James Sey

ART AND THE DISCURSIVE CITY

BIOGRAPHY

James Sey is a Research Fellow in the University of Johannesburg's Research Centre, *Visual Identities in Art and Design*. He has lectured, written and published extensively, both in South Africa and internationally, in fields as varied as psychoanalysis, sound art and experimental film. He is also an art critic and occasional multimedia artist.

→ In this essay I argue two interconnected points: firstly, that all cities demonstrate a fundamental ambivalence – on one hand, they regulate and organise the lives of their inhabitants, and, on the other hand, they enable a certain aestheticised and contingent experience which is characteristically modern. Secondly, I argue that certain forms of experience of and interacting with the city, derived from the techniques of 'psychogeography', are most productive for elaborating upon this ambivalence, and the example of Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city, is used to demonstrate the usefulness of this theoretical aestheticisation of the urban experience.

Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others. (de Certeau 1984:1)

The city as a discourse

Since the origins of the organisation of cities as distinctively 'modern' phenomena – that is, as consciously planned and organised structures for the habitation and movement of millions of people between their places of work and dwelling – they have also mediated various kinds of cultural and social meanings. Not only do cities mediate so-called 'interstitial' space, dictating movement flow and lines of sight through their infrastructure, they also mediate psychological space. In common with other forms of spatial organisation, the structure of the city is 'readable' as such, as one would read a text. It is planned, laid out, and organised. This organisation has to do not so much with the physical infrastructure of the city – its buildings, roads, sewers, and so on, but with more discursive aspects of the city – the planning of systems of reticulation, distribution, timetabling of services, public transport and the like. This is what Michel de Certeau (1984) calls its "strategic" organisation, or what Michel Foucault would point to as a set of discursive practices. This organisation gives rise to the conceptual possibility of a certain type of inhabitant of the city: a type of 'average urban dweller'. This average dweller stands in for actual people in planning terms – for example, on average, more people will move around the city at certain times of the day. They will congregate in certain typical places, and will have predictable habits, the knowledge of which aids in further urban planning. However in order for the city to operate as such a social regulatory mechanism, to produce such effects, thus obeying its own logic of mass capitalist production in the control and organisation of the urban population, time and space themselves must be regulated. Stephen Kern, in his book *The Culture of Time and Space* (1986), recounts how world standard time was only fully instituted on the morning of 1 July, 1913, when the Eiffel Tower sent the first time signal transmitted around the world. Thus, a global electronic network enabled the implementation of a system of standardisation that would in turn enable a certain type of social organisation. This happened around the city as a locus of economic and social activity, and would bring cities in a standardised relation to each other all over the world – now there could be London time, New York time, Johannesburg time … Hand in hand with the standardisation of time came the regulation of space, in the division between the labouring space of the factory, and the leisure spaces of the city, the amusement arcades of the emergent techno-utopias or urban arcadias. It is in these spaces – cinemas, pedestrian boulevards, the alleyways between buildings, children's parks – that Charles Baudelaire first became a *flâneur*, and Walter Benjamin (1973) elaborated on the theoretical and aesthetic value of walking in the city.

On the other side of this regulatory coin, the city is not only about passive inhabitants upon whom planning and control is exerted. It is inhabited not by the 'average' urban dweller, but by thinking and feeling people who interact actively with their surroundings, and therefore change them, in both working and leisure modes. From the beginning of modernity, exploring the city, physically, conceptually and aesthetically, was associated with the idea of the contingent – the chance event, the ephemeral intervention. Mary Ann Doane (2002:11) discusses the nature of this relation:

> Modernity is … strongly associated with epistemologies that valorize the contingent, the ephemeral, chance … in modernity meaning is predetermined not in ideal forms but in a process of emergence and surprise. And new technologies of representation … are consistently allied with contingency and the ability to seize the ephemeral … and focus upon the particular, the singular, the unique, the contingent.

Doane argues that the valorisation of contingency by aesthetic forms such as photography and cinema is an attempt to reinstate a sense of aesthetic freedom outside of the structuration and regulation of urban labour, leisure space and time. It is a valorisation that is definitive of the avant-gardes, such as Surrealism and Dada. Surrealism's vain attempts to productively release the contents of the unconscious, for example, were already prefigured by the ability of photography and film to mimic and replicate memory. However Doane also points out that the rationalisation of space and time necessitated by urban modernity on one hand, and the valorisation of contingency on the other, is a constitutive or productive ambivalence for modernity, rather than an exclusionary choice.

As Benjamin discusses in his essay *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1973), characteristically urban technologies of representation compensate for the lack of psychical depth and full engagement with experience that is the consequence of modernity's fascination with contingency. In this way, as he outlines in his benchmark work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1973), while the products of 'mechanical reproduction', erode the aura of traditional artworks, they also assist us in dealing with the constant sensorial shock to which

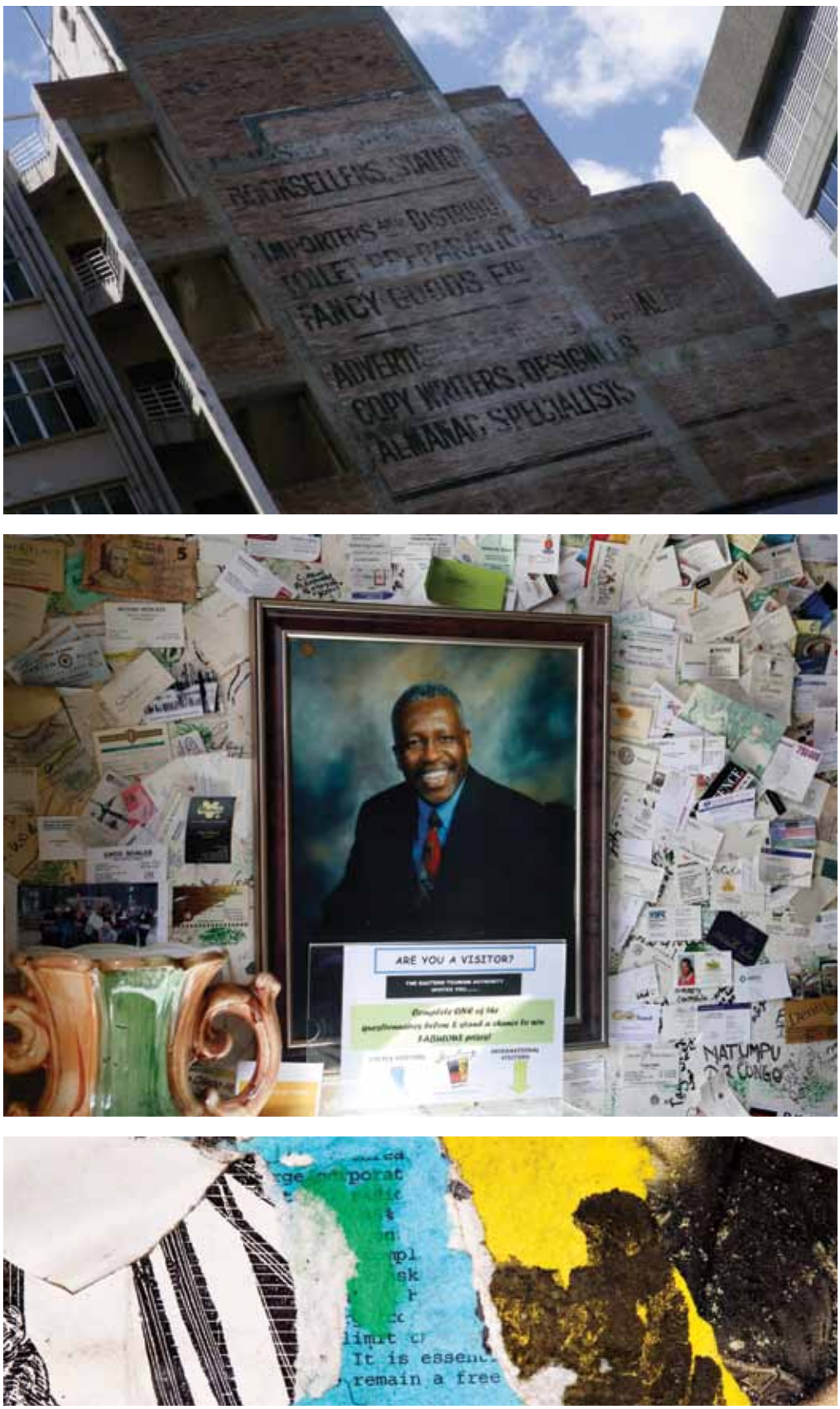

fig 1 Examples of palimpsest on walls in Johannesburg Photography by Clive Hassall

the contingency of modernity subjects us, in the forms of traffic, electricity, advertising, and so on.

The ambivalent adherence of modernity to contingency or shock effect is emblematised for Benjamin in the rise of montage in the cinema. The cinema, of course, becomes perhaps the most important leisure representation of the expanding cityscapes. The cinema captures perfectly the ambivalent oscillation between contingency and organisation, each frame captured as a photograph, yet each part of a coherent narrative sequence, the rationalised and resolved story. To the extent that photography and cinema seem to be able to capture the central ambivalence of the city, the oscillation between contingency or shock and rational, technical organisation, they are the quintessential urban representational technologies. This marks them out as a new form of art, one that also erases the auratic and 'authored' quality that had been definitive of the aesthetic before urbanised modernity.

Yet, these urban aesthetic possibilities can only be realised when they are used – when the 'users' of the city – its inhabitants – begin to play with the ambivalence every city exhibits between its planned organisation and its contingent qualities.

The aesthetics of the city and its users

As we have argued, alongside the 'readable', discursive structure of the city, the mappable territory that organises and arranges, lies the other structure of contingency – the more tangential and aestheticised structure of the city produced by its users, its inhabitants. This one evokes, determines, and produces behaviours, styles, attitudes, values, pathologies. Each city therefore has at least a double character, and a double narrative, and its inhabitants play many roles within each.

The surfaces and depths of the city's structure, its being – from the towering replications of its skyscrapers, to the hollow aortas of its undercover car parks, to the secret somatics of its circulatory systems of tar, wire, cable and pipe – all form a paradigmatic sign system, a primary cybernetic machine. Seen as such a sign system, the city should be the true locus of modern media – and aesthetic – philosophy.

The city's users who play with this double structure to unlock different urban meanings are, in de Certeau's (1984) term, "tacticians" of the city. Urban aesthetic tactics are exemplified in his famous essay *Walking in the City*, where the city's inhabitants find their own routes, their own street plans, which have a multitude of meanings for them. This opening up of the city is ranged against the intentions of the urban planners and developers, whose purpose is to order and organise the city's physical character, to impose restrictions on movements and behaviours.

Urban 'tacticians' work in a plethora of modes, using the city to produce discourse and refine practices in many different subcultures. Music has a role, with all of the languages, loyalties, spaces and fashion it provides. Beyond music, the city has its own soundscapes, white noise and birdcalls, traffic and sirens, an undifferentiated mass of machine noise; there are sports, from street football, basketball and skateboarding to free running and base jumping; the city is also saturated with visual representation – from billboards and magazine covers to the endless graffiti which manifests as a signature urban aesthetic style – sprayed on the canvas which the city's walls mutely provide.

What these urban discourses have in common is their quicksilver mutability, their existence as a set of subversions of the city's planned and formal character – subversions with no sustained agenda. What brings them together, from being a vastly disparate set of activities and rituals, is the ways in which they are all aestheticised discourses and practices.

An example of this is the ways in which the city has, from early on in modernity, been associated with the concepts and methods of avant-garde art movements. The propensity of avant-gardism, as Marcel Duchamp's urinal most famously demonstrated in 1917, has been to disturb formal relations between aesthetic judgement and the nature of art objects. It was possible, a century ago, to use the philosophical category of the aesthetic to interrogate and defamiliarise perception, representation, and the social provenance of art, in the relatively new environment of the city. While such a defamiliarisation has become steadily less possible as the production of meaning and media have proliferated, the response to the ubiquity of structure and organisation that the city requires in order to function has continued to take aesthetic and often conceptual forms.

Perhaps the key aesthetic manoeuvre of the city is the palimpsest, the writing or drawing over onto another set of images, texts or meanings. The city, we should remember, is a giant circulatory system. It recycles things, including water and air. Images and meanings

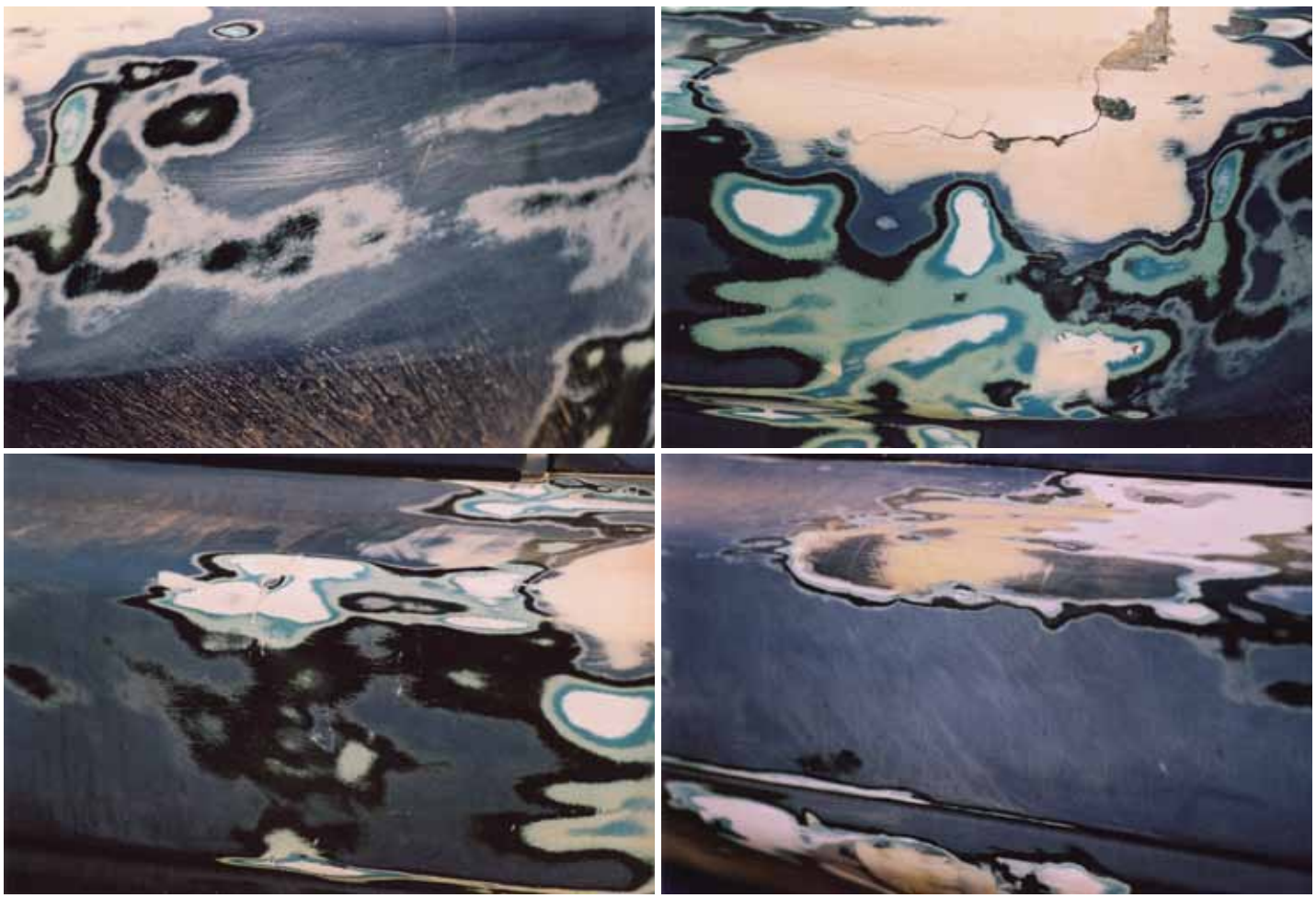

fig 2 Stephen Hobbs,
Autocamoflage 1-4, 2002
Hand-colour prints
100 x 66 cm each
Courtesy of James Sey
and the artist

are not exempt – new billboard images replace yesterday's product, today's headlines usurp yesterday's.

We might extend the meaning of the term 'palimpsest' in this context in the coinage 'palimpsestuous'. This has the undertone of 'incestuous', to refer to the self-referential and interrelated – as well as libidinally charged - nature of urban aesthetic meaning. All of the aesthetic interventions mentioned above participate in this palimpsestuous circulation of urban meaning – noises on top of each other, fashions colliding and stealing from each other, skateboarders turning banisters into grind rails – which become a part of their own urban geography. Indeed, recycling in the city has now even become an ethical dictum, with 'green' buildings and cars on the official agenda. As with so many other interventions, the legislators – the city's 'strategists' – catch up with the street too late.

The idea that such a palimpsestuous set of strategies for creating urban aesthetic meaning has a psychosexual – that is, libidinally charged – character is important, since it provides a means of understanding the view of cities as having an 'unconscious' or hidden character, that can be uncovered and understood through certain aesthetic strategies. One such strategy, I suggest, is that of psychogeography and its attendant technique of the 'drift' or 'dérive'.

Psychogeography

The origins of psychogeography, as a set of strategies for exploring cities to uncover their effects on emotions and behaviours, was formalised by the Situationists. Since the 1950s, it has come to represent a means of accessing the 'secret histories' of places, particularly cities, and the ways in which these histories defy intention and planning and utilise contingency and expediency. Contemporary psychogeography focuses on the interactions, impositions, and palimpsests of modern urban planning upon older histories, narrative accounts and belief systems about the city. Through a matrix of myth, superstition, belief and story, which underpins the newer matrix of the planned urban grid, emerges, for psychogeographers like Alan Sinclair, JG Ballard, and Alan Moore, a more aesthetic and meaningful version of the being of the city, and being in the city. This essentially aesthetic psychogeography utilises the materials of signification the city itself provides – the myriad discourses and practices I have referred to, overlaid with a template of mythic creation, or re-creation, of a city which of course, exists only in the imagination. Only small vignettes of such cities exist in the actual urban landscape. Those that do exist owe their presence to artists, to the new aesthetic psychonauts travelling through imagined cityscapes.

The chief technique of the psychogeographer, almost the 'free association' to the psychoanalysis of psychogeography, is the dérive, described by Debord thus:

> **In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there ... But the dérive includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities.**

The technique is thus one of investigation but also free association, rationality and contingency, and is thus well-suited to the discovery of the hidden and ambivalent character of the palimpsestuous city. One of the most intriguing of such cities, given the nature of its history, and the fact that it is the city where I live, is Johannesburg.

The psychogeography of Johannesburg

South Africa's largest city and its financial capital, Johannesburg is a prime example of the mutability of cities, their propensity for change and 'strategic' reorientation. Since the demise of institutional apartheid in 1990, and the advent of the democratic African National Congress-led government in 1994, the city has been subject to a process of constant physical and ideological 'renewal', as a means of changing its apartheid character.

While the general programme of renewal has been driven by an unimpeachable ideological agenda to make the city more inclusive and representative, urban planners have run into the dilemma of the ambivalent character of the modern city – the way in which it is defined by, and yet resists, urban planning and governance. The process of renewal in Johannesburg is full of palimpsestuous anomalies – historical buildings have been torn down to make way for gleaming and anodyne new office blocks – but their 19th-century façades have been retained intact in a nod to historical respect. The formidable apartheid-era prison overlooking the city that was Johannesburg's Old Fort, and which once incarcerated both Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, is now the site of an 'experiential museum' complex, and the site upon which the state of the art architecture of the Constitutional Court is built.

The city's aesthetic 'tacticians' in the post-apartheid generation are working in a schizoid environment of a different stripe to that of the apartheid era – now they are torn between the drive to represent the new realities of their country, and, for many of them, the drive to join the more homogenised currents of the global urban art markets. Representing a national character for art in a post-national, globalised, hypercapitalist market can be a strain. It is further complicated by the fact that national public sector support for the arts in South Africa has a distinctly ideologised character, with more support given to 'public' art (of which there is an increasing amount) serving a particular arts and culture agenda – that of representing the 'new' South Africa. This imaginary entity is a hodgepodge of an idealised Pan-Africanism and a lionisation of struggle-era and post-struggle liberation politics.

This by no means exhausts what contemporary South African artists are engaged with – the post-apartheid period has signalled a blossoming and diversity of work for artists in the country – but it is certainly typical of those artists engaged with art explicitly in the city.

The ironies and ambivalences of the situation are well expressed in Johannesburg by the setting aside of a cultural precinct, the Newtown Cultural Precinct, alongside the site of the most famous anti-apartheid theatre complex in the world, the Market Theatre. It demonstrates the dilemma of the urban planners attempting to legislate art –the theatre remains largely dormant and underused.

Elsewhere in the city are areas that have changed under unplanned pressures. One of these pressures was the influx of poor immigrants from neighbouring African countries after the fall of apartheid, who came seeking a better future.

Johannesburg's ongoing palimpsestuous urban development programme extends apace. Apart from the continual physical rebuilding of the city in preparation for the upcoming 2010 FIFA World Cup, many street and suburb names are currently being changed, in the interests of reflecting the new ideology of the country and erasing the civic commemoration of the apartheid past.

The psychogeography of such a mutable city – one that, in a sense, reveals all as surface, and has little psychical or socio-architectural depth to be uncovered – is truly that of the disengaged *flâneur,* the artist under erasure. Public art has been covered up by building developments, paintings are replaced by graffiti, which is itself replaced. It is in cities like Johannesburg that the idea of the urban palimpsest is realised – the 'tactic' of refashioning the nature of the city comes to aesthetic life in a way that distances it both from the confines of the art gallery's rules of representation, and from the graffiti artist's bombs in the street. In the refashioning of an aesthetic identity between these two extremes, Johannesburg becomes an 'everycity' of the developing world, with an always new imagining of its psychogeography, and with new paths across its surfaces and its disavowed depths.

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