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Toda gente

**Little Magazines and
the New Literature of
the Sixties. The Case of
*El Corno Emplumado /
The Plumed Horn***

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Abstract

The article analyses the role and characteristics of the Mexican-American poetry magazine *El corno emplumado/The Plumed Horn*. It proposes that the magazine establishes a transnational node for alternative aesthetic exchanges by reinventing core aspects of the literary avantgarde between 1910 y 1920. The intention is to show how the seemingly provisional spaces of little magazines form topographies for a new literature that transgress the boundaries of other institutions and geopolitical borders.

Keywords

Little magazines, sixties, poetry, avantgarde, artist communities.



Tzompantli. Fotografía de Lucía Gutiérrez Santana.

Pequeñas revistas y la nueva literatura de los sesenta. El caso de *El Corno Emplumado* / *The Plumed Horn*

Resumen¹

El artículo analiza el papel y las características de la revista de poesía mexicana-americana *El Corno Emplumado*. Propone que la revista establece un nodo transnacional para intercambios estéticos alternativos, reinventando aspectos centrales de la vanguardia literaria de los años comprendidos entre 1910 y 1920. La intención es mostrar cómo los espacios aparentemente provisionales de pequeñas revistas, forman topografías para una nueva literatura que transgrede los límites de otras instituciones y fronteras geopolíticas.

Palabras clave

Pequeñas revistas, años sesenta, poesía, avantgarde, comunidades de artistas.

¹ Traducción del resumen al español por Amaury Fernández Reyes.

Literature teacher Franco Moretti begins his article *Conjectures of World Literature* (2000) with a reference to German author Goethe: “Nowadays, national literature doesn’t mean much: the age of world literature is beginning, and everybody should contribute to hasten its advent” (Moretti, 2000). However, almost 200 years after Goethe in 1827 foresaw a *Weltliteratur* (world literature) most literary histories, Moretti points out, still emerge within the boundaries of national historiographies (German literary history, American literary history, Mexican literary history, etc). One of the reasons, Moretti states, is that “world literature is not an object, it’s a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That’s not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager—a hypothesis, to get started.” Moretti identifies a lack of critical method to understand literature not only as national literature, but *also* as part of world literatures, and provocatively proposes to move from *close reading* to a kind of *distant reading* in order to be able to look beyond the canon and follow related experiments across borders (see also his 1998 work *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*).

Moretti’s notion might be key to understand why Mexican author and literary critic Carlos Monsiváis left out the poetry quarterly *El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn* in his otherwise 1967 complete list of little magazines and small poetry pamphlets in Mexico in the 20th Century. Little Magazines, like the exile magazine *Das Wort* (1936-1939) of Moscow, but published in German, *The Transatlantic Review* (1924-1925) that spanned Europe and North America, or *Caballo Verde para la Poesía* (1935-1936) that Chilean poet Pablo Neruda published during his years in Spain all form a long trajectory. Just like these much earlier little magazines *El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn* – or simply *El Corno* – came out of a geographical location (‘a Mexico City magazine’ as it said on its first page), but it never focused solely on poetry from Mexico. However, some remarkable features made *El Corno* an important contribution to the Mexican literary environment and elsewhere. This article will begin with a brief history of the magazine —and the end of it— and place its specific features in a larger historical and geographical context of little magazines.



El Corno Emplumado/*The Plumed Horn*

El Corno emerged from Mexico City from 1962 to 1969 with four issues per year. Its name combined the horn of jazz and the feathers of the Mesoamerican God, Quetzalcoatl, in a playful tradition shared with other magazines of its time (*White Rabbit, Floating Bear, Caterpillar, Angel Hair, Poems from the floating world, etc.*). The name was a self-conscious reference to jazz as a truly new North American invention and to Quetzalcoatl as ancient, pre-Hispanic, and at the same time the announcer of the new.

The magazine was founded in 1961 by the young American poets, Margaret Randall and Harvey Wolin, and the Mexican poet, Sergio Mondragón. At the time they all lived in Mexico City where they were an integrated part of a vivid scene of young poets and artist from a number of different places around the world. Many of them had barely been published, and they met in private houses or small bars through networks of friends. The idea for *El Corno* grew out of these cross-continental multilingual gatherings, and a longing for knowing and learning more about each other's poetry:

We would gather at Philip's [the American beat poet Philip Lamantia] in the evening and read poetry to one another. We were in our mid-twenties, I was, I think, probably 25-26 when I got to Mexico City. We were passionate about poetry and about life and very eager to communicate with one another, to hear one another's work. My Spanish was very rudimentary at the time. Although I had lived in Spain for a couple of years, so I did have some Spanish and many of the Latin-American poets didn't have much English, but we heard each others passion in the work. And very much wanted to understand what we were writing about, not only our own work, but the poets who had been important to us in our formations. In the case of Latin-American poets very much Neruda and Vallejo and in the case of the North-American poets William Carlos Williams, Pound and so forth. So we had this great desire to share our mentor's work with one another and our own work with one another, and it was out of that experience of reading to one another, sharing with one another, realizing how little we knew of each others work and each others concerns, that the idea for *El Corno Emplumado* was born (Randall, interview 2002).

In this quote, Randall describes the gatherings as a new possibility for the poets to share what they were writing as well as the work that inspired it. Many of the North American poets that gathered at Lamantia's place drew on beat poet Allen Ginsberg's radical work *Howl* that came out as a re-awakening of the traditions of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. For the Latin American poets, it was the work of Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo, as well as some of the early Mexican avant-garde movements like Marple Arce's *Estridentistas* from the 1920's. The first editorial note thus reflected an intent to create a space to share works between poets from many different places and provide a sense of community beyond the heightened tensions between the Americas (in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961). In addition the editors wanted to be able to control the publishing process and create a format that could embrace the appearing experiments of a new literature – the free verse, visual and concrete poetry and graphic works – rather than restrict it:

El Corno Emplumado – The Plumed Horn is a magazine of poetry, prose, letters and art from two Hemispheres... printed in Spanish and English... published in Mexico City out of the need for a *New Magazine*... a magazine whose pages conform to the word instead of whose words conform to pages... now, when relations between the Americas have never been worse, we hope *El Corno Emplumado* will be a showcase (*outside politics*) for the fact that *we are all brothers*. Manuscripts (...with the usual self-addressed paraphernalia), money (any kind) both welcome. To begin with: quarterly publication; later monthly. We hope that this nucleus will eventually grow into a publishing house... eventually into *much more than that* (ECE, 1: 5).

The first issue of *El Corno* was 100 pages long and compiled poets from the editor's Mexico City environment, as well as from their network in the USA and Latin-America. It got widely distributed due to the editor in chief of the Mexican publication *Fundacion de Cultura Economica*, Arnaldo Orfila, who shared their directory of independent bookstores all over the Americas. The editors sent out copies for sale to them, and the ambitious distribution of the first number was reflected in an even larger second issue in April 1962 (130 pages). Letters, poems and artworks by significant poets and artists like Agustí Bartra, Robert Creeley, Clayton Eshleman, Paul Blackburn,



Juan Banelos, Allen Ginsberg, Rosario Castellanos, César Vallejo, Ray Bremser, Robert Kelly, Mathias Goeritz, e.g. showed that the editors had managed to distribute the first number in large parts of Latin America and the US.

During 1962, the editors established an extensive network of named representatives in different countries who distributed the magazines to independent bookstores and local poetry venues. Some of them were people they had met in Mexico City and, some were poets who approached the magazine after reading it, though not meeting the editors in person until much later. The result was that *El Corno*, after its first year, was already available in 250 bookstores in 23 countries (ECE, 5: 5) and at its height reached 500 subscriptions.

The format of the first issue continued throughout much of the lifespan of the magazine: a comprehensive (100-250 pages) Spanish and English quarterly with a distribution of 2-3000 copies, publishing a mix of poems, art works, announcements, and on a pastel coloured section in the back, numerous letters from poets around the world directed to the editors. Most of the poems were printed in the language of origin except for the small anthologies of national poetry (Greek, Russian, Finnish, Mexican etc), and poems by Vallejo, Williams, etc, whom the editor's wanted to introduce to the other language.

The magazine was printed at a print shop with linotype – a labour intensive printing technique that was still extensively used in Mexico at the time. This technique gave the typography a material appearance fitted for the graphic experiments by concrete poets and other of the magazine's visual oriented work.

One of the editors, Wolin, left Mexico after the first two issues and Mondragón and Randall, who privately became partners for a number of years, continued the magazine until Mondragón left Mexico for the US in 1967. Randall continued to edit the magazine with her new partner, poet Robert Cohen, until they, in the aftermath of the repressions of 1968, fled Mexico and went to Cuba in July 1969. This was the end of *El Corno*.

The Re-Discovery of the Role of the Little Magazine in the Sixties

El Corno formed part of a period during which little magazines and small poetry venues flourished all over the world. Many poets in the sixties were re-discovering the role of little magazines as both a statement for a new social sphere and for the possible distribution of new poetic innovations. American poet and frequent *El Corno* contributor, Jerome Rothenberg, called it a *second great awakening*, referring to the 1910s and 20s as *the first* (Rothenberg 1998). Drawing upon inspiration from the 1910s and 20s, artist and poet groups explored the potentiality of the close relationship between radical artistic and literary experiments, alternative production, self-publishing and distribution (Clay & Philips 1998).

The 1910s and 20s had witnessed an extraordinary artistic and literary innovation nourished by an explosion of European little magazines. The avant-garde and modernist movements of the time had led to magazines like *The Adelphi* (1923-1955), *The New Age* (1907-1922), *BLAST* (1914-1915), *Der Sturm* (1910-1932), *Lacerba* (1913-1915), *Les Nouvelle Revue Francaise* (1908-), *Nord-Sud* (1919), *Littérature* (1919-1920), *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924), *De Stijl* (1917-1920), *VZYAL* (1915), *LEF* (1923-1925) and *Criterion* (1922-1939), that all involved European poets and artists that were to become some of the most important of their time (Whyndam Lewis, Ezra Pound, André Gides, André Breton, Louis Aragon, Vladimir Mayakovski, Kazimir Malevich e.g.). In addition, a number of cross-continental European-American magazines emerged between them: *Secession* (1922-1924), *Transition* (1927-1928) and *The Transatlantic Review* (1924-1925) and American magazines like *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse* (1915-1919) and William Carlos Williams' *Contact* (1920-1923).

They formed an alternative little magazine scene, which nurtured a radical literary movement of a new intensity. 'Alternative' since they were all independent of major publishing houses and with their focus on new formats and new expressions dissociating themselves with established poetic schools. 'Little' since most of them came out in small numbers, often as short booklets or pamphlets and within a limited period of time.



Marjorie Perloff, American literary scholar, describes in a study of the Futurist movement the importance of the little magazines during the 1910s and 20s as related to the impossibility of separating the poetic works from their pages:

If collage and its cognates (montage, assemblage, construction) call into question the representability of the sign, such related Futurist modes as manifesto, artist's book, and performance call into question the stability of genre, of the individual medium, and the barrier between artist and audience. *The avant guerre* is also the time of *parole in libertà* – the visualization of the text that is neither quite 'verse' or 'prose', a text whose unit is neither the paragraph nor the stanza but the printed page itself (Perloff, 1986: XVIII).

Perloff emphasizes how the material and experimental practices surrounding the little magazines redefine the question of representability, as well as genre and the relation between artist and audience. By re-working the page, making performative cross-overs and addressing an audience that were artists themselves and who might contribute in the next issue, or incorporate the work into their own innovative practices, the little magazines transgressed the boundaries established by formal publishing industry and cultural production at the time. With the little magazines, Perloff concludes, the unit becomes 'the page itself' and this page not only formed and staged the poetic experiments, but also the often radical politics and social communities of artists and poets at the time. By doing so little magazines also placed the poet as well as the poem in a collectively defined context thus rejecting the idea of poetry as a contemplative and individual medium. This orientation of contemporary poetry towards communal practices offered a way to both express an opposition to established cultural spheres and feel a kinship of likeminded that could bring the poets beyond the sense of marginalization and ground them in new relations, often transgressing the localities where the poets and artists lived.

By the 1930s the political environment of Europe changed and by the second half of the 1930s many of the little magazines were put to an end due to the political changes in Europe.

Little Magazines as *Topographies*

The young poets of the sixties were very aware of both the poetic experiments of the 1910s and 1920s avant-garde movement and the spaces and connections that nourished them (Clay & Philips, 1998). They picked up not only the innovative expressions and the exploration of new technologies, but also the community formation. The communities around the little magazines served as fruitful inspiration for poetic innovation, as well as bringing the young poets out of their isolation, permitting them a recognition that was often difficult to find in the established literary world at the time: "It was really our isolation from everyone else that threw us together," (Sukenick, 1987:142) as the American composer Philip Glass later described it.

The importance of the communities around little magazines, such as the alternative bookstores and literary venues, can be said to make 'community' a more fitting category to capture the literary production at the time than the much used 'generation'. Perhaps it was most clearly stated in the influential American anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, where *Evergreen Review*-editor Donald M. Allen gathered the to-become central names of a new post-second world war poetry. In the anthology he both 'discovered' and categorized the beat-poets, the Black Mountain group, the language poets, and other contemporary poetry groups after the communities to which they belonged rather than the generation they came out of. It wasn't an easy task as Allen puts in the foreword to the anthology:

The preparation of this anthology presented a series of formidable problems. As I have said, only a fraction of the work has been published, and that for the most part in fugitive pamphlets and little magazines. The field is almost completely uncharted; there is, not very surprisingly, very little first-rate criticism of any of the new poetry, and that little has been written by the poets themselves. Consequently, I have had to go directly to the poets for manuscripts and counsel, and I am heavily indebted to each of them for invaluable aid (Allen 1999: XIV).

Allen's achievement had much to do with developing a new method to find the poets he wanted to include. Instead of looking to established publishers or even his own *Evergreen Review* he explored the communities around Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *City Light Bookstore*



in San Francisco, around the environment and magazine of the *Black Mountain College* (1933-1962), and around the coffee houses and university environments of New York City. This 'topographical approach' permitted him to go beyond established publishing houses and magazines and use small venues and little magazines as *locations* for an emerging new poetry.

A Topographical Approach in the Generational Anthology *Poesía en Movimiento*?

A couple of years after Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, the poets Octavio Paz, Alí Chumacero, José Emilio Pacheco, and Homero Aridjis presented a Mexican equivalent to it. However, the anthology *Poesía en Movimiento – Mexico 1915-1966* spanned a longer period of Mexican poetry in order to both capture the new poetry and the various traditions it drew upon. It thus used a classical temporal and generational method to categorize the poets into four groups. The youngest group included fourteen poets: Antonio Montes de Oca, Thelma Nava, Sergio Mondragón, José Emilio Pacheco, Homero Aridjis, Jaime Labastida, Juan Banuelos, Óscar Oliva, Francisco Cervantes, Eraclio Zepeda, Jaime Augusto Shelley, José Carlos Becerra, Gabriel Zaid and Isabel Fraire. What united these young poets, some of whom hadn't been formally published yet, was an openly stated rupture with the tradition of *Los Contemporáneos* and a return to the avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 20s. Mondragón, the editor of *El Corno*, later described the rupture this way:

En la poesía mexicana en particular imperaba una prosodia muy importante pero de cierto tono que luego fue cuestionada. Quizás el iniciador de esa ruptura en la poesía fue Marco Antonio Montes de Oca que —a mediados de los años cincuenta— comenzó a escribir de una manera diferente y eso marcó la pauta y creo que los efectos de toda esa ruptura están viéndose hoy todavía (Mondragón, interview, 2002).

Just as Allan Ginsberg's *Howl* became a sign of the new poetry for many poets in the US, Montes de Oca's rejection of the limits of the verse and the invention of new and alienated images embodied the rupture with which they identified. While Ginsberg reached back to

William Carlos Williams, Montes de Oca drew openly on early 1910s and 1920s European and Latin American avant-garde movements.

Twelve of the fourteen poets had already been published together a year earlier when *El Corno* had managed to identify the poets through the communities that had formed around other of the little magazines of the time in Mexico City: *Mester*, *Metáfora*, *Rehilete*, *La Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, *Cuadernos del Viento*, *Pajaro Cascabel* and *El Corno* itself and include them in an anthology of new Mexican poetry in its issue 18, richly illustrated by Mexican painter José Luís Cuevas. The generational aspect, underlined in the foreword of *Poesia en Movimiento*, thus somewhat veiled the fact that the selection of the younger group of poets probably had followed much the same method as Allen's topographical approach to identify them due to one of the editors, Homero Aridjis, who had published in *El Corno* a number of times, knew the editors, and formed part of the new alternative poetry communities appearing in Mexico City at the time.

Forming a Social Fabric Transgressing Barriers

For many of these poets, little magazines had a double role as American poet and scholar, Charles Bernstein, puts it in *Provisional institutions: Alternative Processes and Poetic Innovation* (1995). Here he argues that little magazines, as examples of alternative institutions, both developed a new literature and the social fabric around it:

Literature is never indifferent to its institutions. A new literature requires new institutions, and these institutions are as much a part of its aesthetic as the literary works that they weave into the social fabric. The resilience of the alternative institutions of poetry in the postwar years is one of the most powerful instances we have of the creation of value amidst its postmodern evasions. When you touch this press, you touch a person. In this sense, the work of our innovative poetries is fundamentally one of social work (Bernstein, 1993).

In the quote Bernstein deliberately characterizes the flux of little presses and venues appearing in the 1950's and spreading through the 1960s and into the 1970s as a social work that created a vibrant and often internationally oriented environment.



In the case of *El Corno*, social work very much had to do with the particular Mexico City environment where the magazine was able to weave the new poetry into an idea of a new Pan-American community. Contrary to most American and Latin American little magazines the work of the editors bridged the two continents and also involved —though in a much lesser degree— a European poetry environment as well (poetry from Finland, Spain, The Netherlands, Greece and Russia). Key in this effort to connect very different traditions and interpretations was the magazine's bilingual approach, where the most influential poetry was published in both Spanish and English. In addition to this, the letters coming from different parts of the world – written to the editors, but shared with a larger audience – provided a sense of being part of an intimate community:

A community is always important for anyone and I guess it's particularly important to someone whose work or whose life is not honoured by the mainstream community and since poets are sort of... they're not greatly taken into consideration or supported or honoured by our societies, perhaps in that respect they... we need communities more than ever. We need communities to talk about our works, we need communities for criticism, we need communities sometimes as our only readership. So community is tremendously important and *El Corno* generated a worldwide community and I think it broke down a great deal of barriers. It wasn't that we had thousands of people in Holland or thousands of people in Venezuela, but we had enough so that these bridges were crossed and those barriers were sort of crumbled, so I think in that respect the community was just an on-going experience of tremendous excitement and nurturing (Randall, interview, 2002).

Randall, in this quote, emphasizes the importance of this community both for the dialogue around poetry, for being read, and for criticism. The barriers that *El Corno* broke down were not only national barriers, but also those making it difficult to access a readership and feel a kinship with other poets. For a number of younger poets who were not already connected to poetry communities, *El Corno* thus became what Chilean poet Cecilia Vicuña called a *pasaporte de ciudadanía* (a passport) (Vicuña, 2002, interview); not to a specific locality, but to the wide-spread community that formed around the magazine. In that sense the social fabric that Bernstein stressed abo-

ve is not necessarily a local fabric but can be understood as formed around the little magazine as a *node* in larger networks.

In the case of *El Corno* the barriers transgressed also had to do with those between different schools of poetry. For the large part of *El Corno's* lifetime the magazine was thus characterized by not conforming to just one group of poets, but rather the wide selection of very different poets, or what the North American poet Diane Wakoski very precisely called 'a hotchpotch' (Wakoski, 2002, interview). By juxtapositioning beat poets from the US with concretistas from Brazil the community it formed was different than many of the other magazines of its time, and for the poets publishing in it, that was a core aspect: 'We, they, people, LIKE the fact that you have an open mind, not favouring any school or type of writing.' (ECE, 5: 151) as Wakoski wrote from New York in a letter published in issue 5 in 1963. Wakoski's analysis was reflected by American poet Kathleen Fraser, who in those years lived in Paris and in an earlier issue stated: "I read it cover from cover and was so delighted with the offering. Not just one sound. Room to stretch. A floor of imagination very big for dancing. And how clean and free a format" (ECE, 3: 131).

The connection between the open editorial line and the transnational take was a fundamental possibility to place the magazine outside the pitfalls of national identity. By adopting the cosmopolitan identity of being a 'Mexico City Magazine' *El Corno* would stage itself as a node connecting North and South, where quite different aesthetics could interact, and where past and future could meet. In that sense, though not openly, it re-interpreted the status of Mexico City as a parallel to the many exiled positions of the 1910s and 1920s. American poets fleeing the anti-communism of McCarthyism reaching way into the 1960s ended up in Mexico or Europe, while more and more poets and artist from Latin American countries fled the new right-winged dictatorships of Brazil, Argentina, etc. during the 1960s to Mexico as well. Confirming this status of Mexico City as a cosmopolitan-kind of meeting place, the editors of *El Corno*, together with the Argentinian magazine *Eco Contemporaneo* and the Mexican magazines *Rehilete* and *Parajo Cascabel*, hosted the large international gathering of 150 poets from more than 15 countries in 1964.



A Story of the Sixties

However, Mexico City's role as a new home for an exiled artist community came under pressure in the second half of the 60s with the election of Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970). The situation accelerated during the summer of 1968 with massive student mobilizations, and culminated with the massacre at the Plaza de Tlatelolco on October 2nd and the numerous arrests following it. That very month *El Corno* came out with a critical editorial note against the repression of the government. By the end of 1968 the former artistic editor of *El Corno* and frequent contributor, Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg, went into exile in the UK, and by the summer of 1969 Randall and her new co-editor and partner, Cohen, fled to Cuba.

Emerging at the beginning of the decade with a strong hope for a new and more reconciled époque, and disappearing before issue 32 —ready for print— came out at the end of it, *El Corno* in many ways also became a story of the sixties. Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña, who debuted in *El Corno*, describes the closure of the magazine as closely related not just to the changes in the social and political climate in Mexico, but all over Latin America at the time:

I think the flavour, as we say in Spanish: *el sabor*, and the feeling of the sixties were very different from any other decade, because in the sixties we were under the illusion that there was a great opening and a great change in social and political affairs in the world. For example Chile had this huge social movement that eventually became The Popular Unity. That is to say that Chile was governed by an elected socialist back in 1970. And we had this feeling that there was this great social movement in the US of protest against the war in Vietnam and we had similar progressive moments all over Latin America, so we had the feeling of riding the crest of a big wave of change, so our poetry and our ways of connecting to each other were very open, were full of solidarity, were full of generosity. It was a feeling that you could share things and that you could share ideas. All this came to an end with the military dictatorship and military coups of 1970. In the seventies what happened is when these military coups happened not only these magazines disappeared, for example *El Corno Emplumado* disappeared precisely because the military interfered with the democratic movements of Mexico City and similar things happened all over Latin America. Magazines could not exist anymore freely,

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because there was no more funding and people went into exile. The huge disappearance happened, so my feeling is that for the seventies and eighties you didn't have this communication between poets (Vicuña, 2002, interview).

In this quote by Vicuña she points to the decade as a period of sharing and a longing to connect. These appealing and fascinating transnational aspects—long before the internet made it an everyday experience for many of us around the world— attracted poets and artist to *El Corno*, and at the same time manifested the magazine's marginalization in a Mexican literary historiography as exemplified at the beginning of the article with Monsiváis leaving the magazine out of his list of Mexican poetry magazines in the 20th Century. Nevertheless, looking back at its history, the context it inscribes itself into, and in a world literature perspective, *El Corno* forms a weighty part of the seemingly provisional spaces of little magazines as locations that form topographies for a new literature, new ways of distributing it, new political visions, and new communities in the sixties.

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