In Their Defence: Fictional Voices of Otherness in the "September-Eleven" Context[1]

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Key-words: *religion, control mechanism, terrorism in fiction, subjective construction, alterity*

1. Societal Control Mechanisms

This paper starts from the assumption that society has its ways of controlling the individual, which act directly, by laws and regulations, and indirectly, by multiple ingrained customs and traditions. All these means of controlling the individual are taught and acquired since early childhood and along the whole life with the large support of all the institutions which make up the societal apparatus and which hold identities and individualities together. A secondary assumption which governs the present undertaking is that, despite their common core as economic, social and cultural structures, based on various social relations between their individuals, societies are grounded in different cultural patterns which influence their members in different ways. When such differences are small and, moreover, when societies interact through their representatives, processes of intercultural communication and even acculturation occur and societies converge towards multiculturalism and common traits. Ultimately, the already overused concept of globalization implies an interchange of various social and cultural practices with the aim of unifying cultures and civilisations under the larger umbrella of a "single world society" (Albrow, King 1990: 9). However, not all the societies and cultures of the world are ready to join the global village, and that is a consequence of their too consciously embracing their differences (which, of course, are seen as such from the outside, not from the inside), and of their unwillingness to allow alterity to permeate their culture. A good case in point is represented by a part of the Islamic states (and/or organisations) in the Middle East, which not only refuse to embrace Western culture, but actually fight it with very concrete weapons.

In what follows, this paper aims at demonstrating that societal control mechanisms specific to a large geographic area of the Muslim world may be among the reasons why individuals choose to die defending their culture against Westernisation and globalization. To this end, the theoretical framework will be

[1] This work has been supported by Project SOP HRD-PERFORM/159/1.5/S/138963.

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provided by the interrelated concepts of "societies of control", "ideological state apparatuses" and "disciplinary societies", as outlined by Western contemporary philosophers, but emphasis will be also laid on *Qur'an*, the most relevant Muslim religious text, in view of testing the validity of the hypothesis that Muslims resist Western civilisation mainly because of religious constraints to which they are exposed and which constitute, within their culture, one of the most effective *state apparatuses*.

1.1. Ideological Control and Confinement. Theoretical Configurations

1.1.1. Michel Foucault's "Disciplinary Societies"

The concept of "disciplinary societies" has been outlined by French philosopher Michel Foucault in his 1975 book, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la Prison* (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*), which deals with the prison and its modern modes of punishment, based not on physical force and terror, but on power. Foucault starts from *Panopticon*, which is a device of surveillance, more precisely, "a tower in the centre surrounded by a ring-shaped building composed of cells, each housing a prisoner" (McHoul, Grace 1995: 67) and which allows for the continuous observation of inmates. In Foucault's view, the panopticon induces a permanent "state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic function of power" (Foucault 1995: 201). However, this concept, correlated with that of discipline, can be and is actually applied at the level of the entire society, not only in prisons. Foucault does not regard discipline as an institution or as an apparatus: "it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, compromising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or 'anatomy' of power, a technology" (*Ibidem*: 215).

According to the French philosopher, discipline is much more effective and civilised than the old forms of punishment based on torture and on the visual impact of the scaffold, all the more as it begins in early childhood and continues along the whole life of the disciplined individual. Foucault stresses the idea that prison is just an example applicable in other societal spheres as well: "I shall choose examples from military, medical, educational, and industrial institutions" (*Ibidem*: 141). He insists that discipline operates at all societal levels with the help of three instruments: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement (which compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes and excludes the individual – *Ibidem*: 182) and examination (which "combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment" – *Ibidem*: 184).

To summarize, one may say that, in Foucault's terms, disciplinary societies act much in the way prisons do, displaying and enforcing power over individuals through observation and normalization of practices, also aiming at normalizing and levelling their individuals through their numerous control factors: family, education, army, workplace, media and, in some cases, religion and cultural customs.

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1.1.2. Gilles Deleuze's "Societies of Control"

Starting from Foucault's discussion on disciplinary societies, another important French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, acknowledges their transience under the constraints of the successive new worlds and worldviews:

> the disciplines underwent a crisis to the benefit of new forces that were gradually instituted and which accelerated after World War II […]. These are the *societies of control*, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies (Deleuze 1992: 3-4).

The difference between the two concepts, in Deleuze's view, would be that, in disciplinary societies, the individual was passing through different spaces of confinement (family, school, barracks, factory), whereas, in the societies of control, "one is never finished with anything" (*Ibidem*: 5). The reason he finds for this state of affairs is inspired by Marxist ideology and starts from the assertion that nineteenth-century capitalism was one based on production, for which factories as spaces of confinement were erected, whilst present-day capitalism relegates production to the third-world countries, focusing on the product (that is to say, on its marketability) and, as such, replaces factories with corporations. Family, education, even art are said to be part of this global corporatism in which the individual is no longer "enclosed", but indebted, and to whose profit he/she is taught to continually learn and improve. Deleuze's conclusion is that people should understand that "they're being made to serve" (*Ibidem*: 7).

Nonetheless, apart from the economic context and from the difference between *discipline* and *control*, whereas the latter is regarded as more dangerous and intrusive for the individual, precisely due to the persistence of the control factors along his/her entire life, one may easily notice that Foucault's forms of enclosure and Deleuze's control mechanisms are basically the same: family, education, workplace, etc.. It is, however, worth mentioning that the two French ideologists refer to Western societies, which, in the context of analysing an Eastern society, might seem out of place. In truth, though, as soon as these societies have abandoned feudal structures and have embraced the capitalist structures (at least partially), they may and should be analysed as Westernised societies, despite their inherent peculiarities.

1.1.3. Louis Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatuses"

Last but not least, when approaching individual identities by relating them to their context of manifestation and the ideological constraints which inform it, one cannot overlook the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's views on ideology, as outlined in one of his most famous essays: "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation". Of course, the French theorist's argumentation is grounded in Marxism and constantly refers to production and the replication of the means and relations of production (Althusser 1969: 101). Whilst the present paper does not discuss Western realities to which the article as a whole applies, a series of Marxist key-concepts which refer to ideology may still prove useful in formulating the hypothesis that individuals may and do act as a result of

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their education (in a broad sense) within a society strongly marked by ideological control. It is the case of the interrelated concepts of infrastructure and superstructure. Althusser explains that the former represents the economic base ("the unity of the productive forces and the relations of production"), while the latter – relevant for the present case – is made up of two different levels: "the politico-legal (law and the State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical, legal, political, etc." (Althusser 1969: 105). Furthermore, he draws a demarcation line between what he terms as Repressive State Apparatuses (henceforth, RSA) (the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.), which function by means of violence, and Ideological State Apparatuses (henceforth, ISA), which he lists, apparently in no particular order, as being represented by: religion, education, family, laws, politics (including the political system and political parties), trade unions, communications (mass-media) and culture (literature, arts, sports, etc.) (*Ibidem*: 110-111). Nonetheless, RSA and ISA can only function in concert.

The role of religion as one of the most effective ISAs is further emphasised, partially belying Althusser's claim that the order was arbitrary. In the pre-capitalist historical period, Althusser asserts, religion was the dominant ISA "which concentrated within it not only religious functions, but also educational ones, and a large proportion of the functions of communications and culture" (*Ibidem*: 115). In the context of Eastern fundamentalist civilisations, it may not be too far-fetched to ascertain that institutionalised religion still preserves all these "capabilities" which the Christian Western Church has lost along the centuries. In a society dominated by religion, an individual's consciousness is shaped by his/her beliefs (*Ibidem*: 126-127); consequently, his/her behaviour and practices are in accordance with the tenets of the ISA, although it may seem that they have been predetermined by one's own conscience.

1.2. Control Factors in Eastern Civilisations

Drawing a preliminary conclusion of the three views on the mechanisms of control as outlined by these theorists of the twentieth century, one cannot but notice that, despite inherent differentiations and alternative denominations, these controls operate, in fact, through the same institutions – family, school, workplace, religion, communication, culture, in order to subject the individual and integrate him/her in a specific social, political, economic and cultural milieu. Whilst reference is made, in all the three cases presented above, to Western realities such as industrialization, post-industrialization, Christianity, etc., similar constraints may be understood as also functioning within the Eastern world. It is the specific case of religion as a determinant political factor in many parts of the Islamic world which has suggested the hypothesis of this subjection of the individual inasmuch as to make him engage in murderous acts – apparently by his own will and accord, but, in fact, as a result of ideological mechanisms at work in his upbringing. It may very well be the case of Muslim terrorists who crashed the planes in the WTC on September 11, 2001 and whose fictional representations constructed by Western literary discourse are in focus in the present paper.

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2. From *al-'islām* to *ğihād* [2]

The recent history witnesses a break of the Islamic civilisation: some Islamic states accept an opening towards globalization, Westernization, economic exchange with non-Islamic countries, and even some freedoms for their citizens (Turkey is a good case in point, but not the only one), while others – and the most representative cases are those of Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan – are governed by the principle of returning to (or remaining in the sphere of) the teachings of the fundamental writings of Islam, the *Qur'an*[3], the *Sunnah*[4] and the *Shari'ah*[5]. Any further mentioning of the Islamic fundamentalist states should be interpreted as referring to this latter group, and not as generalisation or conscientious inclusion of all Muslim believers in the category of terrorists, a mistake which the West has constantly made since the day of the infamous attacks on the World Trade Center.

Without any claims of thorough theological knowledge of the Muslim religion, the present section is intended as a very brief overview of a few Qur'an verses[6] which might have stemmed an [erroneous] interpretation of *the Others* as enemies, leading to suicidal attacks with tragic death tolls directed at the Western world – the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC (*9/11*), the Madrid trains bombings on March 11th, 2004 (also known as *11M*), and the London bombings on July 7th, 2005 (usually referred to as *7/7*) –, events for which the fundamentalist militant movement Al-Qaeda has claimed responsibility.

Among the most problematic of all the Qur'an verses which may trigger violence are the ones which make reference to infidels/unbelievers in the teachings of Allah and his Prophet (Messenger) Muhammad:

- 3:56 – *As to those who reject faith, I will punish them with terrible agony in this world and in the Hereafter, nor will they have anyone to help* (*Qur'an* 2000: 44);
- 3:151 – *Soon shall We cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers* [...] *their abode will be the Fire: and evil is the home of the wrongdoers* (*Ibidem*: 53);
- 8:12-13 – [...] *I will instil terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers: smite ye above their necks and smite all fingertips off them* [...] (*Ibidem*: 137);
- 8:39 – *And fight with them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah altogether and everywhere* (*Ibidem*: 139).

[2] One of the meanings of the word *Islam* is *peace*, whereas *Jihad* is a religious duty that translates as a struggle for and in the way of Allah (islamicstudies.info; islamicsupremecouncil.org).

[3] Literally, *recitation*, the *Qur'ān* is the most significant Islamic text, considered to be the word of Allah dictated by Archangel Gabriel (*Jibra'il*) to Prophet Mohammed, which endows it with infallibility (*The Holy Qur'an*, 2000, back cover).

[4] *Sunnah* is the norm for Muslims' lives as prescribed by Muhammad's teachings. It is considered synonymous with *Hadith* (the life of the prophet) by some scholars whereas others claim that there are differences, in that the Hadith is a narrative (quranexplorer.com).

[5] *Shari'ah* is the moral code and religious law. It has its sources both in the Qur'an and the Hadith.

[6] All future references are made to the Wordsworth Classics edition of *The Holy Qur'an*, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (2000).

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The list of such quotes could be much more exhaustive, yet, it seems sufficient to indicate, at this point, the fact that the Qur'an contains inflammatory verses directed at the ones who do not embrace the religion of Allah. However, the real issue is not the existence of these verses – after all, the Old Testament is equally violent in some parts – but the fact that such statements are interpreted literally in the contemporary world, with the large support of the power in the Muslim fundamentalist world. In other words, the verses come to be enforced as control mechanisms for the subjection of the true believer and ideology works towards political ends which could not have been foreseen in the 7th century CE, when the text was written.

As Althusser remarks, religion went hand in hand with education in the heyday of Christianity; in the Muslims' case, the affirmation is still valid – or Islam is still in its heyday. A perfect example is the renowned translator of the Qur'an, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, an Indian ethnic, who states in the Preface that "it was between the ages of four and five that [he] first learned to read its Arabic words, to revel in its rhythm and music and wonder at its meaning" (*Qur'an* 2000: x), being at the same taught the foreign language for this sole purpose. Nonetheless, whilst the Indian scholar's service to the Qur'an was "to present it in a fitting garb in English" (*Ibidem*: xi), in other cases, ideology makes people present their services to the Holy Book as it is their duty, of course, but also in view of receiving the reward of eternal life. Let us consider the following verses:

- 4:74 – *Let those fight in the cause of Allah who sell the life of the world for the Hereafter. To him who fighteth in the cause of Allah – whether he is slain or gets victory – soon shall We give him a reward of great value* (*Ibidem*: 68);
- 4:95 – *Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) and receive no hurt and those who strive in the cause of Allah with their goods and persons* [...] (*Ibidem*: 72).

From the two verses quoted above, it seems that the Muslims who become suicidal terrorists have been inoculated with an urge to be rewarded, on the one hand, but also with a certain spirit of competition, on the other. Thus, they do not want to be those who sit at home and they expect to be awarded for their bravery in the afterlife (it is worth mentioning that this reward goes as far as promising the men dead in action to be wed with 72 virgins in paradise). Thus, the Islamic society of control makes use of human foibles in directing its subjects towards reprehensible acts. It is the exact series of factors described by Foucault, Deleuze and Althusser that determines the suicidal terrorists to commit their deeds: *education* begins at home, in the bosom of the *family*, *academic* and *professional achievements* – often pursued in the Western world, are geared towards the same purpose which their *military training* has – and everything lies in the overarching power of *religion.*

The distance that the Western world has taken from institutionalised religion (in the sense of laicization of the states) may be an explanation for the Westerners' misapprehension and enhanced sense of otherness when it comes to Muslims. Most definitely, the attacks led by their most radical factions have contributed heavily to

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the perpetuation and accentuation of these misconceptions, which have inevitably given birth to a new phobia – *Islamophobia*, manifest at all societal levels in the Western civilisation, even, as the third part of the present paper will try to prove, at the level of literary representations.

3. Representations of the Muslim Other in Western Literature

3.1. Discursive Islamophobia after 9/11

Otherness needs a face: not the same every time, but one always easy to identify by virtue of a few well-determined criteria of which race, ethnicity, language, customs and religion are the most visible. This concept, applied to the East-West dichotomy, was approached thoroughly by Edward Said who, acknowledging Foucault's influence, described "Orientalism" as discourse and representation: "a created body of theory and practice" (Said 2003: 7) or, in other words, "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident" (*Ibidem*: 4).

Theorizing aside, the Western discursive sources – the street, the press or fiction – unmistakably reveal the Muslim Arab as the ultimate "Other" of the new millennium, where ***terror*** and ***terrorism*** have become the newest Boogieman in the cultural mindset of the Western civilisation. In the preface to the third edition of *Orientalism*, Said casts the blame for this "*terror-isation*" of the Muslim Other exclusively on the media:

> Today, bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists [...], all of them re-cycling the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations so as to stir up "America" against the foreign devil (*Ibidem*: xvi).

If one regards fiction as communication, it is clear that one should also account for its role in imparting information and manipulating its target audience. This is the reason why the next section strives to prove that what British author Martin Amis has achieved with the publication of his contribution to post 9/11 fiction (quite surprisingly, singular up to date), the short story *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, was to accentuate the othering of the Muslim terrorists, even at the cost of contradicting his own statements, presented in a journalistic (hence, presumably more objective) article on the same ardent topic of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

3.2. The Terrorist Other. A Case Study: *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* by Martin Amis ("The New Yorker", 2006)

Although its title announces a record of the last days, Martin Amis's short story captures only the final hours in the existence of a real man directly responsible for the attacks on the WTC, Muhammad Atta, who crashed the plane into the North Tower. The story is a mix of facts and fiction, Amis tracing Atta's actions as they have been revealed by investigations:

Below, there is a list of facts which the short story follows closely:

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- Atta and Al-Omari check out of a Comfort Inn in Portland, Maine at 5:33 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001.
- They drive to Portland airport, arriving at about 5:45 a.m., for a scheduled flight to Boston.
- They board a 6 a.m. commuter flight from Portland to Boston's Logan Airport.
- Atta and Al-Omari board American Airlines Flight 11, for an 8 a.m. flight from Boston to Los Angeles.
- Atta, Al-Omari and others hijack Flight 11 at 8:14 a.m.; they crash it into the World Trade Center's North Tower at 8:46 a.m. (Newsday.com 2008).

Entirely fictional, on the other hand, is the motivation of the terrorist, presented up to the very moment of the impact, when his determination and carelessness turn into regret. Narrated in the third person, the short story unwinds as a stream of consciousness, with frequent analepses which are meant to explain the course of the terrorist's actions.

The fictional character Muhammad Atta reveals a Westernised reasoning which is completely unreliable; yet, one should not disregard the *postmodernism* factor, or forget that Amis has always been about confusing his readers. The stereotypical patterns of Western thinking about the Muslim *Other* are transposed in words and meanings that Muslims do not use to characterise themselves. For example, the terrorist character regards the Muslims' attitude towards women as one of "extreme hostility and extreme wariness" (Amis 2006). Further, he questions the reward granted by the Qur'an, the virgins (see *supra*), relying on a Western theory on mistranslation, which claims that the promised virgins were actually raisins. The theory has been long debunked and, even if it were not, it is not something that a Muslim, connoisseur of the Qur'an teachings since childhood, would accept. Another instance of Western thought is the use of the word *terrorism*, which Arabs never employ to describe their deeds against the Christian West.

The fictional representation of Muhammad Atta is dehumanised and surprisingly irreligious:

> Muhammad Atta wasn't like the others because he was doing what he was doing for the core reason. The others were doing what they were doing for the core reason, too, but they had achieved sublimation by means of jihadi ardour. [...] Atta was not religious; he was not even especially political. He had allied himself with the militants because jihad was, by many magnitudes, the most charismatic idea of his generation. To unite ferocity and rectitude in a single word: nothing could compete with that. [...] If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character with an almost sinister precision (Amis 2006).

As apparent from the quotation above, what Martin Amis seems to have at stake is precisely a deconstruction of the apologetic theory that the fundamentalist Muslims act in accordance with a concert of factors which influence them since early stages of their existence. Whilst acknowledging that "militant fundamentalism is convulsed in a late-medieval phase of its evolution" (Amis 2001), the British author chooses, nevertheless, to expose the terrorist acts as being triggered not by religious faith ("jihadi

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ardour") or ideological constraints and societal control, but by "nihilistic insouciance" (Amis 2006). As Gray observes, "Amis dehumanizes and, in doing so, puts the obscene acts of the terrorists beyond our understanding; they are acts performed by 'them', a demonized other" (Gray 2011: 176). Their goal ceases to be either their duty to Islam or their hatred against America, but simply the pleasure to kill: "the core reason was, of course, all the killing – all the putting to death" (Amis 2006).

However, from Atta's rambling stream of consciousness, emerges the idea that "joy of killing was proportional to the value of what was destroyed" – which points in the direction suggested by Martin Amis in the article *Fear and Loathing* published in "The Guardian" one week after the attacks: "an edifice so demonstrably comprised of concrete and steel would also become an unforgettable metaphor. This moment was the apotheosis of the postmodern era - the era of images and perceptions" (Amis 2001). (The idea was also explored by philosophers Jean Baudrillard and Jürgen Habermas.) The short story repeatedly emphasises the idea of the chosen targets of the attacks based on their powerful symbolism, yet it is not certain that the perpetrators had such thoughts or simply directed the hijacked planes towards an easy target which presented the advantage of being over-crowded.

In the article quoted above, Amis also asserted that "all over again the West confronts an irrationalist, agonistic, theocratic/ideocratic system which is essentially and appeasably opposed to its existence" (*Ibidem*), which shows that, although he was under the strong impression of the event, he managed to see the influence of religion as constraint beyond the terrorist acts. However, the short story he writes five years later is intent on "*othering the other*" and finding no excuses in their belonging to a society of ideological control. To this end, he deliberately dehumanises his character. A fierce atheist, Amis endows his Muhammad Atta with a blasphemous voice which carries overtones of his own controversial statement that "a religion is a belief system with no basis in reality whatever; religious belief is without reason and without dignity, and its record is near-universally dreadful" (*Ibidem*); thus he completely annuls the chance for the character to be considered a victim of indoctrination (although real facts about the life of the real Muhammad Atta indicate this specific aspect). The fictional character Muhammad Atta is just malicious. He is just that "evil" which President Bush claimed to have tried "to frighten [the] nation into chaos and retreat" (Schmemann 2001).

As such, Martin Amis's short story is a literary piece representative for the Western pattern of presuppositions and stereotypes about the Muslim *Other*, one which not only acknowledges their alterity, but also emphasises it. Nonetheless, as the first parts of the present paper have shown, it would be mediaevally naïve to regard Muslims just as evil-doers blinded by rage and much more reasonable to view their acts as a result of their exposure to a powerful state apparatus, namely religion.

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Societal control mechanisms have been ascribed various denominations, such as "disciplinary societies" (Foucault), "societies of control" (Deleuze) or "ideological state apparatuses" (Althusser). With regard to Western civilisation, such mechanisms range from family to prison (as the ultimate space of confinement), with a tremendous significance of other factors, such as education, workplace and means of production, media and politics, etc. Religion is also present, but rather as a reminiscence of pre-industrial (or, perhaps, pre-Marxist) ages. In the Eastern civilisations, more precisely in the Muslim countries, on the other hand, religion still has an overwhelming impact on the development of the individuals and its effects have (re)gained global acknowledgement the hard way, with the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Could the reinterpretation of the *Qur'an* teachings with regard to "infidels" be an explanation for what makes young followers of Muhammad suicidal terrorists? The answer to this question may be one of the reasons that gear famous Western writers towards giving these terrorists a *voice* in their fiction. It goes without saying that the perspective of narrators/focalizers such as Muhammad Atta in Martin Amis's *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* (2006) and Hammad in Don De Lillo's *Falling Man* (2007) can be but altered by the Westerners' understanding and presuppositions. The present paper sets out to examine the two texts, aiming at tracing the elements of subjectivity and stereotyping in the construction of the Muslim other, but also at testing the validity of the assertion of religion as a control apparatus.

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