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“Seducation”: Learning the art of telling tourism tales

Noel B. Salazar, Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania
University Museum Rm. 323
3260 South Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6398
nsalazar@sas.upenn.edu
http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~nsalazar

Abstract

Tourist destinations worldwide are adapting themselves to the homogenizing culture of the global tourism industry at the same time as trying to commoditize their local distinctiveness. These twin processes of globalization and localization play out clearly in the practices and narratives of local tour guides, often the only ‘local people’ with whom tourists interact for a considerable amount of time during their trip.

Applying a combination of grounded ethnographic and discourse-centered approaches to fieldwork data from Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and Arusha, Tanzania, this paper examines how guides learn to tell tourists seducing tourism tales. Paradoxically, guides rely on popular globally circulating discourses to represent and sell natural and cultural heritage as authentically ‘local’. However, in the interaction with tourists they do not merely reproduce but become themselves creative producers of narratives, often subtly altering or even contesting the normative global templates.

The use of a comparative case study approach to examine tour guiding narratives and practices in two different destinations is an innovative way to study and theorize the complex interconnections between the local, national, and global layers of tourism in general.

Introduction: The "glocalization" of tourism

Tourism, one of the most significant global economic sectors, offers potential tourist-consumers a rather unusual type of commodity. In most of its varieties, travel-for-leisure exists only as information at the point of sale. This information, usually a combination of linguistic and supporting visual elements, represents and sells the world as limitless in terms of destinations, activities, and types of accommodation that can be discovered and experienced. Because the logic of the market prescribes diversification and the creation of multiple consumer identities, tourism marketing contains a wide number of registers, each one of them addressing a certain type of potential tourist with specific interests. Marketers rely on powerful discourses, shaping attractive worldviews of each destination. Whatever the communication medium or register used, the language of tourism is one of persuasion and seduction, merging macro-economic goals with attributed individual need satisfactions. Without seducing discourses, there probably would be very little tourism at all. Critical scholarship has revealed how these representations are created and mediated through cultural and ideological structures. Not surprisingly, many contemporary tourism tales are heavily influenced by the mythologized (often Western) visions of "Otherness" from the travel literature and academic writings in disciplines like anthropology, archaeology, art, and history.

Globalization, the process of growing worldwide interconnectedness and interdependency, adds extra layers of complexity to the way touristic imaginaries circulate. Paradoxically, the increased interest in global forces and flows has pushed notions of 'the local' more than ever to the forefront of scholarly analyses. 'The local' not only refers to a spatially limited locality; above all, it is a space inhabited by people who share a particular sense of place, a specific way of life, and a certain ethos and worldview. Detailed ethnographies reveal how local people keep on culturally framing their increasingly globalized experiences as being different from 'others'. In the context of tourism, this "glocalization" (the co-occurrence of processes of globalization and localization) involves the construction of increasingly differentiated destinations and distinct consumers. This goes hand in hand with marketing strategies based on the philosophy that diversity sells. Destinations worldwide are adapting themselves to the homogenizing corporate culture of tourism at the same time as trying to commoditize their local distinctiveness. While they promote and sell the packaged experience of so-called 'authentic' natural landscapes or 'traditional' cultures, what counts as local heritage is increasingly defined on a global scale (e.g. UNESCO's World Heritage List). However, also in this case the global redefinition stimulates the resurgence of local (and sometimes national) identities and competing counter-discourses of natural and cultural heritage.

While the language of tourism marketing has been widely researched, less attention has been devoted to studying the ways its globally circulating discourses are (re)produced by local service providers. Through their narratives and practices tour guides, for example, are key actors in the process of folklorizing, ethnicizing, and exoticizing a destination. They are often the only 'local people' with whom tourists interact for a considerable amount of time during their trip. Guides are therefore entrusted with the public relations mission to encapsulate the essence of place and to be a window onto the site, region, or even country or continent. While some guides take pride in representing and explaining the local heritage and culture, others are more business-oriented and merely interested in selling – images, knowledge, contacts, souvenirs, access, authenticity, ideology, and sometimes even themselves (prostitution). Through a comparative case study of a small but remarkable transnational network of local tour guides in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and Arusha, Tanzania, this paper analyzes the multiple ways in which guides learn to become "technicians of glocalization", internalizing and mirroring the "tourist gaze". The combination of a grounded ethnographic and discourse-centered analysis helps disentangle how and by whom global tourism discourses are locally connected, disconnected, and reconnected in the context of guiding.

Learning the tricks of the tour guiding trade

An introductory discourse on tourism discourse(s)

Much of our knowledge of the world is based on the discursive representations we make of it. The notion of discourse refers to language as a form of practice that is embedded in the social conditions of production and the cultural processes of meaning-making. Discourse-centered studies emphasize the heterogeneous, multifunctional, and dynamic character of language use in actual situations of communication and the central place it occupies in the construction of reality. Although language is probably the most important channel of expression, discourses may take a variety of forms – oral, written, pictorial, symbolic, or graphic – and include both linguistic and non-linguistic ways of producing meaning. Discourses are tools of knowledge and power. While in our daily lives we are surrounded by a plethora of "imaginaries", institutionally grounded representations implying power, hierarchy, and hegemony predominate. Following Michel Foucault, discourses can be conceptualized as cultural domains of knowledge, as institutionalized complexes of signs and practices that regulate how we live socially. The replication and dissemination of discourse is a complex process. The more discourse is overtly coded as non-personal, and the less it is linked to a present context and circumstances, the more likely will the copier be to replicate it. However, as it is being (re)entextualized (reproduced with an altered form) or (re)contextualized (reproduced identically), innumerable factors intervene, and the copy is very often distinct from the original. Because there is frequently an asymmetrical power relationship between the originator(s) and the copier(s), the original discourse is not only copied but is reacted or responded to.

Tourism offers us many possibilities to study discourse because the tourism-industrial complex, a highly decentralized apparatus of power, spreads its own stories, practices, and worldviews. Tourism tales are powerful in the sense that they turn places and peoples into easily consumable attractions, providing simplified and historically fixed versions of local heritage. The more global tourism grows, the more its selective representations of life tend to become the codified and authorized versions of local culture and knowledge. People often have little (economic) choice but to accept and to adapt to the "touristified" identities and cultural views created for them. At the same time, people like local service providers are not totally without stake in the (re)creation and promotion of fashionable stories. Tour guides, for example, are creative (re)producers of profitable myth-making narratives. They tailor local – and glocalized – products (interpretations of local heritage and culture) to changing global audiences (international tourists coming from various parts of the world and with different preferences).

Apart from building up professional skills, guides thus need to understand the currency of their product in a global market that is highly unstable and influenced by continuous changes in consumer cultures. This requires them to endlessly reinvent and market their services as well as to vary and customize them. Guides have to learn which objects of attention to select, what details to elaborate on, and which jokes to tell. In other words, they need to master the currently popular global tourism discourses. In order to fully understand how guides (re)produce these global imaginaries, we need to pay attention to the meta-communicative dimension of their narratives and practices. The comparative case study of a group of transnationally networked guides in Indonesia and Tanzania presented in this paper provides a good starting point.

Setting the ethnographic scene

The research on which this paper is based was undertaken in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (summer 2003), and in Arusha, Tanzania (summer 2004). It forms part of a larger comparative and multi-sited project on tourism and glocalization. Both the group of guides in Yogyakarta and the one in Arusha are linked to a loosely organized transnational network of *Traveler's Bars* (pseudonym), with other branches in Senegal, Mali, Nepal, Honduras, Nicaragua, Argentina, Belgium, and

Spain. These European-run bars are popular meeting spots for tourists, expatriates, and locals. Apart from serving both local and international food and drinks, they provide a variety of services, usually including cultural tours, courses in local craft production or cooking, and introductory language courses. The bars of Yogyakarta and Arusha became operational in 1995 and 2000 respectively. These two sites, in particular, were selected for the research because their guides had a chance to meet one another in person. Delegations from both places were invited by the European section of the network for a one-month visit to Western Europe in the spring of 2002. During this period they underwent an intense two-week experience as international tourists – a kind of role reversal exercise – and also participated in a two-week interactive course on guiding and intercultural communication.

Yogyakarta is the name of both a Javanese province and its capital, a city with a population reaching half a million. The region has been participating in international tourism for almost thirty years, and has actually become a mass destination. Since the early stages of tourism, it has been promoted by the Indonesian government as "the cultural heart of Java" (or even Indonesia), and an ideal destination for both domestic and international markets. The region's main product is cultural heritage. Its most important attractions include the eighth century Buddhist stupa of Borobudur and the tenth century Hindu temple complex of Prambanan (both recognized as UNESCO World Heritage). The city, with its *Kraton* – the eighteenth-century walled palace where the Sultan resides – cherishes its Javanese roots, attracting a large number of painters, dancers, and writers. Yogyakarta is famous for crafts such as *batik* (textile design), silverware, pottery, clothing, woodcarving, and *wayang* (puppets). Recently, "Jogja" was introduced as a brand name to market the region since the letter "Y" was believed to be a more difficult alphabetical start for most international audiences. This brand name also appears in "Jogja, never ending Asia", the catchphrase currently used by the local government to attract investors, traders, and tourists to the region.

Arusha, a city with an estimated population of 300,000 people, is situated in northern Tanzania, on the eastern edge of the Great Rift Valley. It is often called the "safari capital", because it is the gateway to Lake Manyara, Tarangire, Arusha, Serengeti, and Mount Kilimanjaro national parks, and the Ngorongoro Conservation Area (the latter three are UNESCO World Heritage sites). International tourism was first established under German and British colonial rule, catering to the needs of Westerners coming to observe and hunt 'exotic' animals (the so-called "Big Five"). The establishment of national parks around 1930 was as much a process of 'Nature' production as nature preservation. Hunting, however, has largely been replaced by photographic safaris. Many of the region's wildlife landscapes, especially the wide plains of the Serengeti, have become popular icons for Africa as a whole and have provided nature documentaries and Hollywood entertainment with their perfect romantic and nostalgic vision of an unexplored and time-frozen "wild Eden". Not surprisingly, Tanzania capitalizes on this well-known iconology. The country's new promotional campaign for the global market, "Tanzania – Authentic Africa", powerfully encapsulates it all. And the city of Arusha strategically markets the fact that, being situated halfway between Cape Town (South Africa) and Cairo (Egypt), it is "the center of Africa".

The methodology used for this research involves a hybrid ethnographic and discourse-oriented approach that can be described as "pre-fieldwork" since it involves two visits lasting only ten weeks, as opposed to ethnographic fieldwork which is usually conducted over a much longer period. As the research in both sites took place during the height of the tourism season, I had ample opportunities to engage in participatory observation and interviewing people. Throughout my stay, I observed the daily activities of the guides contracted by the Traveler's Bar (six in Jogja, five in Arusha). My daily presence in and around the bar made it easy to integrate and be accepted by the group of guides. I accompanied each one of them at least once on a tour. Each guide also agreed to have two semi-structured in-depth interviews and multiple shorter, open-ended interviews. Additional short semi-structured interviews were conducted with the owners of the bar, other personnel (including cooks, servers and drivers) and expatriates, locals, and tourists who frequented the bar. Since the Traveler's Bar in Arusha is linked to a local tour guide school, I also visited the program, attended some of the courses, gave a couple of guest lectures, and interviewed both teachers and students. This gave me unique material to compare the kind of knowledge students learn at school with the way this knowledge is (re)contextualized while guiding.

All primary qualitative data – my field notes, the interviews, and the audio recordings of the guides while guiding – were coded and interpreted with the help of *Atlas.ti*, a popular software package for visual qualitative data analysis. The analysis of the raw empirical data (following the principles of grounded theory) was greatly enhanced by embedding the practices of the guides within the broader socio-cultural framework. In what follows, I give a brief overview of some of the striking features of the observed guiding discourses. Due to space constraints, the lengthy ethnographic examples illustrating my theoretical points had to be left out.

Tour guiding and "seducation": Theory and practice

Neither the Indonesian nor the Tanzanian guides under study received much formal training as guides. In Yogyakarta, the guides all have previous working experience in the tourism industry, usually in restaurants or hotels. They started in the Traveler's Bar as cooking aids or servers and were selected by the European owner because of their language proficiency, self-confidence, and sense for initiative. They built up their guiding skills by specializing in one particular tour. The owner regularly organizes meetings with the guides in order to discuss their work and evaluate their professional progress. In Arusha, the situation is slightly different. All guides received at least some general training at a private tour guide school (which is partly sponsored by the Traveler's Bar network). The school's headmaster recommended students able to work as guides for the Traveler's Bar. Also here, the guides usually specialize in one or two specific tours.

Most of the guides in both destinations have had the opportunity to experience firsthand how it feels like to be an international tourist. As part of their ongoing training, they were offered a kind of European internship. In the spring of 2002, they underwent an intense two-week experience as tourists. The trip was organized by the European part of the Traveler's Bar network, with the aim of giving the guides more insight in European culture, in order to better understand the behavior of the people they guide for. The whole group also participated in a two-week interactive course on guiding and intercultural communication. Mastering all this new knowledge was a huge task, especially given the fact that the guides lack a formal framework to which they can relate the information. The lack of vulgarization and adaptation of materials to the local context makes it difficult to appropriate foreign knowledge. Besides, what is learned in a classroom setting is one thing; the way in which the taught scripts play out while guiding is another. Building on their initial meeting in Europe, the guides on the two continents are regularly in touch with one another and rely on their unique global connectedness and experience when interacting with tourists.

The sociolinguistic toolbox developed by Graham Dann and others to study the language of tourism marketing has to be broadened if we want to accommodate the more interactive nature of guiding narratives. Guides have to give evidence of mastering a vast amount of knowledge and an accompanying expert register. As such, guiding can be seen as a public display of competence, both of knowledge and of language proficiency. However, guiding stories are rather distinct from other tourism language genres. Guiding consists of rather complex speech chains whereby long stretches of monologue are interspersed with parts of intense interaction and dialogue of various kinds. What actually happens during the interaction with tourists is very nuanced and open-ended.

Tourists might ask questions, and the guides themselves often engage in small talk. The latter is typically used to fill the gap between stretches of explanatory guiding narrative. During the interaction, expectations and preconceived patterns can be creatively manipulated.

The language of contact between guides and tourists is usually a kind of international English. In some cases, guides will downplay their language proficiency, especially when they notice that tourists have problems speaking and/or understanding English. Most tours in Jogja and Arusha are multilingual experiences. Among each other, tourists speak their native tongue (if the group shares a common language) or English (if the group is mixed or has English as a native tongue). The tourists receive explanations and instructions from the guide in an Indonesian or Tanzanian form of English, with occasionally the use of an Indonesian or Swahili term, usually to indicate a certain local craft, food, plant, or animal. The simplified use of national languages (which are often different from the local ones) is a powerful tool used to manipulate the tourist experience and make it more 'authentic'. For many tourists, for example, Swahili is not the language of a particular country or people, but a symbol of Africa as a whole, of the safari and its related images of romance, adventure, and fun under the African sun. The use of simplified languages invites tourists to actively reproduce some of the phrases they learned in their travel phrasebooks. When interacting with local people, however, the linguistic situation becomes more complex, with the Jogja guides switching to Javanese and the Arusha guides talking in Maa or other languages. Given the language barrier, the direct contact between tourists and locals is often minimal and the tourists have to rely on the guide as mediator.

While touring the guides give detailed explanations about the local cultural and natural heritage. By highlighting certain elements of the places visited over others, they take control, distracting tourists from things which they want to keep hidden (e.g. local evidence of globalization). In their narratives, they tend to focus on aspects that are particularly different from the tourists' own culture and traditions. The guides also subtly adapt the depth of information provided to the estimated average intellectual level of the group. Using a flexible expert register, they try to establish a genuine connection between their clients and 'the local'. Again, they are only able to do this successfully because they are somehow familiar with the home culture of many tourists they guide for. For the guides it is not necessarily a matter of getting things right, but of impressing and seducing tourists. Of course, the tourist's dependence on the guide's knowledge and interpretation is balanced by the guide's dependence on the tourist's money. After all, tour guiding is about providing clients a (paid for) service. However, this asymmetrical alignment, typical for service encounters, is often blurred or temporarily interrupted.

Guides rely on dualisms or binary 'us' vs. 'them' oppositions to interactionally position themselves vis-à-vis tourists and local people. Two different logics are at work here simultaneously: a logic of difference which creates differences and divisions, and a logic of equivalence which subverts existing differences and divisions. As global tourism marketing prescribes, guides behave and perform as the 'locals' that many tourists expect and perceive them to be, even if they are not necessarily natives of the destination. They facilitate the tourist's experiential process by blending in with the local life that is on display. For example, during village tours some of the Jogja guides wear a traditional conic straw hat which is also worn by the villagers working in the rice fields (attire the guides would never wear when they are not at work). By doing this, the guides subtly portray themselves as more local than they really are. It is, indeed, necessary to qualify the 'localness' of the guides under study. While in Jogja, all but one guide come from within the province (but not necessarily the city); in Arusha there is more diversity because the guides come from all over the country and belong to different ethnic groups. For most of the guides, a visit to a Javanese *desa* (village) or Maasai *boma* (settlement) can be as exotic as it is for newly arrived tourists. Paradoxically, guides rely on globally circulating discourses to capitalize on their own background and signal their authenticity as truly 'local'. It is their global knowledge and experience which helps them to present the glocalized reality around them to tourists as distinctively local, but they will seldom reveal, for example, that they have been in Europe.

While the guides specialize in reproducing currently popular global discourses of selling heritage and culture (e.g. focusing on sustainability and everything "eco"), tourists assume the local authenticity of the guides' narratives and knowledge. Both parties are usually unaware of the classificatory schemes and scripts behind the generalized representations used. This is because it is difficult to trace who the actual producers of tourism discourses are. Guides appropriate imaginaries of their own culture and heritage that are deeply rooted in foreign (mostly Western) ideological representations of "Otherness". These ideologies circulate through a complex system of artifacts and communication devices: newspapers and magazines, television programs, museums, textbooks, student exchange programs, travelogues, and films. To be a professional guide is to familiarize oneself with an 'exotic' worldview. Western tourists are unaware of the fact that the actual masterminds behind the guiding narratives come out of their own cultural backyard.

The whole tour experience is professionally framed and manipulated. The guarantee that what is marketed and sold will be seen and experienced becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, directing expectations, influencing perceptions, and thereby providing a preconceived landscape for the tourist to discover. Tour guides play an important role in reinforcing these predetermined images. They have to make sure that tourists experience exactly the kind of things that they expect and that were sold to them by tour operators or travel agencies. Even if they would like to, guides often cannot go much beyond a commoditized, reductionist, touristic representation of local life because that is not what the tourists came to hear or see. They will try everything they can to make their clients feel 'at home' by relying on discourses that tourists heard before (in the tourism media). They do this by strategically using the normative global set of genres and strategies that they have skillfully appropriated (at school or through practice). Comparison, for example, comes in very handy and is frequently used to let tourists contrast the visited culture with their own, often as a means of individual status enhancement. The guides' ever-changing (re)presentation of the local culture is always fine-tuned to the different tastes of specific group. This requires interpreting both the linguistic and non-linguistic cues provided by tourists and carefully balancing the interest of the group against the interest of individuals and the guide's personal interests. Here again, international experience comes in handy. Paradoxically, it is their global knowledge which helps guides to present the reality around them to tourists as a distinctive, "mythologized" version of 'the local', and not as is currently being lived and internalized by most local people.

Even if guides are pressured from various sides to perform in certain ways – locally as well as nationally and globally – tour guiding can never be fully controlled and tourism discourses are never completely replicated. On some occasions, the tautology is broken. The original message can be subtly modified and resisted, and the learned scripts might be tempered with unfamiliar elements that are brought out. The guides under study, for example, often prefer to align themselves on the 'us-tourist' side of the 'us-them' binary, by distancing themselves from the local people encountered during a trip. This is achieved through the subtle manipulation of demonstrative and personal pronouns, or temporal and spatial expressions. Humor is probably the most common device guides draw on to align themselves with tourists. However, since humor is a culturally sensitive mechanism, the magic trick in intercultural interaction only works if there is a shared frame of reference. Clearly, various schemas of identity and identification are at work while guiding. When talking about the destination as a generalized place, the guides usually align themselves as locals. However, when referring to their own personality, they prefer to be aligned on the side of the tourists. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that not everything that happens during a tour is necessarily under the control of the guides.

Discussion

Thinking of globalization and localization as being opposed to each other is not very helpful in understanding and explaining contemporary tourism. The constant (re)shaping of 'the local' is in many respects part of and simultaneously occurring with the globalizing process itself. By carrying out research on the contact zone between the global system of tourism and local tourism destinations, ethnographies of tourism – such as the one outlined in this paper – contribute to dynamic tourism studies. While previous studies have focused largely on the language of tourism marketing and advertising, this paper has analyzed how these globally circulating discourses are locally (re)produced. By studying the daily practices of local tour guides and the way they (re)present and actively (re)construct local culture for a diversified audience of tourists, we can learn a lot about how processes of globalization and localization are intimately intertwined and how this is transforming culture – through tourism and other channels.

The role of guide involves a number of supplementary and sometimes conflicting sub-roles, of which the information-giving function is emphasized by guides themselves, in their drive for professional status. By examining how guides in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and Arusha, Tanzania, are familiarized with seducing tourism imaginaries through formal and informal training and through the practice of guiding, it becomes evident that global tourism tales are constantly being (re)contextualized. Relying on both discursive and non-verbal practices, guides learn how to present tourists with a commoditized and mystified version of their heritage, represented and packaged as 'local' for global export. "Seducation" is the neologism I use to refer to the globally circulating seductive discourses guides appropriate to actively folklorize, ethnicize, and exoticize the local distinctiveness and uniqueness of Yogyakarta and Arusha that is constantly been fragmented by outside influences – global popular culture and tourism being two obvious examples. In order to successfully do so, they need to appropriate extensive extra-local knowledge.

The similar small-scale tourism activities in which the Traveler's Bar guides in Indonesia and Tanzania are engaged illustrate the increasing complexity of international tourism and its socio-cultural dynamics. Of course, I acknowledge that the guides I studied are real front-runners. Stimulated by their European employers and their personal travel experiences abroad, they have a clear advantage over other local guides who have fewer opportunities to develop their professional skills. However, they do share a similar agency with other guides. Although their performance is often staged and routinized, the reproduction of the rehearsed narratives is never complete or devoid of deviation. Tourism tales may be the primary engine of myth and culture-in-the-making, but they are not closed or rigid systems, but rather open systems, which are always put at risk by what happens in actual interactions. In other words, tourism tales are not fixed, but are the site of constant contestation of meaning. For example, guides do not blindly copy the learned canons but use their agency to strategically position themselves on changing sides of the 'us' vs. 'them' continuum that is so prevalent in all tourist imaginaries.

The interaction between tour guides and tourists typifies a socio-cultural moment in which two different imaginaries meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. Every encounter is unpredictable and a new challenge, even if the guide is well-experienced. Normative global templates provide orienting frameworks but are rarely scripts by which life must be lived. They have a social life by being played upon in the interaction between people. Even if both tourists and guides are active players in the reproduction of tourism discourses, there is mediation at every level, and there is always room for alternative or counter-discourses. It is therefore important to analyze how discourses can be understood in many ways, and under what social circumstances they are produced and consumed. A very fruitful way of doing this is by combining linguistic analysis with social theory and detailed ethnography.

One of the issues not addressed in this paper is the relationship between guides and their employers. Tour operators have different rules, with briefs ranging from set texts to a high level of 'carte blanche' allowing tour guides to respond more freely to the demands of particular tourist groups. The company, the guide, and the tourists are all actively taking part in shaping a mythologized tour product. However, successes and failures are not equally attributed to each. These and other related questions of power, status, and control in tourism discourses are obviously of central importance. This paper has also not explicitly dealt with the question how guiding narratives conflict, confront, juxtapose, and sometimes even converge with the competing imaginaries of government officials, journalists, scholars, development workers, missionaries, artists, and local people in a struggle for dominance. These various discourses participate in the complex construction of knowledge, cultures, and meanings. They all promote their own version or model of 'local' reality through their particular discourses of what is real and true and what is not. A long-term return visit to both sites will allow me to empirically better substantiate the theoretical framework laid out in this paper. Future research will also determine the extent to which some of the findings described in this paper can be generalized to other socio-cultural contexts…

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