

## **Remixing Memory through Home Movies**

Shaun Wilson

**Abstract:** The moving image has traditionally provided a catalyst for screen-based culture to develop a language that evokes a means and experience of storytelling positioned in-between the image and the viewer. However, this article will frame such a relationship by distancing the moving image from a cinematic or industrial context to instead look to the amateur cohort of private films commonly referred to as 'home movies'. In doing so, I will consider what Bachelard refers to as a returning to childhood in search of memory, to form a reasoned understanding of the ways in which memory itself can be grafted in-between film and experience. This article will focus on celluloid film which I will define as vintage home movies, namely Standard 8mm and Super 8mm film contributed from domestic-orientated archives. The discussion will examine two main video installations evidencing selected work in the wider series *Filmic Memorials* that is comprised of a substantial body of work established from my family collection of 8mm home movies.

**Résumé:** Dans notre culture de l'écran, l'image mobile a souvent servi de catalyseur à l'élaboration d'un langage narratif situé à mi-chemin de l'expérience du spectateur et des particularités de l'image. Dans cet article, on voudrait revenir sur ce début en privilégiant non pas le contexte cinématographique ou industriel de l'image mobile mais la production de films amateurs ou domestiques que l'on nomme souvent les "home movies". Ce déplacement me permettra de regarder plus en détail ce que Bachelard appelle un retour à l'enfance dans la quête mémorielle et de mieux comprendre la manière dont la mémoire elle-même se place entre cinéma et expérience. Le corpus de cet article se compose d'un ensemble de films sur pellicule qui relèvent du genre des "vintage home movies", à savoir des films 8 ou super 8 empruntés à des archives de type familial. Je présenterai aussi deux installations vidéo de la série *Filmic Memorials* (2002-06), l'une et l'autre basées sur des documents provenant de ma propre collection familiale.

**Key words:** Home movies, filmic memorials, childhood, place, longing

## Article

In its heyday, from the late 1940s until the mid 1980s, 8mm film became the medium of choice for many families to document their lives through the moving image. These kinds of films are now often located in hallway cupboards, wardrobes and darkened spaces; a distant filmic reminder of old technologies from a by-gone era. In the age of digital video practice, however, 8mm home movies are perhaps at their most powerful in terms of cultural and historic value. While this is a fundamental part of how film can gain philosophical worth over time, what emerges through deeper probing is an emotive relationship between the viewer and the image through memory: a 'reinvented' memory located from and within film. However, I will argue that the primary differences between film as home movies and film as cinema are found in the intent of both mediums. Cinema, whether narrative or non-narrative based, focuses on establishing a public viewing in which the subject is available for both entertainment and intellectual scrutiny: yet home movies until the age of the internet were private films and have most certainly kept out of the public gaze until the emergence of online video distribution, such as You Tube and Vimeo for example, reversed this scenario. In fact, contemporary home movies can use this kind of digital distribution method as a way to transpose the privateness that once was experienced through the screening of vintage home movies to a public voyeurism of posting videos on websites and databases with the main intent of becoming widely available under the auspice of 'being seen'. This process now inadvertently changes the way home movies are viewed and ultimately articulated through memory – we now embrace the public instantaneousness of home movies, from mobile and desktop monitors that aid the user to selectively edit these artifacts or change their scale via the use of software and hardware. While this contemporary condition of witnessing home movies propagates the democratization of domestic recordings I will probe these differences in relation to the impact of the types of environments in which vintage home movies were screened and bring this impact back in the context of the experience and re-experiencing of memory.

The overall objective is to come to an understanding of these factors to derive at a central point that both compounds our experiences of memory through this genre of home movies and also find ways of measuring the impact of this merger. This concern

is illustrated through my studio-based contributions which are supported by the joining of ideas within the expanded principles of the aforementioned themes.

Vintage home movies are, first and foremost, a method that preserved glimpses of family and friends in candid moments, remaining, as if locked away and within their immediate environment. Over time, these filmic glimpses often evoke connections between the past and the present that ultimately claims ground between identity and memory. Emma Crimmings in 'Traces' from *Remembrance and the Moving Image*, suggests a connection between film and memory; not in the pictorial sense but rather in the relationships that form between the audience and film and also the re-emergence of an experience from the past brought into the present.

Through projections in living rooms and bedrooms all over the world, these abundant quotidian moments are harvested, processed and preserved only when they are stored away in the dark, enclosed places – pantries, garages, wardrobes – for eventual retrieval and remembering in a distant future. (Crimmings, 2003, 37)

Crimming's argument places vintage home movies within two factors: first, committing and archiving captured moments on film and second, re-experiencing the past through the archive. Although it is clear that the first describes a methodological orientated process, a paramount value that must be first understood in terms of the philosophical currency with which these kinds of films exist is how these records change over time to then evoke memories as the viewer experiences a re-invention of the past through the archive. The value of Crimming's position reflects the personal nature, and power of home movies when viewed with distance between what we see on film and how we can then experience such film. Australian film theorist Leon Marvell calls this 'the experience of deep time' (Marvell, 77) – the journeying back through memory arriving at a mnemonic zone, a mix between the present and the past where emotions locate themselves in transit with the moving image and the self.

These values are not unlike the approach of the French existentialist philosopher Gaston Bachelard who likens the emotions brought about through memory to revisiting, going back to, childhood as he states:

But reverie does not recount. Or at least there are reveries so deep reveries which help us descend so deeply within ourselves that they rid us of our history. They liberate us from our own name. These solitudes of today return us to the original solitudes. Those original solitudes, the childhood solitudes leave indelible marks on the soul (Bachelard 1971, 99).

In this passage, Bachelard strips away memory and returns to childhood as the base for reverie and, moreover, the coming to terms with memory from childhood. This is another factor that contributes to my position which not only defines the structural elements of my artwork but moreover establishes a means of articulating memory that goes beyond the rather more simplistic process of images prompting memory. Of note is the means of going back to the past in order to re-experience it with some sense of emotive leverage. Bachelard prompts the reader to consider an invitation to *be within* memory instead of merely observing it and this state of being within the memory contributes to the impact such films can have on the viewer.

Indeed, my first memories of witnessing my family's vast collection of Standard 8 film compounds this strategy when in 1975, as a three year old, I recall sitting on my grandparent's sofa, captivated by the exotic locations screened before me – Germany, Guam, Holland, and Far North Queensland. These places and others were filmed predominately by my grandfather, Tony Barbone, during his service in the United States Air Force between 1956 and 1964 and also after his retirement between 1965 and 1986. Where Tony traveled so too did his Bolex camera resulting in hundreds of hours of footage that, as I remember it, created much excitement and wonder still evident in me today. Yet the ways in which I experience these films in the present through memory, is not as I did in 1975 but rather as a point of memorialisation; of coming to terms with the loss of much loved family members who appear in the subject and also of the changing places and characters depicted in the film. Some of these people are now much older, houses have become aged and transformed by numerous renovations, decorations have come and gone, animals have lived and passed, carpets have faded and cars replaced. Perhaps in this context, the Lennon and McCartney lyrics from their song *In My Life* which states 'there are places I remember, some have gone and some remain, [.....] and these memories lose their

meaning when I think of love as something new' (Lennon, McCartney, 1965) are at their most impactful when compared with the emotive values that play out when witnessing old film that has some relevance or implied connectivity to one's own self.

Yet these emotions prompted by these films are grafted onto the original memories I recall of 1975, coexisting as both wonder and longing. Childhood becomes a harbour to shelter the duality of memories I share with these films. As such, linkages to this position are echoed in the French poet Georges Rodenbach, in 'XIV' from *The Mirror of the Native Sky* (1898) describes a process of going back to childhood in order to re-experience memory in much the same way as Bachelard prescribes a zone of memory through childhood, not as a journeying back and into the past but rather as a perception of returning as a child to then articulate memory.

Gentleness of the past which one remembers  
Across the mists of time  
And the mists of the memory  
Gentleness of seeing oneself as a child again,  
In the old house of stones too black  
Gentleness of recovering one's thinner face  
As a pensive child, forehead against the window pane... (Rodenbach, 63).

I reference this passage with regard to what Bachelard and Crimmings establish and in relation to contextualising the artwork in describing my relationship with the source film — as an adult remembering through a child's memories. Moreover, what Bachelard also brings to his position is the intimate nature of memory that, in turn, opens up the possibilities of recollections evidenced in the home movies; undeniably personal and intimate. This deeply private filmic territory locks in the secrets of family histories yet at the same time provides an opportunity for the viewer to engage with someone else's stories so often intricately crafted within the image and of the subject. Fiona Trigg, in the essay 'Bourgeois Dictionaries / Meanwhile Somewhere...1940 – 1943' comments:

An outsider can easily miss the hidden stories and secret resonances buried in the visual traces left by the people who capture their lives on film. Watching

other people's home movies can be like listening to someone describing their dreams: occasionally striking but more often than not banal. (Trigg 2003, 71)

In the historical sense, home movies were often composed by amateur film makers intended to be viewed at home with friends and families, depicting celebrations, holidays, domestic life and characteristically imbedded with imperfections: incorrect lighting, camera shake, bad cropping and irregular compositions, non-sequential editing and poor quality film stock. Nevertheless, these blemishes only enhance 'deep time' experiences for the viewer like a type of time-based printmaking – as mnemonic monoprints etched into each frame almost lost in real time projection. Yet once slowed down these markings come alive: a hair, a scratch, a fingerprint; future relics of other memories generated at some point after the original event was committed to film.

Moreover, these marks on the film are to Rodenbach's concept of revisiting memory as are the fragments of reverie that Marcel Proust describes in *Remembrance of Things Past* in his journey back through to childhood memories of eating a Madeleine. I make these comparisons to raise the idea that, like the timely residue accumulated on film, childhood memories are peppered between narratives in both authors' work, randomly appearing - overlaying existing stories - only to then disappear then re-emerge at a later point in time. Such animations are evident in the way I have chosen to examine my family's home movies and represent them in a contemporary art context by slowing down the footage where each residue slowly emerges on top of an existing frame thereby changing the original image to something else. In effect, Rodenbach does the same by revisiting memories that, one might argue, in effect, change the original memory into a hybrid, animated reverie just as Proust's memory of eating the Madeleine coexists with other intertwined memories, and so forth. This can be found in what was to become the first home movie artwork titled *The Bridge* (2002) featuring a slowed down sequence of a bridge entrance to Phillip Island, a small island located in Western Port Bay South East of Melbourne.

In this artwork, we slowly see the random jutting of transforming frames which are darkened via the use of software manipulation in Final Cut Pro that takes on an organic aesthetic as if it is some kind of strange portal rhythmically pulsing like a

heartbeat. This effect became a standard element in future works whereby these images were reconfigured to engage a sense of embodiment. Embracing the imperfections of the source film rather than attempting to digitally 'clean' the image developed an overall mark making exercise that to me was a two-fold way to bring together the reconfigured subject with a suggestion of a bodily presence lurking nearby; that is, to make reference to the person filming behind the camera while at the same time provide a linkage to the characters depicted within the film itself.

This raises the question of how can the image located in home movies change by the presence of scratches or hairs while still compounding a sense of belonging to or marking a significance of filmic identity. Are these residues simply connectors between memories embedded within the artwork? No, they are not. I also use these marks in the art making process as links to other memories, as did Proust and Rodenbach through text, as a means of anchoring the charactability of a placed character, of moving through and within place, conjured through the experience of deep time. In fact, place, when viewed as a conceptual structure, becomes not the physical locations depicted on film as such but rather an understanding or coming to terms with how these locales impact on human experience - becomes important to the artwork. Places are the written spaces that my family, captured on film, has moved through both in their memories and in my own recollections of watching these films.

Places give us, the viewer, a comparison between past and present but also a connection that can give rise to other memories, and from this, forgotten experiences that lurk within each individual frame as well as our perceptions of the subject. If these kinds of places are understood from the perspective of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who argued that the difference between animals and humans is that animals inhabit places while humans dwell in places, If so, then this attachment to the locations with which we experience and move through are a key factor into why such filmic locales can be important to us and that of memory.

Australian philosopher Jeff Malpas, in the essay 'Memory, Place, and Film', raises this idea of location and memory in the context to Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* (1992) by stating that: 'Memory always places us somewhere and every memory always involves us in some sort of bodily orientation. Memory is tied to the body and

so also to place'. This means that memory brings body and place with it, but body and place also bring memory. Memory – and so also the sense of a past – is part of the very fabric of place. Perhaps the best example of this in Wim Wenders' work is in his homage to Berlin, *Wings of Desire*. In that movie, the city is perhaps the leading character in the film – indeed the original title was *Himmel über Berlin* ('Heaven over Berlin'), while Wenders himself says that 'the city called the film into being'. It is a film, one might say, about the spirit of a city as much as it is also about the spirit of human life in that city, and it is also a film that plays with the fabric of the city as constituted in memory, in memorialisation, in the past and in the future (for memory is never only about the past).' (Malpas, 2005, 1)

From this perspective, Malpas distinguishes the connections between memory and place as separate from the past as 'past' and in turn brings the past through place and what is recalled from such places into the present. Although Malpas is not advocating that the past is some how removed from memories evoked by film he does nonetheless raise the idea of advancing the past into the present, that memory is around and within the places we inhabit. Like Wenders' Berlin, in *Wings of Desire*, where the scars of the past are evident in the present, we are reminded of a city that co-exists with the echoes of its history - its interrelated past - imbedded within dwellings as perceived and experienced in the present.

Vintage home movies are much the same. An example can be found in witnessing a known dwelling committed to film and then making a comparison with the same place in the present viewed as a central character in such emotive narratives. As Malpas compares Wenders' Berlin to a character in *Wings of Desire*, so too can the locations and dwellings featured in home movies become a placed character judged by their former depiction.

During the early development of the *Filmic Memorials* series I stumbled across, quite by accident, a collection of never before screened 8mm film captured by my late father, Peter Wilson, spanning the years 1972 – 1986. They were found sitting behind a filing cabinet in my mother's house, collecting dust in an unopened bag. As my immediate family never owned an 8mm projector these films were developed but remained somewhat of a mystery as to what they contained. During my PhD

residency at the University of Tasmania, I brought the collection of films down to Hobart and, whilst sitting in a darkened library screening room, I threaded each film one by one through the projector to find a substantial documentary of my own childhood. While this experience of witnessing these lost films was quite profound, the subsequent artwork produced thereafter played on the sentiments I have for this footage – on the one hand I feel a great attachment to the places and characters which are depicted on film but, more importantly, as my father never lived long enough to see these screenings I felt a tremendous sense of loss and longing that could not possibly be grafted onto the film's subject unless this condition of importing the emotive nature that memories can evoke was intertwined in and from the source footage.

This demonstrates how film can take on evolving interpretative qualities which change in time the emotive conditions of our memories in relation to witnessing the subject. For example, if I had experienced these films at a time when my father was alive then the emotive condition would not be associated with loss and longing but rather react to a first-handed memory of what is depicted in the subject; yet, because the memories of such now evoke other more engrained emotive values the film can become immersed in mnemonic references that claim a wider and more complex scope, these films carry a mnemonic weight emotionally mapped onto the film itself. Likewise, as Tony has also recently passed away, I look to his home movies as much the same as my father's but on a deeper level: the images of both contributors carry with them a sense of absence in the spaces that they moved through in order to commit their captured moments. One might consider these interventions in terms of Aristotle's belief that eyes are the windows to the soul and of memory, in that what they saw through the camera's viewfinder is what the image has committed – as the camera moved so did Peter and Tony, and so on. Bringing the discussion back to the body, we have what I refer to as an 'imprint' of their orientation that when incorporated into my artwork places emphasis on experiencing the remixed films as a comparative exchange in seeing what they saw, going 'back to' the captured moment through memory to be inside their body and relive the way they moved, what they reacted towards in situ, and how this was composed in the live image.

Building on these key ideas was a main focus contained in the video projection *The Image & Narrative*, Vol 12, No2 (2011)

*Memory Palace* (2003) screened at CAST Hobart in 2003. I found a collection of miniature train set buildings, which my father made for me during the late 1970s, and projected the source footage on-top of the structures housed in custom built diorama bases. I then filmed the artwork containing both the miniatures and the projected home movies this with a video camera capturing both the miniature and projection in what was a second hand 'film of the film' not unlike the process of remapping emotions onto existing reveries as discussed above. This artwork in itself became the first of three series of *Filmic Memorials*, which were projected on the wall of the gallery. The point here was that the train set miniature, when enlarged, become gigantic and thus positioned scale as a means of understanding how memories can change their emotive impacts over time but become most specifically a playing out of the idea that the enlarging of scale directly relates back to the embodiment of memory insofar as to make comparison with the enlargement of physical size between childhood and adulthood. The film's place in this argument was that of engaging the act to evoke memories of the past and their re-mapping of remixed memories over time.

As the video work was played on a large 35mm sized projection, in a cordoned off a section of the overall rectangular gallery space, it gave the viewer a place to come to, experience and then leave. However, when future screenings of the artwork were publicly shown in other galleries following the CAST exhibition I intentionally displayed this installation on a much smaller scale – on a standard TV monitor and on a laptop screen that, as one might suspect, gave the viewer a less personalized experience and subsequently detached from the shared intimacy of more traditional spaces to which home movies were originally displayed; instead representing the way personal images are shared in the contemporary world. Learning from this lack of focus, I went back in future works to the design of enclosed spaces to preserve the traditional intimacy of the viewer experience with the image.

The follow-up installation *1975* (2006) was commissioned and displayed in the curated survey exhibition *NEW06* at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, comprised of a miniaturized cinema into which participants could enter via a three foot high door and sit on a two-seater couch approximately one foot wide by three foot long watching a small projected image of the feature video, also named *1975*.

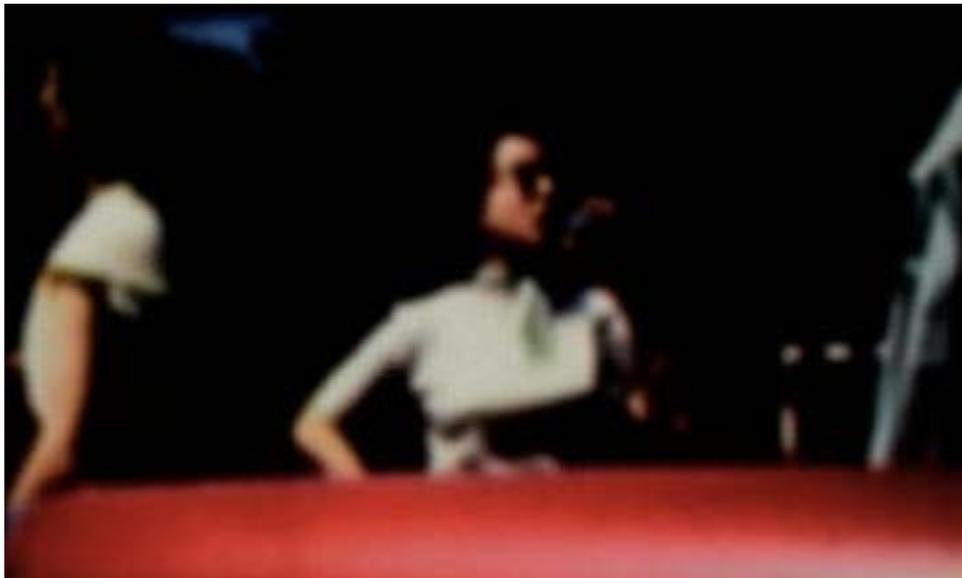
The idea behind this layout was to create an enclosed space that re-created aspects of my own memories of witnessing my grandfather's film that focused on three complimenting aspects: first was the construction of the installation in the scale of the world of a three year old child which, when experienced by an adult, became miniaturized – my height as it was in 1975 measured approximately three foot high so the height of the door and its relation to the rest of the space reflected my exact body dimensions; second, recreating the couch I would sit on to view the films that resulted in a scaled version of what I remember the couch to be and again, constructed according to my then bodily dimensions; and third, to scale down the projected image to fit into an enclosed space which constructed the roof in an angled down fashion so that the projection wall appeared further away from the viewer than what was actually the case. While this miniaturization from memory brings with it an oddity of scale when we view something of an adult world scaled down to that of a child's world, we as an audience suddenly become very large by comparison, as experienced by the viewer inside the artwork's installation room.



Shaun Wilson, video still from *1975* (2006), single channel DV, colour, sound, Dur: 60 mins.

The effect of the film in such a reduced space echoes a displacement in time, especially when viewed with an attachment from memory. It is not dissimilar to the view of Susan Stewart who argues in *On Longing* that 'the beginning of narrative time here is not an extension of time of everyday life; it is the beginning of an entirely

new temporal world, a fantasy world parallel to... the world of every day reality.’ (Stewart, 57) What reveals itself in this context is that the changing scale of both the film and its surroundings take the viewer into another time. Perhaps this is a remixed space combined from the period of the original image stitched with other moments of the memories associated with the film. The point here is that while I bring to these films my own autobiographical memories there is every opportunity for the viewer experiencing the installation to bring their own memories to the film, which of course, creates a different layered interpretation of the image and so forth. Further, this exemplifies not only what Stewart claims as a parallel fantasy world as experienced through and within memory but also to Bachelard’s idea of situating childhood memory by going back to childhood as *the child*.



Shaun Wilson, video still from *1975* (2006), single channel DV, colour, sound, Dur: 60 mins.

The artwork itself referenced source footage of my grandmother Madge Barbone who had died six months beforehand and thus the final artwork was able to explore the elements of loss in the editing process of the source film which used layers of blurs and thin colour tints.

What binds the installations of *1975* and *The Memory Palace* in addition to these emotive resonances is the integration of the archive with the imaged past. If we return to earlier discussion regarding the environments of screened film, many families who

captured their moments on 8mm film had access to a collection of archived reels that, like my own family, form an historical databank but were very much stored away for family and friends. Of course, the desire to keep these films private can give rise to the intimate nature of vintage home movies that were mostly as if a kind of filmic diary which documented the mundane and the domestic. Yet these simple acts captured on film have become, as we have discussed, positioned in the context of being brought into the public domain. In saying this, the intent of the genre as such is still to be seen by family and friends but the ways in which this is distributed to such people has become available, in doing so, to a mass audience. Discussion here can be two-fold: first, regarding the implications of the archive and in the ways in which the viewer engages with vintage home movies and, second, in relation to the environment which surrounds the display of the archive.

There are still many similarities to how vintage home movies were witnessed in the past and how the contemporary web based home movie is also viewed in that home and work computers, mobile and screen-based devices still allow the viewer to experience such films in private spaces; but when these are placed in context to interactivity the home movie experience is changed. I mention this factor to highlight the mode by which vintage home movies were understood and witnessed that, of course, is very different to how their contemporary examples are accessed insofar as sentiments of intimacy that were once part of the home movie experience have become reduced in the newer delivery systems for the image so it would be logical to suggest that this forgotten intimacy of space can be mapped back into the subject when re-experiencing my own source footage. For example, the editing process and subsequent display of the finished artworks were constructed on a computer using image software that was completely detached to the initial ways in which the projected images were first encountered from 1975 onwards. As Crimmings states, these films were more often than not revealed in living rooms and other domestic spaces. It was a clear choice in the 1975 installation to construct an enclosed space that gave a darkened refuge back from the outside world to in turn create a space that was detached from the present.

From this perspective, the archive itself also plays an important role in the way we view our articulations of intimate spaces in order for these collections to bring to the

viewer a point of reference housed in a preservation of past moments which are congealed by its very intent to ‘preserve’ private moments as a way of remembering sequential events – such as the birthday, the Christmas celebration, the graduation, and the holiday. The condition of memory brought about from the archive can be considered a holding pen that the audience can “go to” time and time again but the memories situated in the experience of such will of course change, as we have discussed, from one screening to another as time moves on. Yet the archiving of the captured moment brings with it a stationary anchor that nonetheless moves in between the experiential moments of revisiting these films from one screening space to another; that is, and most importantly, a mode that allows the viewer to come to terms with the past by not only taking into consideration the spaces that the images move through but emotive journeys that the archive can bring back to the viewer on subsequent re-experiences.

In understanding the role of memory through vintage home movies, the viewer forms a relationship between the past and present and of the emotive conditions brought about by the re-experiencing of memories through the moving image. As the collective of domestic 8mm film begins to narrow and deteriorate over time, what we have is a contained period of moments spanning over forty years that have documented generations in their private rituals and celebrations. Perhaps it is the richness of celluloid film that makes vintage home movies occupy a classic quality of deep time matched with its tactile nature to attach an ongoing, deeply personal relationship with memory. My studio practice seeks to continue this investigation into understanding not only the ways in which the viewer can evolve their own memories with the captured image but also how the moving image itself can be experienced through the domestic intimacy and spaces of memory.

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