other book, *Movies and Mental Illness*, also published by Hogrefe.

We want to extend a very deep bow of gratitude to Jeremy Clyman. Jeremy, a rising star and blogger in this area, helped us with several of the exemplar sections as we retooled and added new examples. He also conducted important literature reviews and summaries and offered consultation, film suggestions, and enthusiastic support. We question whether we would have made our publication deadline if it weren’t for his efficient and effective work. We applaud Jeremy’s striking character strengths that he showed with this project, namely creativity, love of learning, humility, teamwork, curiosity, prudence, and bravery.

James Pawelski deserves special recognition for engaging in a mutual, motivational coaching experience with Ryan (we are proud to describe this as an Aristotelian friendship). James’ creativity, curiosity, and kindness are only surpassed by his wisdom which he exudes with a mix of practicality, philosophical substance, incisive inquiry, and heart.

Danny Wedding is grateful for the two extraordinary women who shared his life while he was working on this new edition: Pamela Broadman and Connie Horn. They both happily shared dozens of wonderful films (and a few somewhat less than wonderful films) with him during 2011 and 2012.

Many people made important movie suggestions to us that made it into this second edition. A few of the most memorable suggestions came from Hugh Burns, Paul Bryant (Luke), Mark Liston, Kazuo Koya, Keith Oatley, Jacque & David Wall, Catherine Cogorno, Skip Dine Young, Ken Paul Rosenthal, and the original Media Watch Committee of Division 46 (Media) from the time when Ryan took over as “chairperson.” This group includes: Jeremy Clyman, Mary Banks Gregerson, Susan Stone, Michelle Ronayne, and Karen McGra. Countless other individuals who have attended our workshops and presentations will have to go unnamed but know that we are grateful to you as well.

We appreciate especially the numerous psychologists who wrote film reviews for *PsycCRITIQUES*. Many of these film reviews are available on the *PsycCRITIQUES* Blog: (psyccritiquesblog.apa.org). We have learned much of what we know about films and psychology from reading these trenchant reviews.

One of the best ways to learn is having someone ask you provocative and intelligent questions. With this new field of positive psychology movies, the questions are endless, but we wish to extend our gratitude to those individuals who helped us expand our thinking on this topic by posing good questions to us. A few of the strongest examples were from Kristen Carter, Peter Delany, Michelle Gielen, Vadivu Govind, Jon Haidt, Lucy Hoblitzelle, Claudia Lau, Donna Mayerson, Keith Oatley, Deb Pinger, Pat Snyder, Marta Syrzistie, Anne Marie Turnbull, and Karolina Zbytniewska.

We appreciate the wide support the construct of “positive psychology movies” has received from practitioners, educators, and researchers around the world in positive psychology and related fields. Some of the colleagues who have supported us include: Rhett Diessner, Bruce Smith, Stefan Schulenberg, Ray Fowler, Ad Bergsma, James Kaufman, Kathryn Britton, Senia Maymin, Andrea Goeglein, Neal Mayerson, Donna Mayerson, Gunilla Lundquist, Martha Darwin, Thomas
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