

John Mc Grath's Socialist Theatre: An Analysis of the Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil

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ABSTRACT

This study examines John McGrath as a pioneering figure in British socialist theatre, renowned for using drama to critique social and political issues. McGrath sought to provoke thought and action against inequalities by addressing the struggles of marginalized populations. This paper focuses on his seminal work, *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), which is pivotal in socially committed theatre. The play vividly portrays Scottish history, intertwining historical narrative with political analysis to explore economic and social inequalities. It highlights McGrath's influence on contemporary theatre through his innovative approach and socialist stance. The paper delves into the thematic concerns and narrative structure of the play, emphasizing its impact on discussions of class, power, and identity, and its enduring relevance in modern theatre.

INTRODUCTION

John McGrath, renowned for his socially committed approach to theatre, dedicated his career to leveraging performance as a catalyst for social change. Rejecting conventional theatrical norms, McGrath sought to create theatre that was not only entertaining but also intellectually stimulating and socially relevant. He co-founded the 7:84 Theatre Company in Scotland with the aim of making politically and socially engaged theatre accessible to working-class communities. This initiative embodied McGrath's belief that theatre should be relevant to all segments of society, particularly those who are marginalized or disenfranchised. McGrath's play *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* is a prime example of his commitment to socially engaged theatre. The play, set against Scotland's natural landscape, uses a series of vignettes to portray the exploitation of Scotland's resources—particularly oil—and the effects of industrialization on its people. McGrath employs a Brechtian approach, breaking the fourth wall and incorporating music and direct audience address to provoke critical reflection. This technique not only engages audiences intellectually but also emotionally, prompting them to reflect on their roles within societal structures.

Thematically, the play critiques the dominance of multinational corporations over local communities and explores the intersection of economic power and cultural identity. McGrath's characters, a blend of historical figures and archetypes, symbolize various facets of Scottish society—from oppressed Highlanders to corporate elites. Through their interactions and monologues, McGrath weaves a narrative that addresses universal themes of exploitation and resistance.

Beyond its artistic achievements, *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* exemplifies McGrath's belief in theatre as a form of political activism. The play's success lies not only in its ability to entertain but also in its capacity to inspire collective action and dialogue. McGrath's legacy endures in contemporary theatre, where his approach to performance continues to influence artists who seek to address social justice and inequality on stage. His insistence on the integration of political consciousness into artistic expression challenges the notion of art as detached from the realities of the world. McGrath's work remains a significant beacon of socially committed theatre, demonstrating the power of performance to provoke meaningful dialogue and foster social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

John Bull's *New British Political Dramatists* (1984) is a key text in British political theatre studies, offering critical insights into playwrights from the 1970s and early 1980s. Bull's book explores the political dimensions of British drama during a period of social upheaval and political change under Margaret Thatcher's government. It analyzes how playwrights like David Hare, Howard Brenton, and Caryl Churchill used the stage as a platform for critique and resistance against socio-political conditions.

Robin Nelson's article, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil: Political Theatre and the Case against Television Naturalism*, critically examines

John McGrath's play within the context of political theatre and its divergence from television naturalism. Nelson argues that McGrath's use of documentary style, music, dance, and audience interaction creates a more engaging and effective form of political theatre compared to the representational limitations of television naturalism.

Dan Rebellato's *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* explores the evolution of British theatre, focusing on the pivotal year 1956 and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Rebellato challenges the notion that 1956 marked a radical break in British drama, suggesting instead that the changes were part of a gradual evolution influenced by earlier developments. The book traces the roots of modern British drama and examines the social, political, and cultural shifts that shaped new theatrical forms.

T.C. Smout's *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (1986) offers a comprehensive social history of Scotland, covering transformations during a period of significant change. Smout's work examines how industrialization, urbanization, and political developments reshaped Scottish society, focusing on the lived experiences of ordinary Scots. The book employs a range of sources, including census data and personal diaries, to provide a detailed analysis of various aspects of Scottish life.

Richard Findlater's article, *The Case of P. Slickey*, critically examines the British stage production of the same name. Findlater analyzes the play's themes, style, and impact, exploring issues of morality, justice, and corruption through satire or allegory. The article situates the play within the broader trends of mid-20th century British theatre, discussing the playwright's intentions, directorial choices, and actor performances.

METHODOLOGY

Analyzing John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* within the context of socialist theatre involves a multidisciplinary approach, integrating literary analysis, theatre studies, historical contextualization, and cultural studies. Below is a streamlined outline for this analysis:

Literature Review

To position McGrath's play within socialist theatre and British political drama, review existing critical literature on McGrath's work, especially *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil*. Explore secondary sources on socialist theatre, agitprop, and political drama in Britain. Include studies on the 7:84 Theatre Company and its impact on political theatre in the UK.

Textual Analysis

Conduct a close reading of the play's script to identify themes, motifs, and symbols tied to socialist ideology. Analyze the play's episodic structure, direct address, and the integration of music and multimedia to understand their role in advancing political objectives. Examine characters and dialogue to explore McGrath's depiction of class struggle, national identity, and capitalism's effects.

Performance Analysis

Assess how *The Cheviot* functions as a performance piece. Review archival footage or recordings to study staging and audience engagement. Analyze production notes, director's notes, and actor interviews for insights

into interpretative choices. Consider the adaptation of ceilidh theatre to serve socialist ends.

Historical and Cultural Contextualization

Place *The Cheviot* within the 1970s socio-political and cultural context of Scotland and the UK. Research historical events featured in the play, like the Highland Clearances and the North Sea oil boom, to grasp their significance. Examine the 1970s Scottish political climate, including Scottish nationalism and deindustrialization, to contextualize the play's themes.

Audience Reception Studies

Explore how various audiences have received and interpreted the play over time. Review contemporary reviews, audience surveys, and critical essays to gauge its initial impact and later revivals. Conduct interviews or surveys with viewers, especially from working-class or Scottish backgrounds, to understand its enduring relevance.

Comparative Analysis

Compare *The Cheviot* with other socialist and political theatre works. Analyze McGrath's play alongside his other works and those by contemporaries like Howard Brenton, David Edgar, and Caryl Churchill to identify thematic and stylistic similarities. Examine influences from earlier political theatre movements, such as Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, and consider international socialist theatre examples, like Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

Theoretical Framework

Apply relevant theoretical perspectives to the analysis. Use Marxist theory to analyze the play's depiction of class struggle and capitalism critique. Employ theories of nationalism and postcolonialism to explore Scottish identity and resistance themes. Consider performance theory, referencing Richard Schechner and Erika Fischer-Lichte, to analyze audience interaction and performativity.

Conclusion and Synthesis

Integrate findings from textual, performance, historical, and theoretical analyses to construct a nuanced understanding of *The Cheviot* as a socialist theatre work. This methodology ensures a thorough examination of *The Cheviot* from multiple perspectives and within its full historical and cultural context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the period following World War II, there was little sign that British playwriting was on the cusp of a revolutionary transformation. This was largely because numerous theatre buildings had sustained significant damage during the war. In his book *1956 And All That*, Dan Rebellato encapsulates the bareness of the post-war era by noting that "by 1956, British theatre was in a terrible state" (1999, 1). Similarly, English drama critic Kenneth Tynan, in his writings for the *London Observer*, noted, "The bare fact is, that apart from revivals and imports, there is nothing in the London theatre that one dares to discuss with an intelligent man for more than five minutes" (1954). The situation of the post-war Socialist theatre was highly disheartening, as it was completely disconnected from contemporary reality. It was clearly weakened

and seemingly at its end. Richard Findlator aptly assesses this state of the English stage, lamenting that the theatre, “takes its sociology from Punch, its politics from British Movie tone, its religion from memory” (qtd in Tynan: 111). Yet, these challenging conditions also created a fertile ground for innovation and new forms of expression. As traditional structures faltered, playwrights began to explore new themes and techniques, setting the stage for a transformative period in theatre.

John McGrath’s 7:84 Theatre Company emerged in response to a dramatic shift towards theatre that reflected contemporary social realities. McGrath’s vision was grounded in socialist principles, focusing on class struggle, social equality, and the empowerment of working-class communities. By targeting non-traditional audiences, 7:84 sought to democratize theatre, making it a tool for education and activism rather than merely entertainment for the elite. This approach was a significant departure from the pre-1950 perception that the working class was an unsuitable subject for drama. John Bull notes that 7:84 aimed to make theatre more inclusive by performing in unconventional venues and reaching audiences who typically did not engage with theatre. He describes the company as “a socialist theatre group committed to taking political theatre to non-theatrical venues and, at least in intent, to non-theatrical audiences” (1984: 22). This marked a notable evolution in British theatre, embracing a politically conscious and socially relevant approach.

Nadine Holdsworth highlights McGrath’s Irish Catholic upbringing and experiences as a minority in Britain, which deepened his awareness of issues related to identity, marginalization, and social justice. She argues that this background heightened his empathy for marginalized groups and shaped his broader political and social views. Holdsworth concludes that McGrath’s “experiences—his Irish Catholic background, military service, and time at Oxford—revealed the class privilege embedded in British society, influencing his advocacy for revolutionary socialism” (2002: 14). This commitment to addressing societal issues on stage has resonated with playwrights and directors dedicated to exploring pressing social matters through theatre.

The appropriation of innovative theatricality is evident in McGrath’s *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil*, first performed by the 7:84 Theatre Company in 1973. This work is a testament to McGrath’s pioneering use of theatre as a form of social activism. This is a seminal work in Scottish theatre and a powerful critique of the exploitation of Scotland’s people and their natural resources. The play is a vivid and politically charged piece that examines the social and economic history of the Scottish Highlands. The play brings up the enduring struggle of the Highland people against exploitation and marginalization. By doing this play becomes a powerful commentary on the exploitation of the Highlands and its people across three critical periods: ‘the Highland Clearances, the establishment of stag hunting estates, and the North Sea oil boom’.

The Highland Clearances

The Highland Clearances is a series of evictions of tenants in the Scottish Highlands during the 18th and 19th centuries. These clearances were carried

out by landowners who wanted to use the land for more profitable sheep farming. The clearances led to significant social and economic changes. It led to the displacement of many Gaelic-speaking communities and the decline of traditional clan structures. Thousands of people were forced to emigrate, leading to Scottish diaspora communities in places like Canada, the United States, and Australia. The social fabric of the Highlands was altered, with a shift from a mixed farming economy to one dominated by large-scale sheep farming. The Clearances are often viewed as a tragic period in Scottish history, marked by hardship and suffering for the evicted tenants. According to Drew Milne, "McGrath's work can be situated, accordingly, as a negotiation between historical tragedy and the politics of contemporary farce." (2002: 313)

The Highland Clearances originated from broader economic and social shifts in late 18th-century Scotland and the UK. The Highlands' agrarian economy, based on subsistence farming under clan chiefs, was disrupted by the Jacobite uprisings and the Battle of Culloden in 1746, which weakened the clan system. The British government's integration efforts further eroded traditional structures. Economic pressures and changing agricultural practices, driven by the Industrial Revolution, prompted landowners to adopt more profitable uses for their land. Sheep farming, especially with the hardy Cheviot breed, required extensive grazing but fewer laborers, making it economically attractive. The Clearances often involved brutal methods, with tenants given little notice before eviction and their homes burned to prevent reoccupation. These evictions, supported by law enforcement and sometimes military, caused widespread destitution.

McGrath's portrayal of the Clearances emphasizes the economic motivations behind these actions, similar to Edward Bond's exploration of land eviction in his play *Bingo* (1973). Bond addresses the enclosure movement in England, where landowners displaced peasants for profit, leading to increased poverty and urban migration. Both McGrath and Bond use historical events to critique power dynamics, exploitation, and the impact of economic policies. He critiques the global pattern of multinational corporations profiting at the expense of local populations, reflecting on how these entities continue to exploit resources while locals suffer: "Now it belongs to multi-national corporations with even less feeling for the people ... In other parts of the world ... the same corporations have torn out the mineral wealth from the land. The same people always suffer" (49).

The introduction of the Cheviot sheep, known for its hardiness in the Highland environment and quality wool production, symbolizes the shift towards more profitable land use. Landowners saw sheep farming as a lucrative alternative to traditional tenant farming. McGrath states:

Huge profits were being made already as a result of the Industrial Revolution and improved methods of agriculture. This accumulated wealth had to be used to make more profit because this is the law of capitalism. ... The technological innovation was there: the Cheviot, a breed of sheep that would survive the Highland winter and produce fine wool. The money was there.

Unfortunately, the people were there too. But the law of capitalism had to be obeyed (14).

Acknowledging the necessity for agricultural modernization, the passage critiques the human cost of capitalist-driven changes. It highlights how communities, rooted in generations of Highland culture and tradition, were uprooted and displaced to serve economic interests. In The play M.C. (functions as a chorus) understands that landlords possess power, and are also supported by the other influential members of society. This collective support from the ruling class enhances their strength and capability to achieve their goal of eviction. It makes them a formidable force in whatever context they operate. According to M.C. "these men are ... determined, powerful, and have the rest of the ruling class on their side" (71).

The speaker in McGrath's play criticizes the Highlanders' traditional ways as backward, suggesting that industrial appropriation is prosperity. He urges locals to abandon their traditional lifestyles, framing them as sources of "misery" and describing these customs as horrifying to "civilized people." (21) This reflects a cultural arrogance and a capitalist mindset that values only what can be bought or sold, undermining the intrinsic worth of the Highlanders' way of life. The song associated with the Highlanders symbolizes their deep connection to their land and culture, contrasting with the destructive impact of displacement and industrial exploitation on a timeless landscape.

The chorus in McGrath's play highlights the risk of eradicating or significantly altering Gaelic culture due to external forces. It underscores that economic powerlessness is a primary driver of cultural destruction, suggesting that without economic control, the people cannot preserve their heritage. The line, "The educational system, the newspapers, the radio and television and the decision-makers, local and national, whether they know it or not, are the servants of the men who own and control the land" (55), criticizes how societal institutions serve the interests of the wealthy. The play identifies historically powerful Scottish families—"the MacLeods, the Lovats, the Argylls, the MacDonalds, the Sinclairs, the Crichton-Stewarts and the Sutherlands" (55)—as the new ruling class dictating economic and cultural realities. This critique highlights the concentration of economic power among a few and its detrimental impact on cultural identity and autonomy, emphasizing the need for more equitable distribution of economic power to protect cultural heritage.

To strengthen his view on the need to protect the Scottish culture heritage is emphasised through songs. The song "These Are My Mountains" plays a significant role in setting the tone and theme of the play. By starting with this song, McGrath sets the stage for the exploration of how these lands have been exploited over the centuries. The song acts as a poignant reminder of what is at stake—the heritage and lives of the Highland people. It contrasts sharply with the subsequent narrative of displacement and exploitation, underscoring the loss and disconnection experienced by the Highland communities.

So if you'd abandon your old misery -I will teach you the secrets of high industry.

McGrath's portrayal of the Clearances shows the economic motivation behind the evictions and the greed of the landlords. The play highlights how

landowners, driven by the desire for higher profits. They saw sheep farming as a more lucrative use of their land compared to traditional tenant farming. In an exchange between Loch and Sellar, it is Sellar who argued that the Clearances would benefit society by promoting more productive land use, which would, in turn, lead to economic growth and modernization. He suggests that the existing social and economic structures were inefficient and that the people were not making productive use of the land. It was argued that the Clearances would benefit society by promoting more productive land use, which would, in turn, lead to economic growth and modernization.

They are living in a form of slavery to their own indolence. Nothing could be more at variance with the general interests of society and the individual happiness of the people themselves, than the present state of the Highland manners and customs. To be happy, the people must be productive. And to be convinced that they must worship industry or starve (6).

This perspective was commonly held by some proponents of the Highland Clearances, who argued that the traditional way of life in the Highlands was backward and unproductive. Such views were often used to justify the forced evictions and the transition to sheep farming, which were seen as a means to modernize and economically improve the region.

In the play, the landlords and their agents are depicted as ruthless and calculating, prioritizing financial gain over the well-being of their tenants. This is exemplified in scenes where landlords justify the evictions with cold, detached rhetoric, emphasizing the economic benefits of sheep farming while ignoring the human cost.

Patrick Sellar gained notoriety for his role in the Highland Clearances, particularly during the Sutherland Clearances between 1811 and 1821. Under Sellar's management, the Duchess of Sutherland orchestrated the eviction of thousands of tenants to make way for large sheep farms. His actions epitomize the harsh realities faced by the local population, as families were displaced to less fertile coastal areas where they struggled to survive. Sellar's role in these "brutal episodes" (Smout, 1988: 65) exemplifies the exploitative nature of the Clearances. In John McGrath's play, Sellar is depicted as a figure of authority and brutality, driven by profit. The play portrays landlords as greedy and detached, justifying evictions as necessary for economic progress, while the harsh consequences for tenants highlight the dehumanizing logic of capitalism and commodification of land and people.

The trial of Patrick Sellar in 1816 is portrayed in McGrath's play as a significant example of systemic oppression and exploitation. Sellar faced charges of culpable homicide and other offenses for his brutal eviction methods. In Act 2, Scene 3, witnesses provide vivid accounts of the suffering endured by Highland communities. Despite substantial evidence and testimonies against him, Sellar is acquitted in Act 2, Scene 4, reflecting the legal system's failure to protect Highlanders' rights. McGrath uses this trial to underscore themes of social injustice, power abuse, and the consequences of economic greed, illustrating the corruption and bias within the legal system that favored wealthy landowners over common people.

McGrath's play vividly depicts the human suffering and displacement caused by the Highland Clearances. The evictions are portrayed through dramatic scenes that bring to life the experiences of those who were forced from their homes. The use of personal stories and poignant monologues helps to humanize the historical narrative, giving voice to the victims of the Clearances. One of the most striking aspects of the play is its portrayal of the brutality of the evictions. The police brutality is evident in the case of John McKinnon a cottar aged 44, with six children:

The manager of Knoydart then appeared with his minions and invaded this helpless family even within the walls of the sanctuary. They pulled down the sticks and sails they set up within the ruins, threw his tables, stools, chair and other belongings over the walls, burnt up the hay on which they slept, and then left the district. Four times they came and did the same thing (18).

The passage from McGrath's play provides a stark illustration of the brutality of the Clearances. It captures the violence and disregard for human dignity that characterized the Clearances, emphasizing the power imbalance between the landlords and the tenants. The eviction in Knoydart highlights the exercise of power and authority by the landlords and their agents. The manager and his minions act with impunity, invading the family's sanctuary and destroying their possessions. This act of violence underscores the powerlessness of the tenants, who are at the mercy of the landowners. The repeated invasions – four times in total – emphasize the relentless nature of the evictions and the persistent threat faced by the tenants. McGrath comments on the plight of the inhabitants of Highlanders who suffer due to the greed of landowners by commenting:

Ardnamurchan, Argyll. A half-witted woman who flatly refused to flit was locked up in her cottage, the door being barricaded on the outside by mason-work. She was visited every morning to see if she had arrived at a tractable state of mind, but for days she held out. It was not until her slender store of food was exhausted that she ceased to argue with the inevitable and decided to capitulate (17).

This scene powerfully illustrates the inhumanity and cruelty of the evictions during the Highland Clearances. The woman's treatment exemplifies the brutal methods used by landlords and their agents to force tenants off the land. Her mental vulnerability underscores the callousness of the evictions, as even those least able to resist were subjected to harsh and inhumane tactics. The landlords wielded absolute authority, using force and coercion to achieve their goals. The woman's initial refusal to leave represents the tenants' resistance, while her eventual capitulation signifies the overwhelming power and control exercised by the landlords. Scenes of homes being burned and families being forcibly removed are depicted with emotional intensity, highlighting the violence and trauma inflicted on the Highland communities.

The Highland Clearances were a period of significant upheaval for the Scottish Highlands, marked by the forced displacement of Highlanders due to economic pressures and shifting land uses. The Clearances were largely driven by the shift from subsistence farming to more profitable agricultural practices,

especially sheep farming. This transition was accelerated by the economic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, which made sheep farming, particularly of the Cheviot breed, an attractive option for landlords. The transition required large grazing lands, which led to the eviction of tenant farmers who were replaced by sheep. This process involved harsh methods, including burning homes to prevent reoccupation, and resulted in widespread destitution and displacement. McGrath critiques the role of capitalism in exploiting land and people, paralleling it with modern issues of economic exploitation and cultural destruction.

Patrick Sellar, a key figure in the Sutherland Clearances, becomes infamous for his role in the evictions between 1811 and 1821. Sellar, acting under the management of the Duchess of Sutherland, orchestrated the eviction of thousands of tenants to establish large sheep farms. His actions are portrayed as emblematic of the brutal realities faced by Highlanders during this period. The Sutherland Clearances are depicted as severe and inhumane, with families being relocated to less fertile areas, highlighting the harshness of these economic shifts.

McGrath's play vividly portrays Sellar's cruelty and the broader economic motivations behind the Clearances. The trial of Patrick Sellar in 1816, depicted in the play, serves as a poignant example of systemic oppression and exploitation. Sellar, charged with culpable homicide and other offenses, defends his actions by claiming they were necessary for economic progress. Despite substantial evidence of his brutality, Sellar's acquittal symbolizes the legal system's bias in favor of wealthy landowners, reinforcing themes of social injustice and the abuse of power.

Highlanders, displaced by the Clearances, often emigrated to North America, where they encountered French traders and Native American tribes. The play uses this encounter to symbolize the broader theme of colonialism and the clash of economic interests. The Highlander's struggle to adapt to new socio-economic landscapes while dealing with the trauma of displacement highlights universal themes of exploitation and cultural conflict. The play does not shy away from depicting the emotional and psychological toll of the Clearances. McGrath uses traditional Gaelic songs and laments to amplify the sense of grief and mourning, connecting the audience to the Highlanders' cultural heritage.

Women play a crucial role in the resistance against evictions, with McGrath highlighting their agency and bravery. The involvement of women in fighting back against eviction orders reflects their vital role in the community and their fierce protection of their homes and families. The play emphasizes the collective effort of the community and their struggle against landlord exploitation, connecting past and present struggles for justice and self-determination. McGrath's play draws a parallel to Mahmoud Darwish's "Identity Card," where extreme conditions drive individuals to contemplate drastic actions against their oppressors. The play underscores the intense pressure faced by the Highlanders, reflecting the transformation from law-abiding individuals to those contemplating retaliation.

McGrath's revolutionary zeal is evident in his portrayal of historical and social issues as ongoing. His assertion that the play "has a beginning, a middle, but, as yet, no end" (Agit-prop, 2009: 1) highlights the ongoing nature of the struggles depicted. The play covers various historical periods, from the Highland Clearances to the exploitation of North Sea oil, emphasizing that the impacts of past injustices continue to resonate in the present. This openness implies hope for future generations to learn from past mistakes and build a more equitable society. The play's communal storytelling, music, and dance unify characters and audience, suggesting that collective action and unity can resist the isolating effects of capitalism. McGrath's work remains a significant contribution to socialist theatre, critiquing economic and cultural injustices through historical narrative and critical analysis. It challenges audiences to address the forces shaping their lives and advocate for a more just society. Through its powerful storytelling and historical context, McGrath's play continues to be an influential work in theatre, reflecting ongoing struggles for social justice and reform.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* stands as a remarkable example of socialist theatre that seeks to empower and engage the working class. Through its unique blend of Brechtian techniques, Scottish cultural forms, and political commentary, the play disrupts conventional theatre norms and creates a dynamic, participatory experience for the audience. McGrath's approach is both educational and entertaining, employing humor, music, and direct address to convey complex socio-political ideas. The play's structure, rooted in historical events, not only highlights the patterns of exploitation faced by the Scottish people but also serves as a broader critique of capitalist systems. By portraying the historical struggles over land, game, and oil, McGrath connects past and present oppressions, urging his audience to see themselves as part of a continuous fight against injustice. The play's power lies in its ability to make the audience feel implicated and invested in this ongoing struggle.

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