

For a Sociology of Art: Dancing Cyborgs Between Digital Choreographies and Speculative Horizons

Linda De Feo^a

Abstract

Human creativity records and throws again the dynamics of social transformations. It expresses itself into poetics that must be constantly interpreted. These poetics exhort to think of the complex relationship between narrative fields, techno-communicative mutations and epistemological frontiers. The paper will focus on the analysis of the mirroring between the creative parable traced by contemporary digital choreographies and the speculative horizon. Object of the reflection will be some significant segments of imaginary, conceivable as transpositions into choreutical acts of theoretical assumptions. These theories can be intended as narrations of the present and of the future, particularly careful in the interpretation of the structural processes. It will attempt to demonstrate how by the actual acceleration of the computational power in the area of the simulation and in the area of the perceptual reorientation, the intersection between the spectacular domain and the conceptual one produces an extension of the operative sphere of the dance. Like many forms of narrative, the terpsichorean art is increasingly acquiring a heuristic valence. The dancers destined to inhabit the mathematized space of digital descriptions incarnate the connection between the political experience - meaning the latter term in its etymological significance - and the sociomorphic representation of the human body. The protagonists of the works examined represent on aesthetic level the sense-informational *métissage* realized by the process of cybernatization of the human being, reflect the suspension of the semantic duality between biology and technique, interpret therefore the chimerical reconfiguration of the statute of contemporary identities.

Keywords: sociology of imaginary, sociology of art, virtual choreography.

^a Department of Social Sciences, University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy.

Corresponding author:
Linda De Feo
E-mail: linda.defeo@unina.it

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1. Introduction

The social reality is persistently pre-formed by an imaginative matrix which defines its characteristics and which structurally modifies the existential condition of the human subject.

The imaginary is made up of mental productions or materialized in works, based on visual (paintings, drawings, photographs) and linguistic elements (metaphors, symbols, stories), capable of forming coherent and dynamic creations (Wunenburger, 2003). It performs an important role in the construction of the world and it is part of the processes that make man and woman specifically human (Jedlowsky, 2000). It is not only an object of analysis, but also a heuristic tool and a perspective from which to analyze society. The epochal translations of imagination reveal the link between aesthetic forms and the change of the world. The imaginative mirroring, like the gnoseological one, intends to understand, to discover and to re-propose, by its own specific means, the totality of reality in its richness of contents and forms (Lukács, 1916). At the same time it relaunches the processes involving the various space-time contexts. In the languages that are constantly socialized in the present, new forms of knowledge are structured on new forms of life, generated by the fusion of nature and artifice, biological and technological.

The technique unfolds as a destiny of unveiling, as transformation of non-presence into presence, of latency into non-latency (Heidegger, 1977). The continuous, present electronic rewriting of the anthropic system realizes itself through multiple horizons, including artistic expression.

The terpsichorean art, in particular, stages a phenomenality that interweaves new realities and their *repraesentationes*. The choreographic imagery has currently extended its operational field, transforming into a speculative dimension.

The objective of the paper is to demonstrate how some fragments of imaginary represent moments of a gestuality conceivable as transposition in dancing acts of theoretical assumptions. These theories interpret the complexity of the relationships between the representation of human body and the experiences of social reality. Dance is linked to the idea of the body as a *locus*, as a privileged place of the symbolic horizon.

Since its origins, dance has been the *medium* through which human beings have expressed their harmonious alliance with the world (Sinisi, 2005). Through movement the human subject was able to come into contact with tangible and intangible elements of his habitat (Giedion, 1962-1964). One could easily assume that the substance of choreographic thought resided exclusively in the body. We wonder if it is possible for choreography to generate autonomous expressions of its principles, choreographic objects without the body (Forsythe,

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2008). Choreographers have always been interested in producing an art form based on somatic processes, the only processes capable of establishing pre-linguistic and precognitive communications between dancer and audience.

The poetic action of many authors has marked a decisive step in the evolution of the choreuthical art. Multiple transcodings of the same art form into changing artifacts come true. Many contemporary choreographers have chosen to proceed with research aimed at exploring the potential offered by the organic-virtual interface (Monda, 2018). Why have these artists chosen to digitize the products of their imagination?

Human beings populate the “associated environment”, constituted by the connectivity between virtual reality and physical reality. They appear as “presumers” (Montani, 2014, p. 77), spectators and at the same time performers of what is happening in the human dialogue with the dominant digital cognitive technology. Terpsichorean art is inextricably linked to the evolution of the humanity. The performer was, is and always will be a metaphor of humankind (Monda, 2018). The attitude towards the world determines the spatial conception of a historical period, a conception that creates the graphic projection of this attitude (Giedion, 1962-1964).

Some significant creations of imaginative activity interpret the chimerical reconfiguration of the statute of contemporary identity derived by the amalgam between human beings and sensory-informational prostheses. This *métissage* is reflected in the social imaginary, based on the complex tangle between socio-anthropological mutations, epistemological paradigms, techno-communicative frontiers and narrative horizons. It relaunches the relationship between sociomorphic representation of the body and cyberspatial dimension. The cybernetic horizon consists in a tension that urges individuals to widen the limits of their own finitude, to contrast the biological border, in an impulse projected onto the epistemological and ontological level.

2. Extension, invasion and dissemination processes

The imaginative production is an important element of a shared cultural heritage, endowed with a semantic value, which promotes a process of attribution of sense across civilizations. The constant connection between individual imagination and collective one (Dubois, 1994) creates meanings. This dialectic traces an ideal path that comes from the neurobiological level and extends to the cultural horizon (Durand, 1960). It marks the daily experience and it strengthens the fictional dimension of human life, which will never stop to narrate itself.

A de-functionalized conception of imaginary must be rejected. A socially structured nature of imaginary must instead be recognized. It is appropriate to consider the imaginary as a dynamic emanation of space-time contexts, thus identifying its role as indicator as well as, at the same time, as hermeneutic instrument of extra-aesthetic aspects of reality. The imaginative horizon, conceived in terms of its anthropological universality, is strongly linked to the cognitive elements of cultural representations. It allows to reveal fundamental traits of the history of ideas and animates representative images of the “*esprit du temps*” (Morin, 1962).

Imaginative thought and scientific thought are equally capable to search for the truths, fleeting and penultimate (Dick, 1964), of existence. The production of imaginary is based on “*matières fondamentales*”, “*éléments*” “*qui ont des lois idéalistiques aussi sûres que les lois expérimentales*” (Bachelard, 1943, p. 14). The images perform an expressive function that is sometimes more fruitful than the concept (Wunenburger, 2003).

Oskar Schlemmer talked about the emblems of current process of abstraction in art, conceiving the term art in the multiplicity of its declinations, elitist or popular: “among the emblems of our time [...] the new potentials of technology and invention [...] create altogether new hypotheses”. These hypotheses “engender, or at least give promise of, the boldest fantasies” (Belton, 2018, p. 166).

Digital tools can visualize art in different ways and give access to artistic thinking and to sociological, anthropological and philosophical knowledge.

Choreographers and performance makers, for example, are “drawing from practical and intellectual enquires into the materiality and immateriality” as a “source for making work” and creating “new poetics” (Whatley, 2018, p. 98). I am referring in particular to artistic expressions aimed at emphasising the daily encounter between human body and mechanisms that have a linguistic specificity and a power of numerical representation of reality.

The dancing body, object of the gaze of the movie camera and video camera, demonstrates how cinema, television and computer media have established a correspondence with constitutive peculiarities of the terpsichorean art, such as dynamism, speed, rhythm. These particularities are characteristics that modern and contemporary dance reflect in order to represent the metropolitan and post-metropolitan historical horizons. Dance, as an audiovisual text, offers a frontal and passive enjoyment and expresses continuity with traditional choreuthical art. It currently correlates less and less to the idea of an object-text to be contemplated and more and more to the idea of the event deriving from a design nucleus, from a virtual plot. In fact, it is often intended as a structural element of a performative event made up of video

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images, virtual reality, synthesized sounds, digital re-elaborations of movement, in deferred or real time (Pontremoli, 2004).

Silhouettes with a fluidized conformation are hatched, narrating bodies tell how the vast range of artificial devices installed in natural tissues has produced molecular transformations and subsumptions of massive quantities of information in the *concreteness* of the flesh. The *homo technologicus* (Longo, 2001) is destined to experience a perpetual metamorphosis, produced by the symbiotic union with a matter that is no inert, but electrified and interactive. The process of anthropomorphization of nature unfolded in archaic cultures and the reciprocity of perspectives between human subject and environment is re-proposed, is refunctionalized. The choreographers delineate characters that interpret human beings immersed in the hyperspace of communication and transformed into nodal entities, floating on webs of electric current coextensive with their own biological and neurological formation (de Kerckhove, 1995). The redefined reality makes feasible a poetics of social action that foresees new ways of being in the world, transforms utopias into organizational projections and allows the imagination to be defined, along the lines of Kant, as a general function of the practical possibilities (Wunenburger, 2003).

“Human beings are standing wave, patterns of energy” and “complex harmonics”. Human bodies “look solid but, from another frequency”, they “might look like luminous orbs with filaments of light transmitting. As energy fields the dancers leave trajectories of light hanging in space from their own bodies” (Belton, 2018, p. 160), another dimension through which they move.

Acknowledging that the border between organic and inorganic is not sharp, dance provides a site for examining how computers are transforming the conception of movement. Choreographic projects defy categorisations because they are not located in a defined domain of artistic expression. New paradigms of practice and discourse have been elaborated. Visual artists create virtual worlds as locations for creative enquiry. Many systems have been developed. Motion Capture, for example, is a technique whereby a dancer’s gestures are captured and digitally processed by means of having sensors, reflective or magnetic markers, attached to various body parts. “In dance making and performance practice more widely, Motion Capture has been explored by artists” to “replicate live action”, to “create animations or ‘special effects’”, but also to generate a “new form of performance/art practice” (Whatley, 2018, p. 100). The material dancing body “may be reimagined through digital data to create new kinds of artefacts and art events where the boundaries between art forms are as blurred as the boundaries between the physical and virtual. It may be that the intersection between the dancing body and digital technology, or the intermediate zone where virtual and physical meet, produces new kinds of

performative events that can only exist in a state of becoming” (Whatley, 2018, p. 106).

The body is the first principle of identity and the main instrument of the association between human being and world. The dancing body is a historically placed body, belonging to a clearly identifiable society, to which it owes its forms and its deformations. It is a body that gives itself in communication, like writing, of which it is possible a reading (Pontremoli, 2004). The movement of the terpsichorean body is bearer of invisibility, since it makes possible to perceive an immaterial reality. In digital environments the technique brings attention back to the art in its complexity.

Choreuthical art has become a critical meditation on disorienting structural processes like the operation of sensory and cognitive “remapping” (de Kerckhove, 1994, pp. 45-60) of the Self. And, like the process of cybernetization too, as well as of the body, and the *logos*, that means language and thought, the three joint centers that structure the human being. Digital virtuality marks evocative segments of the choreographic encyclopedia.

I will mention some works of “virtual dance”, a linguistic expression coined by William Forsythe (Forsythe and Kaiser, 1999, pp. 64-71). The intangible and luminescent images, generated by the rarefied game of algorithms, reflect the unfolding of digital dimension. The computerized world consists in a form of estropic transcendence (De Feo, 2021), principle of a cosmos detached from the underground vibrations of human *creaturality*. The growing hegemony of abstract individuation is affirmed and the barriers between the persistent antinomies of the Western epistemological tradition are broken down. The current profiles of the terpsichorean imagination are preponderant aesthetic forms of present eidetic diffusion. Virtual dance is not an unusual aesthetic phenomenon anymore. Its elements are already enhanced in the tradition of contemporary *medialandscape*. The materials involved in this process are form and colour, the materials of the painter and sculptor. The arena for this transmutation is found in the merger of space and building, the realm of the architect. Terpsichorean art penetrates in the “liquid architectures” (Novak, 1991, pp. 272-285) of the computer world. The cybernetic space is not geometric or perspective, but it is oculomotor and kinesthetic. It is originated from the movement of a dancing body and its interactivity with other bodies, virtual bodies, display of algorithms in binary format. The transmutation of the physicality of initially amphibious bodies generates virtual bodies, cybernetic organisms, tending to free themselves from the force of gravity to undergo hologrammatic metamorphoses. The arcane phantasmatic figures prophesy the replacement of the biological body with a container, receptacle of the bits that describe its structure, identifiable with a “symbiont of the code” (Longo, 2003, p. 84).

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The history of the art illustrates the history of the transfiguration of the human form. Digital dance animates processes expressed in Klaus Obermaier's works, considered masterpieces of experimental art. *Rite of Spring*, staged in 2007, is a relevant example. The work is a *mise en scène* of an imposing pagan sacred rite that represents the frenzy of the Dionysian, the recovery of apotropaic elements, the rawness of Eros, the primordial force destined to perpetuate the species, the archaic nature of a potential contiguous to human sacrifice. It will be useful to remember the reflections of Alain Badiou (Badiou, 2014). He observes that every choreographic interpretation of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* - from that of Vaclav Nijinskij (1913) to that of Maurice Béjart (1959) to that of Pina Bausch (1975) - marks a catastrophe in history of the body-form, in history of the life-form. Catastrophe in the sense that René Thom attributes to the term, understood as transition of state, as change of shape (Thom, 1972), as turning point (Capra, 1982). This choreography represents alternative models of body in the digital era: extended body, invaded body and disseminated body. The extended body is a deformed body. It is a representation of the sensory extension, organic expansion described by authors such as Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1964), André Leroi-Gourhan (Leroi-Gourhan 1993) or Andy Clark (Clark, 2003). In a different Obermaier's work, *D.A.V.E., Digital Amplified Video Engine*, (2002) the performers change, shatter, merge, dissolve. They become object of a process of electronic invasion and radical deconstruction. Body-stage or body-screen, harbinger of utopias or dystopias, alludes to transplantation techniques, prosthetic surgery, microphysical stimulation, staging the redefinition of the human being through the intersection of genetic engineering and information technology. The disseminated body is the *Leib* diffused in the mathematized space of digital descriptions placed in computer memory. No more body made of flesh and blood, but fluid and polymorphic entity dispersed in cybernetic space. "*Automatonic?*" entity (Tomas, 1995, p. 38), endowed with the titanic capacity to assume infinite identities and to be simultaneously present in multiple places and times.

3. Enlightened savagery

Badiou affirms that art is enlightened savagery, such as to exempt itself from any mathematical consumption (Badiou, 2014). But dancing body is a situated body, producer of situated knowledge, as Donna Haraway states in reference to the human body in general (Haraway, 1991). It is placed in the phenomenality of an anthropic system pervaded by the digitization process, which establishes the indissoluble link between material structures and symbolic emergencies. A body that participates in the constantly ongoing change of a

magmatic cultural condition. This condition transports the communication system into a world that experiences the contamination between reality and its representation above all according to absolutely meta-territorial dynamics.

By modifying the relationship with a reality differently structured, synthetic images refer to the loss of the reassuring isomorphism between percept and concept, and become a potential area of discrepancy between apprehension and understanding (Quéau, 1994). The new individual and social sense of the body, widely offered in its quantitative model, in its standardization implicit in every reduction to the sum of data, accentuates a conception no longer based on the set of physical connections and mental representations built starting from proprioception. Human body appears strongly rooted in the operational field of a digitality aimed at gratifying the archaic need to make palpable fantastic projections, to attribute materiality to thoughts through the simulation of contact.

The dancers become “electrical” and “storytelling beings”. They signal “expanding consciousness” (Belton, 2018, p. 163).

The swinging between virtuality and actuality - two different ways of articulating reality (Lévy, 1995) - is, for example, revised by the works of Adrien Mondot, computer scientist, and Claire Bardainne, set designer and graphic designer. The fluctuation between two existential horizons is a condition of transience. The impermanence is explicitly recalled by the title of a work created in 2013, *Hakanai*. *Hakanai* is an ancient Japanese word combining two signs, symbols of human being and dream respectively. The oneiric sphere alludes to the caducity of existence, to the state of perennial precariousness and to the unstable balance of the human condition (Piovani, 1989). The inspirational motifs of the contemporary imaginary, operating since the end of the Nineteenth century, express themselves. The vibrations of the contemporary imaginary are perceived. Its aspiration to recolonize a world no longer magical, transformed into a hyper-technological universe, is interpreted (De Feo, 2019b). The dancer, protagonist of *Hakanai*, dialogues with the mutant digital scenography, similar to a constantly mobile cube, inspired by the marvel of electronic animism. The graphic entities are created as specific events, interrelated images oscillating between anamorphosis and metamorphosis. Mondot and Bardainne state that the intervention on digital projections, thanks to mapping techniques, generates an ever-changing scene.

The minor circle of science has become the existential a priori, as affirms Jacob Needleman (Needleman, 1963). The minor circle of science transforms the properly human way of being-in-world as bodily existence and transfigures the human presence, which appears to be dominated by an alien project and could deny itself. Nonetheless, science is still an idea that humanity has produced throughout its history (Husserl, 1954). The machine is us, our

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processes, an aspect of our incarnation. The futuristic terpsichorean creatures reflect on the imaginary horizon the process of artificialization of bodies tending to become pure information, celebrating the intense pleasure of technique (Haraway, 1991). The technique is no longer conceivable as an aspect of embodiment metaphorized by cybernetic organisms, privileged characters of speculative fiction. It must be considered a project realization, which, thanks to the absence of the conditioning of the matter, appears inexhaustibly recomposed. Thanks to technology, the historical anatomies of possible bodies (Haraway, 1991), detach themselves from the divine dimension to become feasible. Their imponderable phantasmatic ubiquity, which deforms the absolute dimension of anthropocentric existence, follows the stray destinations marked by the cyberspatial drift thanks to software animated by artificial intelligence systems capable of evolving autonomously.

The last, transiently last, turn of the digital choreutical reality, which produces an “ontological shift” (Heim, 1993, p. XIII), in total harmony with the principles of Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Life, are cyberchoreographies like Wayne McGregor’s work, *Entity*, created in 2006. In this text the author explores the possibility of creating an entity capable of producing intelligent choreographic objects. The autopoietic work, in the perfection of a staging dominated by electronics, manages to repropose itself by representing the disappearance of the author. On the level of the imaginary, therefore, the production of a transhuman, metahuman, not anthropocentric thinking (Mayz Vallenilla, 1990) is foretold. A thought capable of replacing the *subiectum* of the classical epistemological model. *Entity* thus reflects a metontology that dismisses human being, substituting him with a *technitudo*, an otherness that lives an exclusive virtual life. Affirming the productive force of image on an epistemological plane, the uncanny choreographic allegories, in the radical reworking of the Cartesian *cogito* or Leibnizian *calculemus*, map new universes of meaning. These allegories propose unprecedented ways of subjectivation, provide an unusual poietic truth, understood not as auroral *aletheia*, unveiling, revelation, but as subjective certainty, whose place of gestation is a human being who preserves the germ of life whatever form it may be assume (De Feo, 2019a). These allegories therefore interpret other possible declinations of history and its values.

According to Maurice Merleau Ponty the practices of meditating - I add the practices of dancing - were once entrusted to the revelation of the true negative of thought (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), the irreducibly profound, which underlies the evident domain of the word, of the object, of the meaning, of the concept, of the semantic-verbal *ratio*. The practices of dancing were close to the most unfathomable and anodyne invisible powers or to what Badiou defines as wildness, erotic value of the terpsichorean art (Badiou, 2014). Rooted in the

basic human creatureliness, in which being and feeling coincide, dance is wild, then, as Badiou continues, enlightened savagery. It is a feeling the life with the flesh, but it is also rationality. It is *logos* that finds its source in the underworld, in the embryonic world, it is reflection, it is knowledge, it is search for truth even if penultimate. Michael Heim, citing the Platonic *Symposium*, refers to the famous treatment of *eros*, exalted by Socrates as an intellectual force. Referring to the prophetess Diotima of Mantinea, Socrates argues that *eros* is something intermediate between the mortal and the divine. He explains the theory of the growing spirituality of the erotic journey and examines its various degrees, from physical attraction to mental tension of mathematics, on the horizon of continuous extensions of the limits of human knowledge. *Eros* can remain clinging to bodily beauty, but if it is realized in its true nature it is no longer just desire and instinct, becoming a rational process, a rigorous search for being in itself. Cyberspatial *eros* would consist in a tension that urges individuals to widen the limits of their own finitude, to contrast the biological border, in an impulse projected onto the epistemological and ontological level.

4. Conclusions. Infrastructures and superstructures

“Sociological interest” in “corporeality has a long tradition”. “The critical gaze focused on those individual and collective activities that apparently involve a light time, can identify very important relational processes and self-construction dynamics. Interpretations given to the concept of the body from Cartesianism onwards have raised important questions that have implications in the way we consider [physical] activities as moments of learning useful for fostering the development of relational cognitive and emotional skills” (Corvino, 2023, p. 20). The dancing gestures have interpreted individual and collective emancipatory desires. A story of facts and awareness that does not stop on its path (Ferreri, 2021). Creativity is a tool for registering and relaunching social dynamics. Powerful infrastructures, the bodies, intertwine with equally powerful superstructures, the intellectual meanings (Wunenburger, 2003). Dancing bodies redesign ancient choreographies and continue to mirror the thrusts of historical change.

The dancing cyborgs reformulate traditional mythological semantism and load it with valences suggested by scientific thought. The experimental choreographies are the product of the incessant exchange existing on the imaginary level between the subjective instincts and the objective boosts deriving from the cosmic and social environment (Durand, 1960). Some sensitive artists retroact to the categorical structures of both the collective consciousness and the *Zeitgeist*. They also lead back to the rooted aspirations of

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humanity intent on opposing its own finiteness. A humanity perennially intent on conflicting the catastrophe in which greedy and predatory time contracts, in the aspiration not to close the cycle that goes “from the unknown to the unknown” (Piovani, 1981, 143). Albeit within the horizon of expressive forms, digital choreutical art pursues a utopia understood as *eu-topos*. In Greek language the word *eu-topos* indicates the good place of the realisation of life, of its unfolding, in the incommensurability of its extension and in the infinity of its power. In the alliance between sociology and art, digital dance shows a fundamental meaning oriented towards knowledge and represents a hermeneutic key to deciphering the complexity of the connection between human being and the environment. On the physical-chemical level the organic merges with the inorganic, in the cognitive horizon the subject extends himself into the object and in the sphere of the imaginary the real amalgamates with the unreal. The infinite spaces of the Web welcome identities that transcend the dualisms with which the mainstream of Western thought has tried to explain the world.

The dissolution of materiality in the immateriality of electronics characterizes an information environment that traces the paths of a redesigned sociality, reworks the concept of proximity and founds the rules of unprecedented communities. Human subject from protagonist of the organizational deployment of matter becomes node of the reticular interweaving of systemic complexity.

Human subject is endowed with a nature that changes. He suffers if he does not alters himself (Bachelard, 2002), but he is also dynamic invariant of cultural becoming, natural archetype of the historical possibilities of culture (Mazzarella, 2001). Human creatures have turned into bastard artefacts (Haraway, 1997), into figures inhabitable by machines or a nearer death. The terpsichorean characters are symbols of the drift towards which a humanity perpetually dedicated to reformulate itself slips. In the continuous redefinition of the world, the anchoring to a vertiginous artificiality profoundly problematizes the sense of the limit of human action.

The aesthetic configurations, spread throughout cyberspace, represent a life that continues to be built on a fundamental element, the exposure of the human being to the irreducibility of technical otherness. This alterity, with the achievement of results unpredictable, continues to consume the identities, the reality and the existence while reconstitutes them.

A fluid conception of the human subject, both from a phylogenetic and ontogenetic point of view, should not be limited by anthropocentric and merely self-referential definitions. However, it is equally true that the stability of an ethics of moderation, of limit, while careful to avoid immobilist conceptions of nature, is nevertheless due to the invariant dynamics of a form of life that

replicates itself respecting the paradigm of its own recognisability. Even at the imaginative level, we must not ignore that the biological norm preserved in human physiology should be defended, delimiting the potential of *homo cultura* and tracing the normative boundary for self-apprehension.

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