Historical narratives and historical desires: re-evaluating American art criticism of the mid-nineteenth century

Review of:


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Writing on the state of contemporary American art criticism in his 1867 Book of the Artists, essayist Henry Tuckerman lamented its want of rigour, terming it, ‘The habit of exaggerated praise and newspaper puffs’. While Tuckerman’s own enthusiastic, sentimental writing might be disparaged for similar superficiality, he pointed out a distinct need for ‘more definite eulogiums, more measured commendation’ in criticism, which might nurture the development of art in a country where ‘so few standards of judgment’ governed its creation and appreciation. He urged fellow critics to foster ‘genuine art’ with ‘a love that gives insight, which does not blindly idolize, but intelligently appreciates’.¹

Even as Tuckerman wrote his lament, some critics were already working to meet his demands. In light of American art’s growing prominence and diversity in the years surrounding the Civil War, art critics, enthusiastic amateurs, and promoters of national culture sought ways to understand how American painting and sculpture might be categorized, classified, and evaluated. They examined it relative to long-established and esteemed traditions in Europe and England, as well as developments in ‘modern’ art, promoted by influential critics like John Ruskin.² James Jackson Jarves (1818-1888), Clarence Cook (1828-1900), and William James Stillman (1828-1901) strove not only to distinguish their authority and demonstrate their professionalism, but also to prove their acumen, in their increasingly self-conscious art criticism. Motivated by a keenly felt need to define art, as well to distinguish its American manifestations, their writing made assertions about its fundamental nature, set forth conceptual frameworks for its development, and

proposed directions for its future course. Such self-awareness brought the challenge, however, of not only giving shape and structure to the improved tenor of criticism but also to the creation of a well-defined history for American art: this complicated circumstance is the topic that Karen Georgi takes on in Critical Shift.

Seeking to dismantle the ways in which sociopolitical developments have often been conflated with a historical trajectory for art, Georgi argues for continuity in art critical discourses that bridge the antebellum and post-bellum period. She questions a fundamental tenet of American art history, one sustained roughly since the period she examines: that the art produced in America before the Civil War not only differs in its formal priorities from the art produced thereafter, but also that the distinctions between them represent a profoundly different way of thinking about art itself. She crafts a careful argument about and through critical language, closely analyzing the rhetorical structures in the writing of Jarves, Cook, and Stillman, and she is very careful to delineate her project’s scope. She attends to a limited number of their texts, published between 1855 and 1898, representing select moments in the pivotal years surrounding the war and its aftermath. In the process, Georgi identifies common beliefs about art that they not only shared but that are in fact consistent across these turbulent decades.

Georgi chose these critics as exemplary figures since they not only wrote histories but also are themselves historical figures. But she observes how uncritical employment of their texts has all too often served to shore up the foundations of later historians’ work, overwriting modern desires upon those of her historical agents. Indeed, Georgi finds that the historical periodization modern scholars see in their writing is a misperception of more complicated, nuanced, and often only apparently inconsistent or divergent beliefs. She notes that their ‘words taken alone are too easily subject to unrecognized narrative desires on the part of modern writers’ (4). Borrowing some tools from Hayden White’s metahistorical analysis, Georgi finds interpretive value in examining the writing of history as a form of storytelling, and she examines these nineteenth-century writers’ language carefully, to identify ‘pre-critical’ structures governing their explanations and interpretations for American art. These may not, in fact, ‘shift’ between the years in which Jarves, Cook, and Stillman employ them, but they surely do when later rediscovered and used as history. Thus, she claims modern scholars have inserted a model of progressive temporal development between the constructs of ‘real’ and ‘ideal’, and have privileged texts over form, in ‘an unconscious substitution of art’s definition in place of its formal appearance’ (15) that has profoundly shaped the determination of art’s historical meaning.

Despite its narrow focus, the larger stakes of Georgi’s book become apparent. She argues how a seemingly stable, periodized history of American art has been composed from these mid-century critical texts, arising from often

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unacknowledged discursive desires on the part of later historians, and reflecting largely unrecognized, persistent modernist bias. This has served to uphold apparent polarization between seemingly oppositional terms in art criticism that have been readily mapped onto successive historical stages: between the pre-war decades and those of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the ‘real’ is severed from the ‘ideal’, subjectivity from objectivity, and truth from belief. But she claims we now understand these terms—undeniably prominent in the writing of these mid-century critics—in ways that are at odds with their original intent, and ‘in these differences we can find traces of the “deep structures” that order our own art histories’ (7). At the close of each chapter, Georgi speculates on the wider historiographic stakes of her argument, and raises necessary, sometimes courageous questions that set her analysis in the context of more recent revisionist histories.

Yet, while commendable, this does not seem like a new mandate, and I found myself frequently wondering about Georgi’s audience. Given many highly regarded contributions made by historians such as Bryan Jay Wolf, David Bjelejac, or Rachel Ziady De Lue (to name just a few Georgi cites as worthy examples), who could still need convincing about the merit of questioning accepted historical categories and models? However, examining a selection of textbooks and surveys of American art, one is struck by the durability and convenience of periodizations, and thus the caution with which any apparently fixed, distinct, or adversarial historical constructs should always be approached. Georgi implicitly invites us to engage in evaluative scrutiny anywhere we see rhetorical oppositions employed as history. Moreover, since, as Barbara Groseclose and others have observed, ‘in the academic sphere overall, a substantive discipline called American art history was hard to locate prior to 1960’, we would do well to remember how specific and modernist historical, cultural, and aesthetic desires structured the discipline’s formative moments.4

It cannot have been easy to write a book confronting the periodization of American art in the 19th century, when the observable fact that interests, priorities, subjects and styles underwent great transformation is not in question. Nor does Georgi wish to put it in question: that change took place is not merely evident to viewers of American art now, but was widely acknowledged at the time. Georgi also does not suggest that criticism was divorced from arguments for change, or that art, politics and social change are not deeply, intimately bound to one another. She wisely repeats, in the negative, that she is not arguing against any of this, several times. Yet the need to reiterate her case indicates the nuances of the challenge she poses. What Georgi contends with is subtler, more intricate, and more philosophically engaging: she examines how observed changes get transformed into fixed historical distinctions, across illusory ruptures beyond which seemingly irreconcilable interests emerge. Georgi insists, although the point she makes can be

elusive, that while American art may have changed between 1860 and 1900, Jarves, Cook, and Stillman upheld a deep, consistent, and even faithful belief that art must be discursively defined as a kind of truth, above and beyond alterations brought about by the vagaries of historical change.

In questioning any structured opposition between decades or phases, especially ones demarcated by a traumatic national event like war, Georgi suggests that some habits of mind, perceptual models, and aesthetic ideals may not reconfigure themselves entirely, regardless of how transformative an event may be in culture as a whole. Indeed, the events and social consequences of the Civil War itself fade into the background, as Jarves and Stillman were overseas during the conflict, while Cook appears disengaged from its presence and lasting consequence, at least his writing is described here. Similarly, Georgi minimizes consideration of how any popular desire for post-war order might have fostered public demand for satisfying narratives of periodization. Yet the apparent conceptual rupture symbolized by the war is a constant reminder, and—reflecting the kinds of doubt we may bring to our own sense of contingent historical subjectivity—neither Jarves, nor Cook, nor Stillman emerge from this text as disinterested, consistent, or truly authoritative. Nonetheless, as Georgi argues, all these writers shared a firm belief that ‘Art’, in its purest definition and ideal state, could be all of these things: it was above, before, and beyond the vagaries of historical events like war, which may alter form but not ontological substance. ‘Art’, as they apprehended it, was enduring, objective, and didactic, and it was occasionally difficult, sometimes even seemingly impossible, for them to identify clearly in the work of their contemporaries.

Georgi proceeds in rough chronology, beginning with the work of Jarves who has received the lion’s share of recognition for setting forth an explanation of American art’s historical development, thanks in part to the 1960 republication of his formative 1864 Art-Idea.5 Jarves’s work provides a handy example upon which Georgi grounds her argument, since he was not only writing criticism of the work of his own day, but also attempting to set forth a rational, categorically structured history for its development. Although Jarves may deserve credit for his attempt at analytical rigor, Georgi argues his project was not, as he claimed, an objective study of art’s formative social, religious, and political contexts, nor was it as novel as he repeatedly alleged. His ambition was, in her formulation, closely allied to his personal interests, spiritual beliefs, and financial goals.6 He did not set aside his own tastes for the purpose of writing a disinterested history: he favored work demonstrating clear ‘distance from the reproduction of the visible component’ (53)

in the service of less immediately visible spiritual essences and values, and he connected these to historical explanations. The social, economic, and cultural categories he erected in support of his beliefs also reinforced his aesthetic preferences.

Georgi takes on two books in which Jarves demonstrates his developing ideas and critical style: the *Art-Idea* and his prior 1855 *Art-Hints*, showing the development of his thought. He argued that the poles of the real and the ideal—or in his terms, ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ formal priorities—reveal specific ‘historical relations’ between people, faith, and governmental structure, which give rise to differing aesthetic values. But as he was writing these texts, Jarves was also hoping to secure a market for his own personal collection, assembled while he lived in Florence and later purchased by Yale University’s Art Gallery in 1871; this economically as well as culturally mediated desire guided his critical perception as well as his writing. Nonetheless, Georgi proposes that his definitions for Art as ‘absolute truth with universal quests for beauty, and … fixed poles of spirit and matter between which such beauty is expressed’ relative to ‘varying cultural characteristics’ (28), seemed to readers then, as well as later, to carry the weight of well-informed and unbiased expertise. But as she notes, the emphatic Jarves, working his way towards an articulation of belief, was also extremely defensive; he only later won seemingly unshakable authority. Twentieth-century scholars linked his Civil-War era writing to its periodization and found satisfying demonstrations of socially engaged history and proto-modernist sensibilities in his apparent appreciation for the ‘abstract’ art of 13th and 14th century Italian art, which Jarves attributed to the unique nature of early Renaissance Florentine society.

Yet, I suspect another reason that Jarves’s texts proved so convenient for later historians is not only due to his superficially proto-modernist ways of thinking, which Georgi dismantles, but also to his apparently modern tone. I found myself amused, if equally annoyed, by the confident bombast of the *Art-Idea*, whose combination of stridency and vagueness is at once strange and recognizable. Jarves’s capacity for snark strikes a familiar chord: his 1864 characterization of the state of landscape as ‘trash literature of the brush’ featuring ‘a virulent epidemic of sunsets’ is the kind of remark that sticks in one’s head.7 Indeed, at times I wished to see Georgi’s close, sceptical reading attend to Jarves’s written style as closely as she examined its structure and logic: it would have been engaging to see her measure his scathing aphoristic comments against a broader drive among fellow American critics to reform criticism and mould its professional practices. But while he was clear about what he disliked, Jarves, as well as Cook and Stillman, had a much harder time identifying specific qualities that he wholeheartedly endorsed. This presents a difficulty for anyone trying to ascertain what they affirmed as not only praiseworthy but also thus definitive for art.

7 Jarves, 232.
One of the book’s greatest strengths is Georgi’s focus and painstaking argumentation, built carefully across all five chapters, through detailed analysis that can become repetitive at times. Ironically, as she challenges Jarves’s stubborn dogmatism, claiming that he ‘might certainly exasperate the modern reader, continually revisiting the same point’ (38), she occasionally does the same herself. But the repetition of her points and conclusions serves a very different end, as she tries to insure that her challenge to periodization but not change itself is clearly understood. She reminds us that any apparent commonality between Jarves’s tone or his esthetic proposals and purportedly modern habits of thought are merely superficial; both are connected to his ultimately conservative and persistent taste for spiritual values in art, the adventitious examples he had at hand to work from in constructing an aesthetic agenda, and his self-serving ends. Moreover, she insists that any schism in his historical thinking is merely illusory: a faulty conclusion reinforced by the dualistic structure but not the content of his writing.

As significant as Jarves may have been for later historians, Georgi’s analysis turns away from his larger body of criticism, devoting the next two chapters to the lesser-known Cook, whose critical stance, as she describes it, may at first seem the antithesis of Jarves’s. In chapter two she examines the opinionated criticism Cook penned for the *New-York Daily Tribune* between 1863 and 1865, and then in chapter three surveys his writing for the Pre-Raphaelite journal, the *New Path*, and his long career thereafter as an independent critic writing for *Scribner’s Monthly* and other popular magazines. After first setting Cook’s definition of art and its history in juxtaposition to Jarves’ contemporary ideas, Georgi proceeds to cover a much longer span of time, and thus assesses Cook’s changing opinions as they developed in the 1870s and 80s. Although both critics believed art had ‘putatively objective’ nature, and both regarded art with a nearly ‘religious reverence,’ Georgi notes how Jarves and Cook’s respective formal tastes diverged. Yet throughout chapter two, she reveals how both writers shared a common faith that art could be objectively defined, an underlying insistence on its moral purpose, and an emphasis on truth over falsehood; they differed only in their conceptualization of the duality underlying this truth, and the relative value of the real or ideal in art.

Deeply influenced by Ruskin at this stage in his criticism, Cook upheld art’s ultimate purpose in the detailed observation and duplication of nature, which arose paradoxically from ‘the authenticity of the individual artist’s singular sensibility’ (53). This could only be seen and measured in a painter’s close attention to the multitude of natural fact, and the disavowal of fashion, convention, or theory. Maintaining that art should be defined as ‘a collective social ideal that was objective and yet never without “individuality”’ (14), Cook nonetheless mistrusted any superficial, common signs of faith in art’s spiritual purpose, towards which Jarves was far more amenable. Georgi provides a useful example here: while John La Farge embraced theory over faithful observation of nature, securing Cook’s censure, Jarves appreciated his distance from mimetic and materialist values, and his
apparently immaterial embrace of tonal harmonies. The critics differed as well in their attitudes towards art’s traditions: Jarves revered the underlying commitments of American painters active in the nineteenth-century’s first decades, a spirit he saw echoed in La Farge. But Cook, believing himself to be much more modern in spirit, espoused ‘the new’ in art more forthrightly, and his arguments can seem avant-garde, despite his dismissal of the ostensible modernity in La Farge’s work. What links the two critics, however, was a structure to their thinking that is easily misunderstood when mapped onto historically diverging values: their employment of dualism ‘stabilized a persistent definition of art, fencing off with the brackets of a bipolar system other possible options’ (55).

Georgi’s discussion of La Farge’s esthetic theory offers one of the few chances in the book to evaluate an artist’s own ideas against critics’ assertions, and similarly the audience for whom Cook, Jarves, and Stillman were writing is notably marginalized. These critics were not ‘writers without readers’ as James Elkins’ has characterized the state of twenty-first century art criticism, but were deeply engaged in a broad cultural and discursive field, addressing highly interested participants.8 Georgi sets up painter W. H. Beard’s wounded, bitter public argument with Cook over the hostile tone of his criticism as another passing example of how highly publicized critical opinions were sometimes contentiously received. But she does not otherwise let many actors in the networks defining American art and aesthetics ‘talk back’ to their critics, or act in concert with them in the definition of aesthetic change or formulation of history.

Despite the utility of Jarves or Cook’s writing to subsequent models of American art’s history as a progression defined by rupture, they were not the only ones identifying a point of deviation, calling for ‘new’ art to emerge, or giving tacit credence to the ‘shift’ Georgi seeks to dismantle. Thus, I wondered on occasion if examination of additional critical voices might have provided even more chances for Georgi to engage in close, attentive, and sceptical reading. Although she quickly mentions individuals who had set forth the priorities in antebellum art interpretation, such as Asher B. Durand, Georgi only briefly considers how his art criticism established definitions for art with and against which Cook worked. Similarly, she doesn’t explore how later generations of artists and critics, distinguishing their own aesthetic principles in self-consciously modern and multiple ways, wrote in distinction to her three protagonists.9 The relative scarcity of attention paid to other voices or agents is due, without question, to Georgi’s scrupulous attention to carefully chosen texts. Yet the sacrifice of breadth in the service of fine-grained textual analysis, while a great virtue from one vantage point, also potentially jeopardizes her argument’s efficacy. At least, the book’s scope is not

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situated relative to prior and later stages or models as thoroughly as it could have been, and I wished to see a little more evidence demonstrating why this period in particular should be so important.

This is particularly true in chapter three, in which Georgi alludes to other equally opinionated writers, the broader contexts in which American art criticism took shape, and a wider range of products of visual culture. As the most ambitious and the most complicated of the chapters, it was also the least satisfying and the most confusing. While retaining her commitment to close reading, Georgi ventures across a broader critical terrain here, and chooses a less obviously coherent amalgamation of Cook’s critical writing, culled from diverse sources: from criticism of works at the 1864 Sanitary Fair exhibition, to commentary on home furnishing penned for Scribner’s Weekly in the 1870s, and finishing with his 1888 survey, Art and Artists of Our Time. In the roughly thirty years Georgi covers, she argues Cook’s changing opinions are all too easily read as another sign of ‘shift.’ He abandoned his fervent embrace of the Pre-Raphaelites’ dogged naturalism as he welcomed more expressive aims for art into the fold. But Georgi points out that what seems like a profound change of heart in these texts is not, in fact, inconsistent with his earlier beliefs, and the distinction she makes between Cook’s early and later attitudes towards Ruskinian theory complicates any easy classification of his ideas.

Questioning how later writers misunderstood Cook’s gradual embrace of emergent anti-material values in American art, Georgi also asks us to remember that his use of the term ‘revolution’ may be quite different from modern apprehension of this concept. His acceptance of changing aesthetic form signalled not rupture but continuous development and continuity in art’s deepest ontological nature. For example, although Whistler’s art might have displeased the younger Cook, as La Farge’s did, he was willing by the 1880s to concede that pursuit of authenticity in immaterial feeling could take preeminence over the recording of precise mimetic fact. Rather than seeing fundamental difference in Cook’s departure from obsession with mimetic naturalism towards seemingly more formless ideals, Georgi observes how Cook sustained the conviction that all art, whatever its transitory form, possessed an underlying moral and didactic purpose. What changed were merely the terms he applied to his criticism and the historical model he set forth for American art, not the deeper structural tenets to which he held true: whether clothed in mimetic realism or striving towards less tangible, expressive ideals, truth—in the guise of authenticity, individualism and faith—was still paramount, and absolutely essential.

The distinction between transitory terms and fundamental structural beliefs can be confusing, however, and thus Georgi’s pays attention to similar dynamics in the case of Stillman, co-founder of the art critical journal The Crayon in 1855, whose writing she examines in the final two chapters. Although he may as poorly-known as Cook, since his editorials for The Crayon were often un-credited and he left the post after only two years, Stillman, in my opinion, is in some ways the most
interesting of the three writers considered. He began his career as a painter as well as a critic, but abandoned this pursuit when he took up diplomatic service in Rome during the Civil War, and thereafter in Crete, amid great upheaval. Later, he adopted photography as his primary medium, while upholding the prevalent opinion that photographs constituted scientific evidence rather than distinct forms of art. Nonetheless, his firsthand struggle to achieve aesthetic principles undergirds his opinions as much as his painstaking logic, and contemporary politics informed his journalism as well as his art criticism. Thus Georgi offers somewhat more background for his convictions than she does for the others. Like Cook, Stillman was an early and ardent adopter of Ruskinian beliefs, and also like Cook, he later refuted many of them, thus chapter four sets up Stillman as a promoter of Ruskinian naturalism in essays penned for *The Crayon*, and chapter five addresses his later writing, in which he shifted focus.

As Georgi notes, because Stillman was well aware of the stark contrast between his early and subsequent beliefs, he ‘helps us identify which aspects of art’s definition were in play for him and arguably for the larger art world’ (78), since, in distinction to both Jarves and Cook, he changed his mind about the fundamental nature of art, beyond merely posing dualist values in its form or style. Paradoxically, ‘our periodization recognizes the modern in those same aspects by which Stillman repeatedly defined art’, Georgi writes, ‘but whereas we plot them in positive relationship to social change … Stillman perceived them as almost the opposite’ (107). Attending to his style as a writer, and examining his metaphorical language, Georgi makes an important point here: in all art critical writing of the period ‘linguistic forms have to work very hard’ (86), and Stillman in particular used logic and style deliberately to delimit a definition for ‘art’ in its ideal state above and beyond any instantiation in actual objects. The dense web of terms, metaphors, and rhetoric each writer employed in their respective ways was necessary to defining the ontological nature of ‘art’ which was otherwise unprovable in any single representative sample. Specific paintings or sculptures, if offering important examples for the critics, showed the transitory effects of history: ever-changing habits, fashions, theories or aesthetic effects. For Stillman, Georgi argues, history was metaphor, and his ‘tropes … establish the substance of his philosophy’ (80).

Yet often, and particularly here, I queried Georgi’s selective criteria for the texts she examined, as well as the images with which she illuminated their structure.

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and meaning. She makes her case by means of few examples in each short chapter, and she explains how these critics derived their opinions using only eight illustrations, representing the work of five artists, two of whom are scarcely known to viewers today. Moreover, several of the images she discusses were not the same ones the critics wrote about, chosen for use here because they serve as approximations of examples when the critics themselves were vague (or in the case of works they mention which have now gone missing). But if, as Georgi argues at some moments, we should attend to how artistic form is as historically meaningful as texts, I had hoped to learn more—much more—about the art in question. Indeed, material evidence provided the substance from which these critics built their analytical arguments, even if these arguments explored art’s enduring ‘truth’ beyond any particular object’s ability to contain it.

Although there is virtue in her demand that neither art nor criticism should be ever used as mere ‘illustration’ of social history, her choice of select examples comes at the expense of considering how texts interacted with other cultural products. I wanted to learn more about how these critical texts were not only weighed against competing opinions, but also were tested, evaluated, or measured by readers against visible evidence, and thus I longed for richer consideration of the viewing contexts that made such writing possible. This is indeed a tall order whose satisfaction would have resulted in a different book. But I nonetheless desired thicker investigation of how the historical terms of this critical writing was fostered by equally critical looking. However, in her concluding remarks, Georgi reminds us that for these writers, examining particular examples of contemporary art as evidence of historically situated meaning could only take one so far. For Stillman in particular, ‘art’ resided in qualities intrinsic to the fulfilment between form and content, and locating its fundamental nature in any specific example was at best elusive, if not illusory. Georgi ultimately invites us to consider how ‘periodizing gives a false sense of having situated art historically’ (108), when in fact ‘history’ resides elsewhere, perhaps in art itself, or in the critical metaphors we employ to explain artistic change.

For a scholar with evident respect for the social commitment demonstrated by many historians of American art, however, the absence of deeper public dialog between critical texts and other agents seemed curious. I wished to know how negotiation between these writers and their readers might have taken shape, even perhaps moulding the conceptual structures she explores. At times I also pondered whether the ‘shift’ or rupture she explores is not overdetermined. In recent studies of artists working across this periodization, such as Rachel Ziady DeLue’s examination of George Inness, it has been regarded perhaps just as usefully as a kaleidoscopic reconfiguration involving many small shifts and adjustments that reflect changing patterns across art, criticism, and American culture. That said,

Georgi probably would not have been able to sustain the depth of her analysis in a longer book or expanded investigation of more writers, more artists, or more objects. And the broad, systematic survey called to mind by such a project is also not only somewhat currently unfashionable, it would be also out-of-step with the attentive, self-aware historical work this writer takes on: the consequence of this modest start points towards much larger issues.

One cannot embark upon an analysis of how historical periodization took shape without being keenly aware of one’s own historical desires and their enactment in writing; these thoughtful concerns inform Georgi’s philosophy of history and undergird her historiographic enterprise. Indeed, perhaps the omissions or limits I perceive say much more about my own desires for history and narrative satisfaction: I wanted too much from this book. Given the need for thorough, subtle, and complex analyses of historical art criticism in America, this investigation offers the tantalizing glimpse of what such projects might look like, if done with great restraint and attention to the intertwining of rhetoric and belief. The care with which she sets forth the boundaries of her study demonstrates how sensitive Georgi is to the failures any such ‘comprehensive’ study might risk in creating its own mythologized history. Her acknowledgement of the pitfalls arising from desire for satisfying stories lends her book an almost poignant quality. If, as a historian, I share Georgi’s distrust of any totalizing ‘master narrative’, and am equally cautious about unbridled historical relativism, I nonetheless yearn, now and again, for the comforts of a good simple history, well-told and conveniently organized, however sceptical I might also be of any positivist illusions or troublesome political agenda lurking behind the text.

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