

Heroism Representation of the Antagonist Character in the Film *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*

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ABSTRACT

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The film Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse introduces a new Spider-Man character named Miguel O'Hara (Spider-Man 2099), who embodies heroic values despite being portrayed as a villain. Using Roland Barthes' semiotics approach, this study analyzes denotation, connotation, and myth within the film. A qualitative research method is employed, utilizing observation and documentation for data collection. The findings reveal that the film highlights Miguel O'Hara's heroic values, including helping, protecting, bravery, faith, selflessness, strength, moral integrity, and sacrifice. Miguel O'Hara's character also represents Latin American culture, the ambiguity of heroism, and counter-hegemonic narratives.

Keywords: Film, Heroic Values, Semiotics, Spider-Man

1. INTRODUCTION

The superhero genre in cinema is not merely light entertainment, but a medium for conveying stories of struggle, morality, and power. From early adaptations like *Captain America* (1941) to modern animations like *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, the tales of superheroes have undergone various transformations, both in terms of technology and narrative approach.

However, the main attraction of these films lies not only in their stunning action or visual effects, but in the characters that inhabit them. Characters are the heart of every story, divided into protagonists, antagonists, and tritagonists. The protagonist often serves as the central figure, a hero who overcomes all obstacles. On the other hand, the antagonist stands as an obstacle to the main character, while the tritagonist functions as a supporting figure who reinforces the relationship between the two.

For instance, in *Gundala*, Sancaka acts as the protagonist who uses his lightning powers to protect the weak (Atmaja et al., 2022:10). However, not all protagonists are depicted as true heroes. *Joker* (2019), for example, places Arthur Fleck, long known as an antagonist in the Batman universe, at the center of the story. Arthur is someone marginalized, facing the harshness of life in Gotham, until he ultimately chooses to rebel against a system he deems unjust. This shows that a protagonist is not always about righteousness, but rather about perspective.

Interestingly, in recent years, superhero films have begun to explore the complexity of antagonistic characters. No longer just the "evil ones," they are now often given human motivations, even noble goals. This has

given rise to the concept of the anti-villain: an antagonist whose cruel actions are driven by understandable reasons. For example, Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* seeks to maintain balance in the universe, although his methods are extreme and inhumane (Kragstberg, 2021:23-26).

This anti-villain phenomenon can also be found in the real world. One example is Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks. What he did, revealing government secrets in the name of transparency, is seen as a threat by many countries. Yet, for some, his actions are a form of bravery in the pursuit of justice (Reditya & Utomo, 2021). This illustrates that "good" and "evil" are often nothing more than personal perspectives.

Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse is a perfect example of complex character exploration. The character of Miguel O'Hara, or Spider-Man 2099, is a leader burdened by responsibility. As the head of the Spider-Society, Miguel's goal is to protect the balance of the multiverse. However, his past trauma, including the loss of his family due to breaking destiny's path, shapes his rigid view that all must follow the rules. This creates conflict with the protagonist, Miles Morales, who holds different values.

The film presents many emotional moments, from Gwen Stacy's struggle with trauma to the debate between Miles and Miguel over fate. Miguel, with all his complexity, introduces a new dynamic in the representation of Spider-Man. He is no longer a flawless hero, but someone who must make difficult decisions for the greater good.

This study attempts to delve deeper into the representation of Miguel O'Hara as an anti-villain in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*. Using a semiotic approach, this analysis aims to uncover how Miguel's

attributes and actions construct a sense of heroism that deviates from traditional norms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Representation

According to (Barker, 2004:177), representation is a series of processes in which the practices of sign-making or signification emerge to represent or depict other objects or practices in the real world. Representation not only depicts but also creates meaning from what is conveyed.

Stuart Hall, in his book *"Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices"*, states that representation connects meaning with language and culture. Through representation, meaning is produced and exchanged among members of society, and thus, representation can be understood as a way of creating meaning (Damayanti, 2023:19). Stuart Hall's perspective emphasizes that the constant formation of culture through meaning and language greatly influences representation. Meaning in representation can be seen through the use of language, signs, and images (Hall, 1997:15).

2.2. Film

According to Law No. 33 of 2009 of the Republic of Indonesia concerning Cinema, "Film is a product of cultural art that functions as a social institution and mass media, created based on cinematic principles, with or without sound elements, and can be shown publicly."

Wibowo et al., as cited in (Wijayanti, 2017:83), explain that a film is a tool that uses storytelling media to convey messages to the audience. (Pratista, 2008:2-4) categorizes film elements into two components: narrative and cinematic elements. Narrative elements are the content or material to be processed, while cinematic elements refer to the style or technique used to process the content.

Krissandy, as cited in (Ghozi, 2023:33-36), adds that supporting narrative elements include characters, conflicts, goals, space or location, and time. Cinematic elements consist of mise-en-scène (setting, costume, lighting, and actors), cinematography (camera, framing, and shot duration), sound or audio, and editing.

Furthermore, characters in films are divided into three types: the protagonist or the story's driving force, the antagonist or the one who opposes the protagonist, and the tritagonist, who supports either the protagonist or antagonist. Roles are also categorized into three types: central characters, who have the most influence on the story; main characters, who appear the most; and supporting characters, who are added as needed (Id'han, 2020:21).

(Rendragraha, 2018:10) classifies characters into several types: main characters (protagonists, antagonists, tritagonists), supporting characters, and extras.

Film is also a part of mass communication. The definition of mass communication can be understood in both broad and narrow terms. Broadly, mass communication refers to the delivery of messages through print, electronic, or digital media. Narrowly, it is the process of communicating with a large audience (Kustiawan et al., 2022:8). This aligns with Dennis McQuail's view that the main feature of mass media is its ability to reach a large number of people. The relationship between communicator and audience is one-way, with a social and physical distance between sender and receiver (McQuail, 2011:62).

In practice, Jay Black and Frederick C. Whitney as cited in (Irwan & Sari, 2022:3) describe four functions of mass communication: to inform, to entertain, to persuade, and the transmission of culture.

2.3. Anti-villain

According to Street (2013:40), an anti-villain is an antagonist who is not entirely evil. This character possesses certain positive attributes such as motivations or goals driven by good intentions, but the means to achieve these goals tend to be evil.

A villain is typically portrayed as an evil person. However, unlike a villain, an anti-villain may exhibit heroic qualities but ultimately becomes a villain in the story. Just as an anti-hero adds complexity and moral ambiguity to a hero's character, the creation of an anti-villain challenges the audience to question who is truly right (Bedard, 2022).

Vogler, as cited in (Ashari, 2020:2-3), observes that many villains are often portrayed as not entirely evil and tend to have complex motivations. One example is Anakin Skywalker from the Star Wars franchise, who joins the Dark Side and becomes Darth Vader. While Darth Vader is depicted as evil, his decision to join the Dark Side stems from his desire to save his wife and gain freedom.

2.4. Heroic Value

According to Adha & Aditya (2022:73), each person has a unique character from birth. People have varying perceptions of what a hero is. Some see heroes as devoted, courageous, or possessing extraordinary abilities. However, certain common traits can be concluded from the image of a hero: someone with moral strength who fights for a cause for the greater good.

(Bernstein, 2020:55) states that a hero is an honest individual with abilities and resilience that match their responsibilities. A hero faces challenges and dangers in the pursuit of a meaningful life goal, particularly in terms of individual morality.

Allison & Goethals, as cited in Kinsella, et al. (2015:4), argue that defining a hero is subject to debate because the concept of heroism evolves over time. In their research, E. Kinsella et al. (2017:4) identify 13 characteristics most closely associated with heroism: bravery, moral integrity, courage, protection, conviction, honesty, altruism, self-sacrifice, selflessness, determination, helping, inspiring, and helpful.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on naturalistic observation of the object, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument. Data collection techniques include observation and documentation, while data analysis is inductive in nature, emphasizing interpretation over generalization (Sugiyono, 2016:24). The constructivist paradigm underpins this research, based on the view that social reality is relative and cannot be generalized. This paradigm places individual interpretation as a key element in the research process.

The subject of this study is the character Miguel O'Hara from the film Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse. The analysis focuses on scenes that reflect heroic values, using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This analysis consists of three levels of meaning: denotation, referring to the literal meaning; connotation, which expresses dominant societal values; and myth, which represents deeper cultural perspectives.

Data collection was conducted through non-participant observation and documentation. Observation was used to systematically record phenomena without direct involvement with the research subject, as the researcher did not participate in the film's production. Meanwhile, the documentation technique was applied to collect data from selected film scenes and various written sources such as books and journals relevant to the research topic.

Data analysis follows Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, aiming to identify and describe the elements of heroism in the film. This process includes examining the denotative meanings of visual elements, interpreting connotative meanings related to heroic values, and uncovering myths that reflect societal perceptions of heroism.

To ensure data validity, the study implements transferability and dependability testing. Transferability is addressed by describing the data in a detailed and systematic manner, allowing the research findings to be understood and explained accurately. Dependability is achieved through consultations with the academic supervisor to minimize potential errors during the research process. These two validity techniques aim to maintain the accuracy of the data while ensuring the findings are reliable and objective.

The qualitative approach, combined with Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, enables a deep analysis of Miguel O'Hara's heroic values. With the application of systematic data validation techniques, this research offers both a detailed description and a comprehensive interpretation of the character under study.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Result

4.1.1 Helping


00:10:37
Denotation
1. The man in the Spider-Man costume (Miguel) appears dominant and powerful in this battle, reaffirming his status as the hero leading the fight. 2. The red and blue line effects highlight Spider-Man's (Miguel's) speed. 3. A wide shot is used to depict the large-scale battle between Spider-Man (Miguel) and the winged man (Vulture). 4. The minor key in the background music enhances the tension and evokes a mysterious mood.
Connotation
1. Miguel represents the archetype of a dominant and powerful hero who always stands at the top of every battle. He is not only physically strong, but also strategic. 2. These colors add a sense of drama and danger, creating an atmosphere full of tension. This situation signals that Miguel is facing a very serious battle. 3. The use of a wide shot showcases Miguel's dominance over his enemy, with a broader visual space featuring bright background colors, explosions, and light. This provides a visual representation of the power disparity between Miguel and Vulture. 4. The minor key reflects a serious and responsible emotional tone, emphasizing that the situation is highly dangerous or demands a weighty decision.
Myth
The use of a minor key serves as a symbol of complex emotions in moments of crisis (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010:230). The red and blue visual effects, similar to Spider-Man's costume, symbolize power, superiority, and freedom, echoing the symbolism of the American flag (Hasan, 2014:55).

4.1.2 Protection



00:10:41

Denotation

1. Spider-Man (Miguel) strikes the winged man (Vulture) in mid-air.
2. Spider-Woman (Gwen) observes the fight.
3. Explosions and debris result from the intense impact.
4. Visual effects highlight the speed of the attack.
5. An extreme long shot angle shows the vast scale of the battle.

Connotation

1. Miguel is portrayed as a strong and heroic protector, saving Gwen and confronting a major threat.
2. Gwen serves as a witness to the battle, evoking the classic narrative of a hero coming to the rescue.
3. The explosions and debris symbolize the intensity and destruction caused by the clash of great powers.
4. Orange distortion effects enhance the heated and dramatic atmosphere, depicting chaos.
5. The extreme long shot emphasizes the epic scale of the fight, showing this is not a mere duel, but part of a larger, decisive conflict.

Myth

Miguel challenges the concept of *White Saviorism* by saving Gwen Stacy, a white woman. This concept refers to white individuals using their resources to "help" BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) in ways that ultimately serve themselves (Krissanti, 2021:16).

4.1.3 Bravery



00:14:27

Denotation

1. Spider-Man (Miguel) is positioned above the winged man (Vulture) in an attempt to stop him.
2. Golden light emanates from the winged man's (Vulture's) jet.

3. Spider-Man (Miguel) appears ready for action.
4. A low-angle shot displays both Spider-Man (Miguel) and the winged man (Vulture).
5. Miguel's dialogue includes a warning that the Vulture could "break the canon."

Connotation

1. Miguel is shown as a dominant, in-control figure through his heroic actions.
2. The golden light, often associated with glory and triumph, suggests Miguel's superiority.
3. His pose reinforces his image as a swift and formidable hero facing a threat.
4. The low angle lends Miguel visual dominance and power over his opponent.
5. The dialogue references the concept of "canon" in the Spider-Verse and highlights Miguel's role as a guardian of narrative balance.

Myth

Miguel is depicted as a godlike figure in Aztec mythology, akin to Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc, who are tasked with ensuring cosmic order, social harmony, and agricultural abundance (Carrasco, 2015:125).

4.1.4 Conviction



00:14:49

Denotation

1. The silhouette of Spider-Man (Miguel) shows him with an angry expression and fangs bared, indicating his feral side.
2. The silhouette of the enemy (Vulture) appears helpless, as if a victim of Miguel.
3. Bright lighting highlights the scene, increasing drama and contrast between light and shadow.
4. The low-angle view makes Spider-Man (Miguel) appear stronger and more dominant.
5. Dialogue suggests the authorities do not see Spider-Man (Miguel) as a hero but as a threat.

Connotation

1. Miguel is portrayed as having a wild and aggressive side, deviating from the ideal image of a hero.
2. Miguel gripping the Vulture's head signals extreme dominance and violence.
3. The light-dark contrast reflects the duality between heroic traits and darker impulses.

- The camera angle enhances Miguel's powerful presence but also raises doubts about whether he is a hero or more of an anti-hero. - The dialogue reveals irony: Miguel sees himself as the good guy, but his actions contradict that belief, creating a conflict of identity.
Myth
The contrast between the dialogue "But I'm the good guy" and Miguel O'Hara baring his fangs reflects the ideology of <i>utilitarianism</i> . Something that is useful, beneficial, or advantageous (Darmataufik et al., 2024:91).

- These colors suggest emotional intensity and a dangerous situation. The dark background implies that although things seem grim, Miguel remains a beacon of hope for those in danger. - The medium angle portrays Miguel as a strong and dominant hero, yet still in a tense situation. - The music reinforces Miguel's role as a unique Spider-Man. With a heavier and more futuristic melody, it adds to his identity as a harder-edged, tech-based hero.
Myth
The minor key symbolizes complex emotions within Miguel O'Hara (Juslin & Sloboda, 2010:230).

4.1.5 Selflessness

 00:15:23
Denotation
- Spider-Man (Miguel) is lifting two helicopter crew members with his arms. - Spider-Man (Miguel) uses his web to hold the two crew members. - The dark, predominantly purple background intensifies the visuals, creating a dangerous atmosphere where Spider-Man (Miguel) is taking action. - A medium angle shows Spider-Man (Miguel) and the two crew members balanced within the frame. - The background music combines two characters themes, with a minor key used for Miguel O'Hara. Miguel's unique theme strengthens his identity as a different kind of Spider-Man.
Connotation
- This action emphasizes Miguel as a tough protector. It highlights his heroic side as he saves lives in the midst of a crisis. - The glowing red light signifies the urgency and danger of the situation, showing that Miguel is not only fighting enemies but also racing against time to save lives.

4.1.6 Strength

 01:22:02
Denotation
- Spider-Man (Miguel) injects serum into his body. - The color blue dominates the visual palette. - Red lines spread from the injection point across Miguel's body. - The camera focuses on Miguel's shoulder in a close-up shot.
Connotation
- Miguel's action represents acquiring power and taking on a great responsibility. - It symbolizes the dark nature of the experiment he conducted on himself. - The visual effect represents intensity, bravery, and the inescapable consequences. - By focusing on the injection, the camera emphasizes a personal and serious act, a crucial moment in his transformation into Spider-Man 2099.
Myth
Miguel's transformation via injection parallels stereotypes in Hollywood where Latin Americans are often associated with drug dealers (Ramirez-Berg in Popelková, 2014:10).

4.1.7 Moral Integrity

 01:32:51	Denotation 1. A man in a Spider-Man suit (Miguel) is seen gesturing firmly as he speaks. 2. Other Spider-Men begin surrounding the man (Miles), showing that he's becoming cornered. 3. Orange and purple dominate the shot more than other colors. 4. The camera angle places Miguel in a higher, more dominant position, while Miles appears lower in the frame. 5. The dialogue conveys Miguel's absolute moral stance that the world's safety is more important than one life.
Connotation 1. Miguel presents himself as a firm and confident figure, believing his actions are justified. He seems to be in full control, emotionally and physically. 2. The Spider-Men represent intense social pressure, suggesting Miles faces not only physical but emotional pressure from a more powerful and established group led by Miguel. 3. These colors reflect a moral and emotional crisis. Orange signals looming danger, while purple expresses the moral dilemma Miles must face. 4. The over-the-shoulder framing emphasizes that Miles is under immense pressure and feels cornered, while Miguel represents authority. This shot underscores Miles' difficult choice and how trapped he is by circumstance. 5. Miguel's statement symbolically represents the weight of heroic choices, an individual's decision can affect the balance of the world, underscoring the gravity of the responsibility he carries.	Myth Miguel defies Hollywood stereotypes of Latin Americans by showing authoritative leadership. A minority figure shown as strong without falling into typical tropes. The dialogue "save one person or save the entire world" reflects a classic heroic dilemma. A leader must prioritize the greater good.

4.1.8 Self-sacrifice

 01:33:20	Denotation 1. A man in a Spider-Man suit (Miguel) stands in front of another Spider-Man (Miles), surrounded by many others also wearing Spider-Man suits. 2. A green light shines on the man in the middle (Miles). 3. Several Spider-Men stand upright, surrounding the man in the middle (Miles). 4. A wide shot captures the scene from a distance, showing all characters in one frame. 5. One man (Miguel) talks about sacrifice as a Spider-Man.
Connotation 1. Miguel is portrayed as a tough mentor. He's not just stating facts but also affirming the values of being Spider-Man — one must be ready to sacrifice personal happiness for the greater good. 2. The scene shows that Miles is not just another Spider-Man, but someone under immense pressure to meet expectations he may not agree with. He's isolated in the group, reflecting his moral dilemma. 3. The green lighting symbolically highlights Miles' uncertain future. Green may also represent choices and growth, placing him at a pivotal moment that will determine his fate — and possibly the world's. 4. The angle conveys that Miles is being judged and tested by the Spider-Society and must now decide his path. 5. The statement reflects that being Spider-Man isn't just about superpowers and heroic action — it's also about bearing immense moral and emotional burdens. It reinforces the idea that great power comes with great responsibility, and personal pain.	Myth The line "Being Spider-Man is a sacrifice" expresses that Spider-Man's identity is not just about powers, but about heavy moral obligations. This concept aligns with the Latin American tradition of <i>el bien común</i> (the common good) (Rojas, 2023).

4.2 Discussion

After analyzing using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the researcher identified heroic values embodied by the character Miguel O'Hara based on the criteria presented by E. Kinsella et al. (2017:4), which include: protecting, bravery, self-sacrifice, moral integrity, selflessness, helpfulness, and conviction. Additionally, one value found, strength, is not included in Kinsella's listed criteria.

4.2.1 Representation of Latin American Culture in Miguel O'Hara

Miguel O'Hara, the Spider-Man from Earth-928, carries a Latin American identity with a Mexican-Irish heritage. He is portrayed as an authoritative figure who maintains the balance of the multiverse through canon events. His heroic actions, such as confronting the Vulture (00:14:27) and safeguarding the canon, reflect bravery and cosmic responsibility, akin to the mythological role of Quetzalcoatl in preserving universal order. Quetzalcoatl symbolizes the sanctification of authority, a paradigm of legitimate rule and order. These mythic figures serve sacred functions in ensuring cosmic harmony, social balance, and agricultural abundance (Carrasco, 2015:125).

Miguel's self-sacrificing attitude is evident when he says, "Being Spider-Man is a sacrifice" (01:33:20), reaffirming the heroic value of prioritizing the common good over personal interests. This aligns with the Latin American tradition of *El bien común*, or "the common good," which refers to what is intended to be beneficial for all members of a community or society.

The use of serum (01:22:02) to gain strength, while demonstrating dedication, can also be associated with Latin stereotypes such as "El Bandido." Ramirez-Berg, as cited in Popelková (2014:10), states that El Bandido first appeared as a Latin villain in silent films and is now often portrayed as a gangster or drug smuggler with tattoos and cunning behavior.

Through Miguel, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* blends Aztec mythology, Latin American culture, and modern themes of sacrifice and responsibility. Challenging negative stereotypes while adding a new dimension to Spider-Man as a collective hero.

4.2.2 Representation of Heroic Ambiguity in Miguel O'Hara

Through Miguel, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* blends Aztec mythology, Latin American culture, and modern themes of sacrifice and responsibility. Challenging negative stereotypes while adding a new dimension to Spider-Man as a collective hero.

Miguel O'Hara is depicted as an anti-villain through the symbolism of his Spider-Man costume, colored red, blue, and black, representing power, superiority, and freedom (Hasan, 2014:55). Though heroic in spirit,

he displays an aggressive and dark side, symbolized by his fangs, similar to Spider-Man's villain Green Goblin. His character is also reinforced by a minor-key soundtrack, akin to that of villains like Electro in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014).

Miguel's heroic side emerges when he helps Gwen fight the Vulture (00:10:37) and rescues a crew using red webs (00:15:22), demonstrating his protective and selfless nature. However, the moment he intimidates with fangs (00:14:49) adds a layer of complexity to his role as an anti-villain. Unlike villains such as the Green Goblin, Miguel acts to protect the multiverse, albeit through harsh measures.

The filmmakers emphasize Miguel's moral ambiguity as Spider-Man, combining traditional heroic elements with a level of aggression rarely seen in other Spider-Men. This positions him as a unique, authoritative, and complex modern anti-villain.

4.2.3 Representation of Counter-Hegemony in Miguel O'Hara

In media hegemony, the dominant powers shape public thought, often reflected in cultural behavior (Altheide in Karisna, 2020:70). Miguel resists Latin American stereotypes by being a Spider-Man who leads the Spider-Society. At minute 00:10:41, Miguel demonstrates heroism by fighting the Vulture, creating the impression of a destructive yet protective force. The filmmakers depict Latin Americans in a new light, countering media hegemony that prioritizes white characters, with Miguel protecting Gwen Stacy, a white woman.

Miles Morales' statement that "Spider-Man always saves others" contrasts with Miguel's willingness to sacrifice individuals for the sake of humanity. The filmmakers portray Miguel as a hero with moral integrity and strong authority within the Spider-Society. At minute 01:32:51, Miguel asserts his leadership through a major decision, portraying himself as the guardian of the entire Spider-Verse.

This portrayal contradicts negative Latin stereotypes that depict them as exotic, foreign, poor, and lazy. Representations that are often accepted as truth and damaging to Latin self-image (Popelková, 2014:19). As such, Miguel becomes a highly authoritative Spider-Man.

5. CONCLUSION

Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of the character Miguel O'Hara in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* reveals that Miguel is a complex figure who cannot be viewed one-dimensionally. His heroism is reflected through values such as bravery, moral integrity, self-sacrifice, and strong determination. Even though his methods at times deviate from traditional heroic norms.

This study also identifies the representation of Latin American culture in Miguel's character, including similarities to the deity Quetzalcoatl, the *El Bandido*

stereotype, and the *El bien común* tradition that emphasizes collective sacrifice. Miguel further embodies the anti-villain archetype through his physical design and soundtrack, which resemble that of a villain.

As the leader of the Spider-Society, Miguel demonstrates counter-hegemony with his high authority, distinguishing him from previous white Spider-Man characters. His relationship with Gwen Stacy reflects cultural diversity in modern narratives. Miguel O'Hara integrates Latin American cultural identity, Aztec mythology, and modern heroic values. Challenging negative stereotypes and presenting Spider-Man as an authoritative, courageous figure willing to sacrifice for the balance of the multiverse.

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