

Locating an efficacy of the humane time in Ray's *Agantuk*: a travel beyond the object

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Abstract

The ontology of time and space has always been a subject of materialist prospectus bearing a halo effect of 'modernity' and 'progress'. The enquiry into the sign of modern is a mechanical category of production where substantial copies of 'progress' have religiously been equated with a break from the past. This breaking away from the centre (soul) is, of course, associated with a desire for the non-native design. Simultaneously, the past becomes historicized as primitive dangers while the present/'modern' morphs into a non-past spectacular diffusion. Satyajit Ray reloads his artillery of the cerebral one last time in his masterpiece titled, *Agantuk (The Stranger)*, where he pits the idea of a spectral past having an agency to redo the class binary against the totalitarian time(s) in a modern urban space which prides itself on the abuse of power-as-civility. Ray introduces a nuclear family of three (a married couple and their son) where the protagonist, Manmohan Mitra, returns as an archived data in the body of a forgotten relative. His entry into the house ruptures the canny knots of the 'home' where the director exposes limits of the modernized time. This paper tries to analyze how Ray uses the motif of 'travel' in its cinematic cloth to critique the ingestion of global progress as nothing but an accumulation of fallen spectacles that commodify both a subject who is consuming the object-in-time (progress) and also the object that is all the time getting alienated from its own subjective merit. Mitra becomes the mouthpiece of the director for conveying the paradoxes of time-as-capital in the burgeoning of speculative modernity.

Keywords: modernity, progress, primitive, home, time

Ray and the possibility of knowing time

'Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman – a rope over an abyss' (Nietzsche 7).

Time treks to give rise to new forms of despotism in coveted knots and at the same time, retrieve old forms of it in a much more spectacular way, so as to give the idea of a Sisyphean circuited game of power. The relationship between pastness of the past and presentness of the past

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account for a master-slave dialectic between esoteric models of violence and its subtle categories of reception. This circulation of social energies between modulation and consumption by means of an accentuated law slyly acts as a legible account for the method of self-engineering and self-preservation. Satyajit Ray in his last directorial masterpiece titled, *Agantuk or, The Stranger*, raises problems about the metaphysics of knowing time and its ontological constructs which shape the ideological spaces of habitation, material consumption and cultures. Ray's cinematic space talks about the plasticity of time as an escaping category of 'truth' where the only possible scope for any anthropocentric distillation is by a reworking of the habitual time. In other words, *Agantuk* projects characters of embodied time(s) but as a hollow deferential cyclical time, which, as always, Ray was very critical of. He critiques modernity not in terms of its progression but in its implication of borrowed social cloth which not only marginalizes the locals but also produces a suicidal desire for the othering. *Agantuk* shows a canny tussle between the apotheosis of rootedness and rootlessness in terms of its human organicity. Ray's characters become carriers of psycho-social vectors of life and other structural unrests that morph into an idea beyond 'being' rather than an idea of 'being'.

Time in a modern society is envisioned as having an irreversible transitory flow due to the constant progression of scientific innovations, but the promise of 'en avant' has caused deeper sociological problems than solving the pre-existing ones. *Agantuk* succeeds in addressing the problems that surface within modernity, defying the labels of being a humanist, classical, contemporary or an avant-garde film. In a postcolonial era, Ray's swan song suggests a return to the rural. The film is a mnemonic subscription to the native cultures and traditions that have been dialogized by the Western apparatus as barbarous and uncouth and Ray boldly exposes the pathetic lust for a sanitized 'civil' state where any progressive (cultured) boom is sadistically linked to a fetishistic search for some 'super' cosmopolitanism that shall carry the token of a 'bhadra samaj' (respectable society). *Agantuk* is an adaptation of Ray's short story *Atithi*, which was published in the children's magazine, *Sandesh* in 1981. Both the film and the literary text deal with the story of a relative's return to visit an ordinary family in Bengal after vanishing for decades and subsequently the family's ethical dilemma as to how they should welcome him - with, or, without the traditional Indian hospitality, not knowing whether he was a trickster or not. The director Satyajit Ray challenges the author Satyajit Ray's literary creation by contorting, reinventing and reproducing the literary text in the form of 'memory images' by introducing several elements in the film which was altogether absent from the literary text. According to Henri Bergson, memory images share a unique relation with perception. The external object producing sense-data from where the memory-images are shaped is as much as true as it is in the other way round. Thus, Bergson argues that we have 'a circuit, in which all the elements, including the perceived object itself, hold each other in a state of mutual tension as in an electric circuit' (Bergson 104). Interestingly, Ray creates some sort of memorial time lapse inside his narrative where there is a pulse of anti-cyclical time and space that becomes reflective of pre-natal residual time.

Politics of epistemic materiality

Agantuk, unlike Ray's other films, does not have much action taking place and what gains utmost importance is the dialogue between characters on screen. The action is the speech and the speech becomes the language and the language(s) 'in turn' morphs into an essence beyond the sensible. Ray becomes the spokesperson in the film through the character of Manmohan Mitra who

possesses rather striking similarities with his creator, be it in abandoning the plan of becoming a painter or, the determination to never be a 'kupamanduka' ('frog in a well'). Now, Ray issues a teleological enquiry into the limits of knowledge and its recycling of epistemic postulations upon which any society's moral radar functions upon. Manmohan Mitra claims a dissident space in that regard as we learn about his economical dislike about a Faustian approach to life. He makes his viewers learn about the duality of episteme: on the one hand, there is an orgasmic desire for a Mephistophelean vocation, and, on the other hand, there is a platonic fear about the fall of a Faustian bargain. Ray critiques such in-betweenness of the social circus where a body fails to participate in either/or categories of production. It becomes painfully satirical when a body fails to openly welcome a Nietzschean sensation of something that is beyond good or evil. Manmohan Mitra is an anthropologist or, the 'returned native'/uncle who becomes the alter ego of Ray, provoking a sudden collapse of a stable world which still conformed to a plastic habitation (the artificial Real) made familiar by our colonial past. The stranger, much like Freud's 'uncanny' becomes an unpredictable threat because he is both 'secretly familiar' and successfully 'repressed' from the normal daily lives of Anila and Sudhindra Bose. The opening of the film has a very Kafkaesque setting where Ray directs an effect of poltergeist through the affective bodies in lens. He introduces his viewers to the plasticity of memory through the metaphor of a letter which inwardly directs to a metonymic function of absence characterized by modern scientific empiricism. The letter becomes a sign deferred. The heroine of the film does not know the handwriting style. The addressee of the letter reads 'M. Mitra' but the heroine reiterates that she does not recall anybody by that name in her family. At the very outset, the news becomes the 'whole' of the less in the circle of materiality. Ray generates a somewhat Rip Van Winkle effect to create a semantic rupture in his understanding of family and its affective knowability. Anila breaks down in tension as she is not welcoming of the fact that a 'named' stranger seems to be coming to her place. Ray plays on the concept of an unwanted 'coming' as the making of a new analogy of Gordian knot where the technics of a body accumulate in the form of memory-as-lived experiences, as is the case with Manmohan Mitra. For both the husband and wife, we see a kind of nostalgic dissociation which seems to accompany the act of remembering with forgetting. From the letter, Anila notes about the rootedness of native language (Bangla) as a matter of surprise. In the opening scene, we get to read into the language(s) of absence which transmutes into a spectral un-knotting in a letter that hints at the corporeality of a 'coming'. Moreover, the husband is shocked to see the pattern of the archaic in the letter's language which echoes the rootless escape of modern language as a form of hybrid mashup. For the family, the letter remains not simply an inanimate carrier of message but offers a renewable circulation of signs that refers to the stranger's rootedness-as-disturbing in contrast to the mimicry-as-modern. The guest becomes the host and the family falls in a disruptive tension. It is indeed ironical that a man who has lived abroad for 35 years and had cut off all ties with his native cultures and tradition writes to Anila a letter in 'sadhu bhasha' (used solely for writing in 19th-20th century Bengal), reminding her of the traditional Indian hospitality. In reply, the globalized Sudhindra becomes deeply troubled about his weekend plans getting spoiled and advises her to write him back, stating they will be out of station for the week.

The film paints a picture of a new Bengal, a postcolonial society as a site of cultural hybridity. The Bose household sustains this hybridity by serving homemade cookies and 'goynabori' to the

guests, the characters sing Rabindra sangeet (music) and read crime fictions of Agatha Christie. Mitra, being brought up in an extended family, had his grandmother to tell him the mythological tales that he chooses to remember but the present generation of Sudhindra and Anila does not bother about the age-old traditions of their fathers and forefathers. They take pride in a Bengali culture which has been reduced to 'adda', 'rosogolla' (Rasgulla) and 'bangal-ghoti' or, East Bengal-Mohun Bagan dispute. Durga Puja also has acquired a new meaning in the form of a relaxing fallacy that has zero interest in celebration. Satyaki who represents the future generation is a product of nuclear family and embodies the notion of alienation which comes hand in hand with modernity.

Escaping identities and the *habits* of time

Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* and *The Savage Mind* had considerably influenced Ray into making this film. One of the predominant themes in Strauss's work is modernity and the humanist crisis that it creates in our era. Ray was extremely critical of the concept of modernity and he successfully ridicules the Western notion of a 'break from the past' through the characters of Sudhindra, Prithwish and Ranjan. The two-storey house, the lush greenery in the backyard, the well decorated interiors suggest the accumulated excess and 'taste' of the Bose family. Yet, the taste of warmth fails to hit Sudhindra's sensory items. In a scene, the husband calls from his office and asks his wife to enquire about Mitra's passport. Ray points to the politics of identity as the materiality of suspicion where a passport replaces the body as a valid entry point into the politics of recognition whereas the merit of 'travel' within a body gets a suspicious value according to the modern polity of possession and dispossession. The object of passport morphs into the humane for Sudhindra whereas the organicity of Mitra 'turns' into an inorganic code of law which is to be considered as the only 'truth'. In the film, Ray talks about the economics of absence from the prospect of an organic space as a critique to the modernization of presence which is issued as the only validity of identification. Mitra, in a conversation with Sudhindra, critiques the global process of registration as a mathematization of subjects through the process of numbers and papers. He provides a strong distaste of reason over the dialectics of travel as the identifier of people in a geo-political space. While having lunch with the family (husband absent), Mitra talks about his numerous explorations. He defines his appetite for travelling as an asymptomatic wanderlust of the mind-in-body which gets painfully decayed by the institutions of civil spaces and 'corrective' grammars of living. He remembers about an ancient painting of bison that evokes memory of transcendence. For Mitra, the corporeality of his memorial space(s) negates the speculative system of time-as-object. Mitra rejects the notion of 'time' as a utilitarian product of the civil system and rests upon the calling of time as a synthesis of body and mind where both the vectors involve in a participatory dialogue (semantic unison) with one another. Ray generates the idea of 'felt time' rather than the modern's use of 'kept time'. Mitra highlights himself to be a living example of time-in-body and not a body-in-time. Mitra utters the term 'imposition' to define a peculiar tangent in the social memory of receptivity so as to de-familiarize the familiar into a mental ellipsis which ultimately deconstructs the macro politics of sight and knowability. In *Agantuk*, the chronotopes of past becomes a functioning agency in the plotline, both as an exposition of the illusion of modernity and also as a remedy for a paternal present, or, the time in which the characters in the film find themselves. The guest transforms into a space of carnival where Mitra enjoys an autonomous relativity of the unknowable; he gets projected by Anila's callous husband

as a prospective festival 'that' needs to be checked and gazed at by other people. On the contrary, Ray projects his protagonist as a return of the prodigal son who is seen to be declared as wasteful and repentant by the civil domesticated participants. In one scene, Sudhindra turns so lame as to express his pathetic concern about too much money getting spent on the stranger, despite having an affluent setup. The global 'civilized' Sudhindra is later put to shame by the cordiality of the kol tribe who treats Mitra as one of their own.

Manmohan Mitra is not a deracinated migrant as the modernized 'time' would expect him to be. He is a typical Tagorean synthesis of the West and the East like Ray who has 'lived with a plurality of selves, and a part of him was as deeply Indian as a part of him was Western' (Nandy 43). Mitra's degree in anthropology has made him theoretically equipped to live with the Red Indians and other Indian tribes. His deep knowledge about Sudhindra's inherited art collection shows his letters of knowledge. Sudhindra, himself, knows little about the sculptures apart from their financial values. This obviously points to the classical Marxist concept of alienation where an owner is totally cut off from the object she/he owns and focuses only on its transactional capacity. In fact, Sudhindra not only alienates himself from the object he owns but also de-subjectifies the object's situatedness from its history, thereby losing possession of his buy. The cave painting of bison in Altamira evokes a sense of delightful fear in Mitra but the same can never be expected from Sudhindra who feels that embellishment is the final say of any art. This is not to say that Sudhindra was a propounder of the school of 'art for art's sake'. It had become discernible to Mitra at a very young age that no art school can teach him to paint a bison like the primitives could have because in a capital-driven society, art serves the purpose of escapism from the daily class crisis. Mitra detests any artist who strategizes in the commodification machinery of the state in exchange of 'hard' capital so as to remain in the category of any populist fallacy. He himself ditched his plan of becoming a painter as he felt disconnected to the exchange value of any art having a necessary appendage to mass consumption. For Mitra, money, or, the accumulation of wealth becomes a fallen signifier in the determination of social status. His economy is an economy of un-learning of the social determinism as is evident in the way when he leaves his full inheritance to Anila at the end of the film. Interestingly, Mitra links his understanding of economy to the principality of familial economics; he echoes Engels in learning about the unit of family as a recurring repository of 'waste' that is incapable of any renewable production. Mitra talks about the politics of familization of bodies in having separate workable perimeters. He questions the efficacy of 'family' as being homogenized in the form of a registered domestic space where there is little or no autonomy whatsoever. He talks about the politics of home and homelessness in his telling of experiences. Ray wants to echo the idea of a closed bio-circuit in his portrayal of a 'modern' civil household; he points to the constituency of 'family' as bearing a static logo of closed space carrying the markers of a sheltered circuit (home) which is not to be confused with the idea of a 'house' as the latter produces a material epithet. Mitra shows his admiration for the house at the beginning of the film to Anila, where the sight of 'house' becomes a structural merit of an engineer (metonymy of science). In fact, Mitra links the idea of 'kupamanduka' to the social desire/construct of a 'home' as the instigator of stagnation and stasis. For him, 'home' is everywhere but the house as he feels that being at 'home' is a sensate condition which resides beyond any material parameter of 'heimlich'.

Montages of the late nineteenth century Calcutta caught between its provincial past and a megapolitan present is quite common in Ray's films that project a socio-moral zero-sum game. *Agantuk* presents an almost Warholian shot of a floating parachute in Garer math (Calcutta maidan) against the backdrop of skyscrapers where Mitra is seen to be narrating the story of ancient Inca civilization to a group of kids, sitting under a tree. The children intently listen to the 'may/may not be dadu (grandfather)' who recollects his expedition to Machu Picchu and gradually unravels the greatest mysteries of the universe by simply deeming them as 'magic'. The scene discloses the reality of a neo-colonialist era where people portray themselves as being conscious of the importance of nature while being inconsiderate to humans who form a part of nature too. Throughout the film, the husband is seen to be a mouthpiece of the paternal nature while her wife is seen to be crying for a maternal nurture. Mitra becomes an elastic emotive component within the 'to be or not to be uncle' dilemma for them. Once, Anila says that the call of 'mama' (uncle), for her, becomes an uncanny stopgap between the protocols of familiarity and unfamiliarity where there is a mnemonic seesawing of the memory of kinship property and the property of memory.

Mitra as a *labor* of spectral travel(s)

"The word 'modern' is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns" (Latour 10). We witness an epic argument between Mitra and Prithwish, the ancient represented by the former and the modern by the latter. Prithwish, a well-wisher of the Bose family, feels that Mitra, antipathetic as he is towards modern stylization of appendages and technology, ought to live in the forests, deeming it as a site of regression where primordial passion attains autonomy. Prithwish is a barrister who claims to have spent 'some' significant amount of time 'reading' books on tribal cultures and pre-modern civilizations but painfully, fails to equate tribal groups with any other 'acts' apart from cannibalism, witchcraft and taboos, thus reinforcing the view of parochialism forming the base of any civilization. Ray seems to mirror Paulo Freire's fear of the motif of educative laboratories producing Iago(s) within its limits of learning. Prithwish interviews Mitra about his views on modern syllabus on progress such as religion, caste, technology and other alibis so as to surgically dismember his metaphysical opacity. Mitra falls outside of the purview of caste or religion which he understands as timeless fugazi. He declares himself to be an omnivore who has tasted the meat of field rats, bats and snakes but unfortunately failed to find any chance of eating human flesh. The food metaphor provides a Sadean metaphor in linking to the macro concept of labor theory, where, categorically, the haves eat upon the have-nots as a type of necrophilic cleansing, thereby exposing the innate cannibalism of the 'moderns'. In fact, the meat of armadillo serves as a cultural metonymy of travels and escapades for Mitra which, in a way, reflects upon the politics of food as a cultural production of ethics and respectability. So, when Mitra introduces himself as an all-eating-type, he resists himself from the politics of consumption as a socio-moral imposition. He regards the struggle for survival as essential to the nutrition of mind and body and believes his travels to be the prime mover for his wisdom. For him, the ethics and merits of struggle cook up the necessary wit in flesh and he successfully dissociates himself from the notion of struggle as a failed labor. Mitra connects the corporeality of struggle with the merits of 'travel', so that travelling becomes not simply a 'consumable' holiday for the haves but also a 'working' entry into the 'travel' of the mind-in-motion. He is Camus' Meursault who defies all the conventional belief system that the modern man regards as indispensable. Bearing a post-scientific 'turn', Mitra does not believe in

the existence of a benevolent and virtuous God, 'God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.' (Nietzsche 120) and rebukes Prithwish by asking:

"Who will give light (to the blind)? Who will give life (to the dead)?" (1:21:02)

Mitra cannot be classified as simply an atheist but perhaps a pantheist who believes in the existence of cosmic power as delineated in the Rabindra sangeet (music) that Anila sings. Through the character of Mitra, Ray raises the predominant question of how and why modern civilization is waging war on itself. He had witnessed the geopolitical tension that arose in the post-world war era, a time when obtaining nuclear weapons became a legalized insurance for peace and safety. The 1970's also saw the formation of UNEP (United Nations Environment Program) followed by frequent conferences on environment like the Stockholm conference (1972) which clearly stated that weapons of mass destruction need to be put down with immediate effect. That our foes shall not be each other but the earth becomes clear, yet the modern texts end up abandoning a moral stance of being considerate to our fellow creatures. While an urbane Prithwish identifies scientific discovery solely to NASA's pursuit in outer space, Mitra considers the construction of igloo as a scientific 'home'. Prithwish's civil address is boxed up in baseless evening 'addas' with his own class group. With a cup of tea and a cigarette in their hands, the moderns try and convince each other about a superpower, that is, the United States, based on the markers of its scientific 'boon' which effectively 'others' the non-scientific rest. Ray's protagonist reminds us that science and technology were present in the Paleolithic and Neolithic Age too in the form of pottery, fishing, weaving, farming and architecture. Man (gendered body) has struggled, evolved and has emerged as the 'fittest' of Nature's creation. Perhaps Ray was critiquing the Darwinian bio-discourse where the logic of power becomes a pre-requisite organ in its functioning of 'able' bodies:

"...as new species in the course of time are formed through natural selection, others will become rarer and rarer, and finally extinct. The forms which stand in closest competition with those undergoing modification and improvement will naturally suffer most" (Darwin 103).

The ill effects of technology is best explained by drawing a comparison between a body who holds the remote control of a nuclear bomb and a tribal warrior, asking us how the former, who annihilates an entire population is considered civilized and the latter, a savage. Science and technology regard capturing (or, as structuralists would say, capture-'in') pictures of Neptune or, colonising Moon and Mars to be more important than putting a stop to drug abuse or, eradicating poverty and hunger. It is the modern Prometheus wreaking havoc with its unprecedented progress, pushing civilization further into the brink of extinction.

Like Captain Nemo, Mitra rejects the exploitative imperialist nations and refuses to borrow the Western prescriptions on progressive civility. Having learnt from Marx, Freud, Rabindranath, Shakespeare, Michael and Bankim, he reflects upon the prosthetic capital which manages to govern mass as fetishistic surrogates of sellable commodities:

"The bourgeoisie...compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, that is, to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image." (Marx and Engels 14)

Mitra is like the old man in Edgar Allen Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, who cannot be objectified and made-to-order by the calisthenics of modern time. He serves us the naked truth where the 'metropolises' prefer copies of images rather than the image, at least, which is already being twice displaced from any centre. Prithwish's idiocy masquerading as the scientific arrogant modern is actually crass stupidity and refined mediocrity where he is neither a 'zero' nor a 'One'. Sceptic Sudhindra's opinion of Manmohan being a fraudster and Anila's instinct of the man being none other than her uncle creates a row between the two suggesting the radical difference between masculine rationality and feminine sensibility, which Ray inertly distinguishes between the paternal 'modern' and the instinctual primitive. The bogus non-primitivity is further highlighted through the skit that Ranjan presents which is nothing more than a digestible bolus. Mitra even echoes the politics of sight as being characterised through the optics of homeless 'able' bodies as a metaphor for blindness by the homed urbane. *Agantuk* deals with ethical and practical issues that seem almost didactic in nature. Ray's treatment of his dialogues by his characters spills over into a dialogue of crisis, an epic conundrum of the spatial being and the temporal living. In the scene where Mitra visits the kol tribe in response to the insults he received from the 'modern' lack (Prithwish's gibberish), he travels 'back' to his 'savage escape'. Speaking in their own language, pleading for their traditions and cultures, Mitra emerges as the modern primitivist, one who is aware of the limitations of science and technology. He talks about the tradition of reception by the kol tribe as bearing an elasticity of rhythm in their festival of love. Anila's desire to join the tribe in their dance is urged by Sudhindra which suggests a 'travel' of heart in both the urbanisers. This involuntary sign from Anila evokes a tearful respite from Mitra that suggests the instinct acquiring victory over the intellect: "I had a doubt whether she was my niece. Now it has been removed" (1:53:57). Mitra might be the person whom Tagore mentions towards the end of his *Crisis in Civilization*, about a messiah from the East who brings a ray of hope in the dark times. Thus, Ray's final protagonist succeeds in his mission of spiritual exorcism, a kind of moral/civil cleansing of the central characters.

Corporeal time

In *Agantuk*, spectres of past connect the present and forms a symbiotic relationship between an uncanny guest and the canny hosts; the theory gets reversed into a praxis of familial continuum when, at the end, Mitra donates his entire inheritance to the Bose clan. In a way, the corporeality of absence returns to the modern space as the materiality of the 'un-modern', where Mitra almost evolves into plastic time as the primal generator of linkages. Mitra's travelling in time largely differs from the capital time which performs an illusion of the speculative decay of a body. Even, at the end of the running time, Mitra satirizes about the politics of flight when he jokes about the inefficiency of airlines (unable to be flying on time) as a critique to the modern ideas of capital-in-time. He refers to the image of sun as an isotropic capsule in its obedience to the ethics of time that highlights Nature as a systematic order of thought rather than as passive subalternist rhizome. For Ray, passport becomes an incomprehensible output of any identity and he critiqued modernity as having lobotomized paperwork deferrals. Ray positions the prospect of capital-as-time as an entry into the suicidal vortex: a fear of freedom moves within one's 'self' where the 'other', which can be seen as one's true reckoning of oneself, performs the zombification of self. Like his pen name Nemo (a Latin word meaning 'no one'), Mitra disappears as suddenly as he had appeared, suggestive of the modern rhetoric's incapacity to capitalise upon his phantasmic labor.

His last two words are 'mister no-one' where Mitra becomes a rapturous event beyond the scope of any modern language. When he gives away his entire bank share to his niece, Ray might be mirroring Proudhon's reference to property as theft. Ray critiques the idea of property as a fixed quantifiable integer and hinges upon utilizing means as a property of 'living' through the mode of 'travel'. For our fantastic protagonist as well as his creator, the regulatory system of accumulation of wealth-as-property reflects a macro civilization fallacy: the modern stagnation of a 'spectacular' fall from beings into things, or rather, a deeper study in chaos theory.

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