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The Art of Drugs: Psilocybin, Perception and the
Art of Distorted Structure

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Fine Art

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The Art of Drugs:

Psilocybin, Perception, and the Art of Distorted Structure

By Gemma Carpenter

ABSTRACT

The influence that psilocybin has on human experience is one that warps perception and creative output. Art can therefore be a gateway into understanding psilocybin and other perceptual distortions such as visual impairment, dementia, and schizophrenia, alongside cultural influence and acceptance. Drawing from scientific research, psychological studies, and visual analysis of relevant artworks, it is explored how these perceptual shifts shape artistic output across varying contexts.

The cultural connection to psilocybin use is considered through the drug-related advertisement shift of the 1970s and how drug use links back to consumerism, contrasted with culturally accepted drug use seen within Amazonian tradition. The differences showcase consistencies in artworks in relation to cultural identity, spirituality and how society can directly influence altered consciousness.

By comparing art made within non-psychedelic altered perception, artist *Claude Monet's* infamous struggle with cataracts and vision loss is examined through his deteriorating artworks. This brings the intentionality behind recreational drug use into question, and the extent to which this influence is neurological.

Dementia and schizophrenia are considered as visual similarities between psilocybin-induced artworks arise. Through deeper research, the brain's *Default Mode Network* is discovered to be a crucial link for these similarities. Distorted views of colour, pattern and structure reflect on the artists' mental state, with artworks being a possible form of self-therapy.

This exploration concludes by investigating how media romanticisation of drug use can lead to misconceptions that psilocybin creates artistic genius. This negatively impacts public perception of artists, mental health and creates discourse within the art community.

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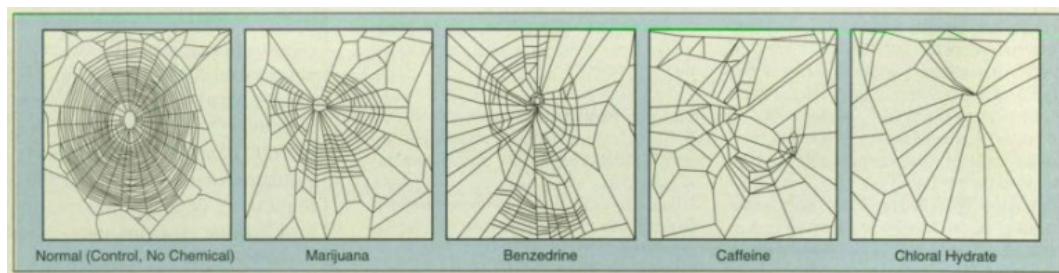
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INTRODUCTION

In the NASA experiment (Noever, Cronise and Relwani, 1995), spiders given caffeine, marijuana, or LSD wove webs that were radically distorted, appearing fractured, fragmented, or overly simplistic. These webs, essential to their survival, reflect a fundamental truth: when perception is altered, so is structure. If a spider's metaphorical life support can be distorted through drug use, what happens when a human; with language, aesthetics, and intention, creates under similar influence?



Commonly referred to as “*magic mushrooms*”, psilocybin-containing fungi are hallucinogenic mushrooms known to produce psychoactive effects once consumed. Psilocybin is a naturally occurring fungi that can alter perception, mood, and create altered beliefs.

Psilocybin's use peaked during the 1960s psychedelic movement, when both musicians and artists sought to express and bring the experience of psychedelics such as psilocybin and LSD to mainstream media. This countercultural shift was seen throughout society, where music-centred “*Trip Festivals*” became social gatherings to share psychedelic escapism. Graphic designers such as *John Alcorn* and *Wes Wilson* created a drastic shift towards psilocybin-focussed advertisements during this period. From advertisements' robotic typefaces and standard iconography reflecting the standardised society they sought to reject, design transformed into warped, kaleidoscopic landscapes with hot, saturated colour palettes – visually demonstrating the rebellious counterculture being embraced.

Although the eyesight of someone using psilocybin isn't physically affected, artist *Claude Monet* provides valuable insight into the neurological implications of mind-altering drugs through his artwork's progression. The art he produced as his vision deteriorated due to cataracts compares to that of psychedelic artist *Isaac Abrams*. Through their warped depictions of nature, the visual outcomes of both artists show that psilocybin use stems deeper than physical eyesight alone.

Moving from cataracts to Alzheimer's disease, the work of *William Utermohlen* is analysed to determine if the true cause of visual distortion is to self-heal internal mental struggle.

Utermohlen struggled deeply with his Alzheimer's, not helped by the fact that he received no medication to slow down the progression of symptoms. This need for comfort through creativity is reflected in the work of *Amanda Sage*, whose psychedelic-inspired artwork is utilised as a tool for a conscious reconstruction of her self-perception. However, despite psilocybin's seemingly positive influence on *Sage's* work and self-image, it is questioned whether her artwork is a way to cover for a reliance on mind-altering substances.

Exploring these neurological implications, the psychedelic visions of *Alex Grey* are compared to the unintentional chaos of *Louis Wain's* schizophrenia through their artwork. The similarities between the artists visual output and the effect both altered states have on the brain's *DMN* is considered.

Returning to the influence of culture, the work of artists *Pablo Amaringo* and *Tokio Aoyama* are analysed through the lens of cultural tradition and religious influence. Both the culturally accepted use of psychedelic brew ayahuasca and less-accepted, recreational use of psilocybin in Western society are considered when comparing these artists. To mirror the analysis of the 1960s psychedelic movement and how society shapes substance use, the effect society and culture has can in turn shape psychedelic hallucinations as seen through art.

Although scientific studies are now considering psilocybin for its medicinal use, its borderline commodification since the 1960s has led to issues such as romanticisation, especially within art and media. It will be analysed how this romanticisation can warp peoples' perceptions of substance use in relation to art, and how ignoring the risks of addiction and overdosing can be extremely dangerous. Artist *Jean-Michel Basquiat* will be used as an example of the 'doomed' artist having been mythologised by media following his death after a heroin overdose at age 27. Media surrounding him will then be critiqued as society continues to romanticise the idea of the 'tortured artist on drugs'.

By combining scientific literature and ambiguous artistic creations, this comparative study of psilocybin-related art will be carried out. Comparisons will be drawn from artworks created during psychedelic states and those produced in non-psychedelic or other altered states of mind. External factors will also be considered, examining how historical context, cultural

traditions and societal values contribute to artistic expression. Emphasis will be placed on psilocybin as the basis for comparisons. Just as psilocybin-producing fungi blur the lines between categories in biology, the artworks produced blur those between art and hallucination alongside individual and societal perception.

CHAPTER 1: *Disrupted Society Through Psilocybin*

During the late 1950s, in both the United Kingdom and the United States, despite increased cost of living, wage rises allowed the average person to comfortably afford luxuries. This led to a rise in luxury consumerism and, as a result, the want for excess was abundant. Upon leaving the 1950s, *Harold MacMillan (1894 – 1986)*, the then prime minister stated: “...*the prosperity being generated during this period was amongst the most widespread the country had experienced*” cited in (*Weston, 2023*). Alongside this, a post-war economic-industrial surge was at its peak, contributing to the growing sense of alienation in society. Psilocybin use in the 1960s offered not just a biochemical high, but a new form of inner escape for those struggling: a stark contrast to this increasingly mechanised way of life. A way out from “...*the dreary repetitiveness and standardization of this ‘robot society’*” (*Mateo Sanchez Petrement, 2023*). Unlike similar manmade substances, psilocybin’s mysterious fungal origins provided the ideal metaphorical return to nature during this intense industrialisation.

This cultural shift towards psychedelics extended beyond recreational use, bringing together artists through a common interest – psilocybin and altered perception. Events such as ‘trip festivals’ were especially popular in the late 1960s and although not officially known as a ‘trip festival’, music festival *Woodstock 1969* was one of the most mainstream examples. The event held over 400,000 attendees with drug use – such as psilocybin, LSD, and mescaline – being central to the event’s success (*Margaritoff, 2019*), medical teams were even present specifically to manage psychedelic-related incidents (*Colin, 2023*). Events like these reinforce the desire to escape this industrialised “*robot society*”, rebelling by breaking such deeply rigid rules. As John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival claims: “...*with half a million people there were no rules.*” Cited in (*Margaritoff, 2019*).

(Tate, 2005) claims in relation to their 2006 exhibition *Summer of Love*, that the showcasing artists from varying cultural origins: “demonstrates how artists were deeply entrenched in popular culture”, highlighting the deep connection between these psychedelic gatherings and artistic production on a global scale. This suggests that the unity created by psilocybin in this era was the real cause of widespread creative expansion, rather than artistic freedom being directly derived from drug use alone. Photographer Bill Eppridge’s (1938 – 2013) ‘Woodstock Music & Art Festival’ (Eppridge, 1969) from Woodstock 1969 bears a



striking
resemblance to



John William Waterhouse’s (1849 – 1917) ‘Hylas and the Nymphs’ (Waterhouse, 1896), which depicts a lone man lured into a spring by a group of nude women. In contrast, the *Woodstock*

photo reverses these gender roles, a single woman immersed among a group of men, showing a move toward egalitarianism through shared escape in psychedelic rituals. Free from societal constraint and united by a common need for escapism, these visuals suggest a deeper continuity between historical countercultures. The symbolic use of nature and nudity remains constant throughout centuries and this reversal in gender dynamics highlight shifting social values. Although unintentional, the mirroring between painting and image of returning to nature adds to the deep and symbolic connection between art and drugs.

Moving from unintentional to intentional artistic production, there is strong evidence to suggest that instead of psilocybin use enhancing individual creativity directly, it removes feelings of self-doubt surrounding creation that artists often have. A controlled study by (Anderson et al., 2019) found significantly “lower negative emotionality”, or self-doubt, within those taking psilocybin or similar psychedelics regularly. As a result, this collective release of doubt within existing and emerging artists removed mental barriers to creative freedom, allowing for a wave of artistic expression within fine art and, more surprisingly, graphic design. Throughout society, these limited feelings of self-doubt in tandem with the increased

social gatherings resulting from fungal drug-use could be argued as the true cause for collective artistic enhancement during this period.

Following this, a monumental increase in creative liberty, especially within graphic design, was evident throughout society. Within abstract art, ambiguity is abundant. Much like an individual's experience with psilocybin, meaning can become fluid. In contrast, graphic design usually aims for the opposite: clarity and directness. With *David Klein's* (1918 – 2005) *Rome* (Klein, 1960) he maintains a clean and legible advertisement, prioritising readability over artistic expression, common during pre-psychedelic movement graphics. This led to it being an award-winning



advertisement during the early 1960s. Although forms are exaggerated and colours are fully saturated, the text and iconography remain easily distinguishable even from a distance. Through plane imagery, common Roman tourism iconography and the bold red words “Fly TWA jets” below, the intention of the poster advertising a travel company is unmistakable.

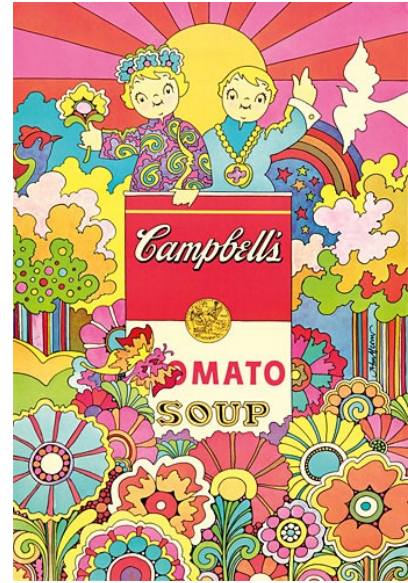
1966 onwards was pivotal for these psychoactive fungi to truly become a catalyst for



psilocybin-inspired designs. Artists such as *John Alcorn* (1935 – 1992) and *Wes Wilson* (1937 – 2020) – one of the famous ‘Big Five’ psychedelic poster artists – were able to thrive, breaking many established rules of graphic design, transforming “...the cold precision of modernism” into an “...explosion of ‘hot’ colours and organic forms.” (Lowey, 2016). The recognisable iconography and typefaces seen in *David Klein's* designs shifted into the subtle ambiguity and surreal imagery of *Wes Wilson's* work, such as (Wilson, 1967) to which he claimed when faced with criticism: “They’ll stop to read it because they can’t read it.” (Lippert, 2020). Distorted and seemingly unrelated imagery

was a theme then carried out throughout graphics during the late 1960s where concepts

began to feel more artistic than informational, blurring the lines between expressive art and practical design. With *Alcorn* advertising products such as *Campbell's Soup* (*Alcorn, 1968*), the style of psychedelic art evolved from swirling, bright colour schemes to implying psilocybin as a core ingredient due to the visual focus on natural elements: “The *Campbell's* ad suggests that psilocybin was now being used in the cream of mushroom soup.” (*Coulthart, 2021*).



Trip-inspired landscapes were abundant to attract viewers, seeming to leave the main focus of the advertisement – in this case, *Campbell's Soup* – as an afterthought. This then furthers the idea that advertisements adapted towards connecting with this popular psychedelic trend to push advertising rather than natural artwork production through private drug use. Another of the ‘Big Five’ psychedelic poster artists in that era, *Alton Kelley (1940 – 2008)*, recalls: “We had free rein to just go graphically crazy. Before that, all advertising was pretty much just typeset with a photograph.” (*Bahr Gallery, n.d.*). Utilising this trend as an artistic tool, ironically, looped graphic design back to the mass consumerism once opposed. Rather than viewing psilocybin-induced hallucinations as disordered cognition, the psychedelic artists of the 1960s reframed these altered states as legitimate visual methodologies during artistic production, warping not only art, but personal perception and societal expectations alike. This change transformed the 'side effect' of fungal psychedelics into a tool of aesthetic production, merging perception with expression. Structure, in this way, was not only altered aesthetically, but metaphorically.

CHAPTER 2: *Monet, Cataracts and Visual Distortion*

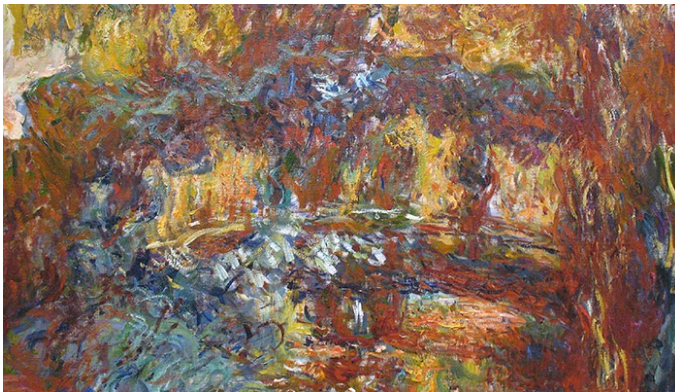
Author and ophthalmologist *Patrick Dacre Trevor-Roper (1916 – 2004)*, in *The World Through Blunted Sight (Trevor-Roper, 1997)*, argues that visual elements in artworks can be directly affected by the artist's eyesight. Visual elements such as colour, proportionality, and use of perspective can all become radically distorted depending on the state of the artists' vision during creation. For example, *Trevor-Roper* claims that glaucoma, astigmatism, short sightedness and cataracts are all conditions able to unintentionally affect visual elements within an artists' final artwork.

When it comes to psilocybin-induced trips, it is no mystery that eyesight and individual visual perceptions of the world can become altered. (*Hartman and Hollister, 1963*) explain in their study of mescaline, lysergic acid diethylamide and psilocybin on colour perception, that "*Almost all measures of color perception were affected.*", leading to subjects finding colours more intense in terms of vibrancy, saturation and contrast on varying levels. These all tend towards enhancing the artists' physical perception, however, what contradicts this idea is the implications of effects such as impaired hue discrimination. Hue discrimination – the ability to distinguish between neighbouring hues on the colour wheel such as reds and oranges or greens and blues, becomes disrupted, implying distortion on a neurological level. Although these are primarily visual distortions, (*Anthony et al., 2020*), explains that this being a neurological effect may hold some weight. This hue distortion was seen to extend to subjects suffering from colour-blindness. From this survey, 23 out of 47 subjects reportedly experienced improved colour sight temporarily after taking psilocybin or LSD, many of which were subsequently able to succeed in colour tests for "*...several days to years*" following – solidifying that these psychedelic distortions affect people on neurological levels rather than purely physical in terms of basic eyesight.

Perceptual distortions originating in the brain are evident within the work of self-proclaimed psychedelic artist *Isaac Abrams* (b.1939). As (Swanson et al., 2024) note, psilocybin can increase visual clarity, an effect which is abundant in Abrams' "The



Earthly Flow" (Abrams, 2017). The sharp, directional lines and detailed patterns suggest intentionality. Although the subject matter appears abstract, its lucid chaos may reflect the altered mental state caused by psilocybin, as Abrams realised: "...there was going to be new art that reflects the intensity, immediacy, and dimensionality of hallucinogenic experiences." (Robert Koch Gallery, n.d.). However, the name of the work, "The Earthly Flow", hints towards a connection to nature in some way – reinforcing psilocybin's fungal origins. Though harsh lines and hot colour palettes are rarely seen in nature, these visual choices likely result from Abrams' altered perception during creation. This visual clarity contrasts harshly with the vague chaos of *Claude Monet's* (1840 – 1926) "The Japanese Footbridge" (Monet, 1922), painted during his visual deterioration.



Monet is widely known to have worked without the influence of drugs, written works about him focus on his vision in relation to his artwork, with no mention of any psychedelic involvement throughout his lifetime.

Therefore, it is safe to assume that the

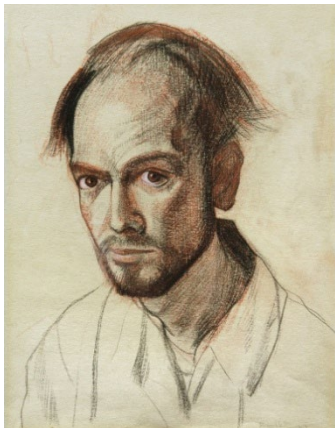
primary reason for this visual distortion in his later paintings was his deteriorating vision and altered colour perception. *Claude Monet's* vision was severely affected by cataracts in his later life and the mental frustration he felt as a result is reflected in his later paintings; his visual deterioration often mirrored by stark shifts in his colour palette. The severity of his vision is confirmed as *Monet* claimed: "I will paint almost blind, as Beethoven composed completely deaf" (Tucker, 1995). His choice of a primarily hot colour palette; filled with fiery reds, yellows and oranges, strays violently from his original iconic cool-toned, natural palette – another unintentional result of his altered vision: "*Monet's* cataracts essentially acted as a colour

subtracting filter, whereby the spectrum of shades visible to him were replaced for a dull, yellow-like quality.” (Irvine, 2024). The placement of blue within this painting appears haphazard and his intention with them seems unclear. Even in his stylised paintings, blue remains in realistic locations; the sky, water and shadows, used to emphasise dimension. This further suggests that *Monet’s* inability to perceive blue tones left him uncertain about their placement. In contrast, although *Abrams’* blue placement appears random due to his abstract style, the visual precision throughout the piece makes it feel deliberate. This could allude to the fact that in his altered state, he is trying to depict an idea that appears obvious and clear to him, something that produces an intense emotional response, yet a non-psychedelic state of mind could not comprehend. As *McGovern et al.* concludes through peer-reviewed research, by use of psychedelics, “*false insights*” and in turn, “*false beliefs*” can occur within the user due to the altered state of mind produced (*McGovern et al., 2024*). This may explain the abstract nature of *Abrams’* work as an attempt to represent an experience that felt deeply meaningful when influenced by psilocybin, even if that meaning may not translate clearly to a non-psychedelic state. As mentioned by *Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885 – 1939)*, an artist known for his drug use, “*I wrote it down and read it back in a sober state – complete nonsense. In the ethereal state, I have written an acceptable poem only once*” (*Bretan, 2022*). An irony is potent here; *Monet* consistently attempts to depict landscapes from reality, yet his later work is often less legible compared to *Abrams’*, which results from intentionally altered perception. The frustration he felt from this unintentional loss of creative precision – although not physically affecting the brain – may also contribute to the result. *Monet’s* artwork at this stage harbours a sense of desperation, a vague impression of the world remaining, once again reflecting the decline in his physical sight. In comparison to his well-known work, “*The Japanese Footbridge*” feels vague, abstract, and murky. From sporadic colour placements forming uneven outlines on objects, to inconsistent colour choices – the argument of *Trevor-Roper* proves to be solid.

Abrams’ work, despite originating from something so misunderstood, comes across much clearer in readability due to its precise aesthetic quality. The sharp lines, repeating patterns and consistent colour choice throughout suggests an intentional quality to the work. Although his perception is distorted, the work remains clear and legible. This suggests that an artist’s mental state may affect artistic output just as equally as their physical vision.

CHAPTER 3: *Alzheimer's Disease, Art, and Losing Control*

American artist *William Utermohlen* (1933 – 2007) endured immense internal struggle after his Alzheimer's disease diagnosis in 1995. He unintentionally documented his mental decline through his artistic output – an artistic visual deterioration similar to artist *Claude Monet's*. Alzheimer's disease is a neurodegenerative condition characterised by memory loss, mood changes, and impaired coordination (*NHS, 2025*). With no known cure, a diagnosis can create feelings of despair, isolation and helplessness due to its progressive nature: it worsens over time. *Alzheimer's Society* says it is normal to “...get frustrated, worried, or lose self-confidence.” when living with the disease; however, there are now a range of medicines available to “...delay the symptoms getting worse” (*Alzheimer's Society, 2022*). Although certain medications were available towards the end of his life, there is no documentation that *Utermohlen* was prescribed any. Therefore, the visual changes to his art are considered a direct result of his neurodegenerative decline, rather than medical intervention.



Utermohlen's “*Self Portrait*” (*Utermohlen, 1967*), “*Self Portrait (green)*” (*Utermohlen, 1997*), and “*Head I*” (*Utermohlen, 2000*) demonstrate his neurological deterioration respectively. He adapts his choice of materials over time as he goes from using paints and multiple media to simple pencil sketches, possibly another reflection of his difficulties in decision making – the pencil being a simple, safe choice compared to the numerous options faced with when painting. *Utermohlen* was classically trained at *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts* (*NBC News, 2006*), which is clear within “*Self Portrait*”. This work – with accurate proportions, effective use of shading and uncanny likeness to the artist – devolved into an abstract display of internal disruption as seen in “*Head I*”. This mirrors the physical effect amyloid plaques

have on the brain during Alzheimer’s disease: blocking neural connections, causing areas of memory and knowledge to become inaccessible. This loss is echoed in his disproportionate depiction of his ‘self’: the eyes are absent, there are unnatural creases and folds where there should be none, and the nose, although misplaced, remains the only recognisable feature. As speculated by *Rachael Davenhill (n.d.)* in the book *Looking into Later Life: “Artistic creation may, for William Utermohlen, also be an attempt at self-healing.” (Davenhill, 2018)*, directly suggesting a connection between *Utermohlen’s* artwork and an attempt at self-soothing the distress of his Alzheimer’s diagnosis.

The idea of self-healing through art is evident in the work of artist *Laura Footes (b.1988)*, who paints primarily domestic scenes, showcasing her home as both a safe space and personal prison as she explores her battle with chronic illness. Within “*4.00 AM*” (*Footes, 2023*) this duality is demonstrated well. Despite the soft purple hues, early morning sunlight and comforting backdrop, the painting is contrasted by the presence of ghostly, restless figures. The rumpled bedsheets and implication of her being awake at an unconventional time (*4am*) suggest an inability to find rest in an otherwise comforting space.



This reflects *Utermohlen’s* work “*Bed*” (*Utermohlen, 1991*), a piece created during his experience with undiagnosed onset Alzheimer’s disease, set in his London apartment. *Utermohlen* showcases a warm, comforting bedroom in a slightly unorthodox way. The unconventional angle of the composition alongside highly saturated, unnatural colours transforms the space into a highly intense and an, ironically, restless one – perhaps foreshadowing the way he will exist after his later Alzheimer’s diagnosis: “...to subsist while disappearing.” (*Davenhill, 2018*).

Both an Alzheimer's diagnosis and psilocybin affect the brain and influence artistic output, albeit in opposite ways. Emerging research even suggests that psilocybin has potential to regrow neural connections or alleviate depression in early Alzheimer's, with results comparable to the SSRI antidepressant escitalopram (Carhart-Harris et al., 2021).

Utermohlen's work documents the mental decline associated with clinical diagnoses.

Although he did not use psilocybin, his art may have served as a form of self-soothing, expressing his distorted sense of 'self'. In contrast, psilocybin-inspired art often centres on intentional healing and identity reconstruction.

Artist *Amanda Sage's* (b.1978) conscious reconstruction of her self-image through psilocybin is a striking contrast to the unconscious deterioration of *Utermohlen's* portraits, yet they



both use art as a tool for self-healing. Her work "*Transformation*" (Sage, 2020) demonstrates her intentionality and goal towards self-soothing well.

The work displays the intentionality *Utermohlen* lacked within his late portraits, with "*Transformation*" leaning more towards abstract illustration than contemporary art with a clear message implied through the use of industrial and natural imagery alike. Her portrait is overtaken by nature, intentionally detaching herself from the pollution behind, an indicator of positive change

within her identity, signalling a positive shift in her self-perception. Although abstract, this visual merging suggests a return to nature, perhaps another metaphoric escape from the ego-driven order of industrial society, much like that of the 1960s counterculture movement.

Through this work, she releases her identity in favour of a more organic, interconnected 'self'. Her intentionality with her reconstruction of self-identity is again in opposition to that of *Utermohlen's* work. As she states during an interview with (Sage, 2021) regarding

moments of distress or struggle she has faced; "*I have to have faith in those dark moments and this is where psychedelics have been an incredible tool.*", showing how she knowingly

utilises psilocybin as a tool for artistic creation as well as personal therapy. The suggestion of

psilocybin fungi and neural pathways further implies conscious mental reconstruction, with *Sage* remaining in control over the visual outcome to an extent.

In both cases, art serves to express neurological degeneration and conscious restoration respectively. Although both artists showcase their self-depictions with obvious dissimilarities, both maintain the goal of visually expressing the internal, and perhaps, in turn, healing inner distress. However, although psilocybin is praised for its antidepressant-like properties, the artistic output created as a result remain as an objectively distorted self-image. The work of *Amanda Sage* implies a positive change in personal perception, nevertheless, it is rooted in unrealistic imagery and created from an unnatural state of mind. It could therefore be questioned if this hyper-realistic imagery masks a reliance on altered states, and whether a distorted sense of self would be seen without the use of psilocybin. However, in some cases, art serves as a form of therapy for artists in distress. Whether it be using psilocybin as a form of escapism, as seen in the 1960s psychedelic movement, or through using art to cope with deteriorating mental health, artistic distortion may be a way of processing deeper internal struggles.

CHAPTER 4: *The Schizophrenic Brain Versus Psilocybin*

Although the origins of a person's sense of self are widely debated, it is generally agreed that the brain's Default Mode Network (*DMN*) plays a central role. First identified by *Raichle et al.* (*Raichle et al., 2001*), the *DMN* is primarily active during rest or introspection and is a "...brain function that is suspended during specific goal-directed behaviors.". As (*Menon, 2023*) states in an overview of the *DMN*, it remains: "...central to the construction of a sense of self". The *DMN* is known to support autobiographical memory – a type of memory consisting of both episodic (details from specific events) and semantic memory (generalised self-knowledge). Alongside this, the *DMN* enables individuals to introspect, critically reflecting on thoughts, emotions and past actions. Although it plays a key role in self-reflection and thought regulation, it is recognised as "...both an essential part of normal human functioning" and a "...critical element of poor psychological well-being." (*Andrews-Hanna, Smallwood and Spreng, 2014*).

During psilocybin trips, decreased cerebral blood flow has been recorded in the *DMN*, indicating decreased activity (*Carhart-Harris et al., 2012*). Psilocybin's disruption of the *DMN* can, in some cases, produce desirable effects that are actively sought after. Ego death particularly is often an end goal for many when taking psilocybin: the temporary or complete loss of one's sense of self. Although there are recorded negative effects of ego death, there is "...promising research into the benefits of psychedelic use resulting in ego death on one's mental health and well-being." And that "...the main aim of psychedelic therapy should be ego death." (*Ohwovoriole, 2024*). The intentionality behind psilocybin's medical or recreational use contrasts the unintentional – and often volatile – nature of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a mental health condition characterised by "...impaired perception, delusions, thought disorder, abnormal emotion regulation, altered motor function, and impaired drive." (*Hu et al., 2017*) that is known to unintentionally affect the *DMN*. The art of *Louis Wain (1860 – 1939)* reflects this neurological distortion through his experience of schizophrenia. Known as '*The man who drew cats*', *Louis Wain* was an American artist often used as an example in psychology today to demonstrate the progression of schizophrenia visually. His unintentional progression behind his art is evident as he was known to have denied his mental illness until placed in a psychiatric institution towards the end of his life (*Dale, 2001*). After the cat he

gifted to his soon-to-be late wife Emily passed away, *Wain's* artistic focus shifted heavily towards drawing cats. Ironically, it has since been suggested that *Wain* may have developed schizophrenia from toxoplasmosis – a parasitic infection commonly contracted from cats. This suggests that the very thing he devoted so much of his life to might have been what caused his mental decline in the first place (*Woolfe, 2013*).



These cat drawings progressed from realistic portraits to fragmented, kaleidoscopic mascots alongside the progression of his schizophrenia (*Damiani and Fusar-Poli, 2018*). His work transitioned into unrealistic colour palettes, intricate patterns and direct, confronting gazes. This intensity may reflect the severity of his schizophrenia, made even more striking by the fact he denied any changes in his behaviour, suggesting he may have viewed his later work as an accurate depiction of a cat. Although his work demonstrates his personal perception of the world, his schizophrenia suggests this distortion runs deeper than physical perception, much like psilocybin use. Comparable with *Monet*, if the cause were purely physical, *Wain* would likely have been aware of these changes, and the distortions in his art would likely appear vague with details deteriorating – instead of being arguably more intricate than his earlier work. This suggests that his physical eyesight was not impaired. *Wain's* unintentional distortions contrast sharply with the intentional psychedelic artwork of *Alex Grey (b.1953)*.



Both artists centre their work around a form of worship: *Wain's* worshipping cats, and *Grey's* towards religious symbolism, seemingly viewing psilocybin as a higher power. Kaleidoscopic anatomical figures and references to transcendence are abundant in *Grey's* work, and hints of these visuals can also be seen in *Wain's*. It is well known that *Grey's* psilocybin use directly influences his visual style, focussing on “...consciousness, interconnectedness and

transcendence” (Grey, 2013), with his work ‘*Cosmic Christ*’ holding many similarities to Wain’s late-stage cat depictions. The repeating patterns, hot orange hues, and the structured, front-facing compositions are features noticeable in both Grey and Wain’s late-stage art. In this context, the religious connotations in both artists’ work seem to originate from a shared experience of bodily detachment and losing a sense of self understanding, reflecting the neurological effects of *DMN* disruption in both cases.

Grey’s obsession and worship appear intentional, as seen in ‘*Flesh of the Gods*’ which depicts an abstract anatomical hand holding psilocybin mushrooms – the mushrooms in the foreground symbolising the ‘*flesh*’ of his personal ‘*God*’. He proves his intentionality in reference to the work’s title by directly saying: “*Psilocybin is the sacramental Flesh of the Gods*” (Grey, 2023). In comparison, Wain’s work suggests unintentionality due to the denial of his illness, leading distortion to be



symptomatic rather than deliberate. Grey instead aims to control this distortion with clear and accurate references to psilocybin – evident in both the subject and background.

The interaction between psychedelics and schizophrenia in relation to mental health therapy is complex. Studies highlight both psychedelics and schizophrenia share neurobiological mechanisms (Maćkowiak, 2023). This raises the question: *if psychedelics mimic the neurological impact schizophrenia has on perception, how can they be used as treatment?*

While their ability to directly treat schizophrenia is limited, often worsening psychotic symptoms, there is evidence showing their potential in treating conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (*PTSD*) which are sometimes diagnosed alongside schizophrenia (Sabé et al., 2024). So far, the art discussed has been analysed in relation to distorted perception brought on from psilocybin and similar causes.

CHAPTER 5: *The Art of Ayahuasca and the Amazons*

As explored previously, culture can influence altered perceptions. It can influence so greatly that in parts of India and Ghana, hallucination symptoms following a schizophrenia diagnosis can be seen as ancestral guidance instead of a symptom requiring medication. These hallucinations – whether visual, auditory or otherwise – are praised, with many within these cultures believing them to provide connections to family members and God. Within Indigenous Amazonian social life, use of the psychedelic ayahuasca is normalised and even praised. Ayahuasca is a psychoactive drug similar to psilocybin. Although they are a psychoactive brew and fungi respectively, the main difference is that in some cultures, ayahuasca use is a cultural tradition – where taking it for recreational and medical purposes is actively praised. This switch from concealed drug use to open cultural tradition may impact creative output differently.

Recent studies suggest that this cultural acceptance can directly alter hallucinations experienced by that individual into becoming more positive (*Bower, 2014*). This contrasts with the suffering experienced by *Louis Wain* after his schizophrenia diagnosis, perhaps a cause more closely attributed to the Western, clinical environment he was in than his neurological distortion. Ironically, this suggests certain forms of altered perception may be malleable, instead of purely symptomatic. Compared to this ceremonial use of ayahuasca, psilocybin use remains marginalised or controversial within modern Western cultures. Culture, in this way, plays a vital role in whether a resulting hallucinatory experience is terrifying or considered transcendent.

Peruvian shaman-artist *Pablo Amaringo (1938 – 2009)* creates artwork inspired by ayahuasca-induced states, something that is actively celebrated within his tribal culture. As confirmed within the art exhibition *Ayahuasca & Art of the Amazon: “the ritual consumption of ayahuasca is intimately linked to the artistic production of ceramics, textiles, sculpture, painting and photography.”* (*Sainsbury Centre, 2025*). Having previously worked “...with plants and vegetables to cure physical and spiritual illnesses.” (*Woolfe, 2013*), his desire to connect more closely with spirituality through ayahuasca aligns with his cultural views. While *Amaringo’s* artistic output was influenced by ayahuasca rather than psilocybin specifically,

both substances induce similar experiences when considering the impact of cultural traditions in resulting artistic creations.



His work *“The Sublimity Of The Sumiruna”* (Amaringo, 1987) depicts a ceremonial ayahuasca gathering, with some of those attending drinking brewed ayahuasca. Although subtle, the gathering of people “connected” by the vine-like network beneath them may be a metaphor for the connection

created through ayahuasca during ceremonies. Today, people travel worldwide to attend these ceremonies, often leaving a personal possession behind as a simultaneous “...sacrifice...” and “...form of liberation.” (Tanner, 2016). The lack of personal possessions seen, cultural diversity, and the emphasis on male attendees all point towards a traditional shaman ceremony. Shamans (*who are primarily males*) brave the experience of ayahuasca (McCallum, 2020) to strengthen their confidence in hunting and killing; “Thus, women do not need to take ayahuasca since they do not do these things” (Fotiou, 2010) which aligns with their historical cultural views, explaining the lack of female figures within the work. Serpents are a recurring symbol in Amazonian culture, often representing transformation. Here, the shaman in the background is seen wearing serpent skin, a cultural symbol of his spiritual transformation. Although experiencing ayahuasca when painting, there remains ample evidence of cultural influence throughout Amaringo’s work. The influence is seen in tandem with repeating patterns, extreme detail and a range of unnatural colours used – all common indicators of art created with the aid and cultural acceptance of psychedelics.

In comparison, Tokio Aoyama (b.1976) is an artist greatly inspired by psychedelia and surrealism, becoming greatly influenced by culture throughout his career. Although he has admitted to regularly using psychedelics, he claims he does not use psychedelics to specifically aid his painting (Aoyama, 2012). He puts an emphasis on cultural inspiration within his work and claims he does not need psychedelics for creativity. However, the

influence it has on him can be seen throughout his artwork. Unlike *Amaringo* being clearly grounded in his culture and its influence, *Aoyama's* work combines cultural influences, an outcome apparent within art created post-migration from Japan to America. Claiming in *Dazed* interview (*Aoyama, 2012*) that he was greatly influence by “...*American music and culture.*” in his late teens and that his resulting work contains “...*influences of urban American mixed with Japanese influence.*”. He subsequently comments: “*Moving to Seattle made me more aware that “I’m Japanese” and that Japanese traditions are deeper than I had thought.*”, making him realise his Japanese roots while simultaneously being exposed to urban American influences as a teenager.

His Japanese roots are clear throughout *Untitled* (*Aoyama, 2010*), with subtle reference to Hinduism, an often-overlooked religion in Japan (*Hardy, 2022*). Through a symmetrical, orderly layout, a large, God-like figure bearing multiple arms and a surreal colour palette, direct influence from Hindu God



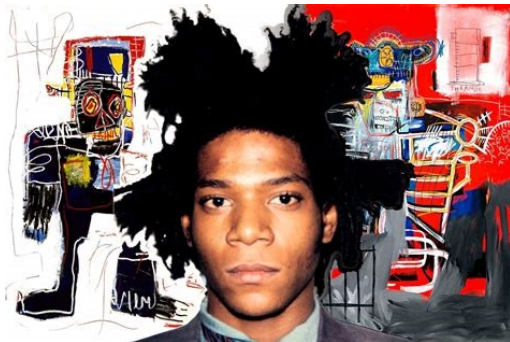
Vishnu can be seen, a God with “...*blue coloured skin and with four arms.*” (*BBC, 2009*). Within Hinduism, multiple arms point to *Vishnu's* ability to uphold cosmic order and is seen as a symbol omnipotent power. Typically, each arm is seen holding a divine tool: each representing a symbol of their power (*Kachar, 2023*), a structure deviated in *Aoyama's Untitled* where the heads of famous black American artists can be seen in their place. His American influence is more direct in this way. These famous musicians are a staple within *Aoyama's* work, and the indirect influence of psilocybin seen in the spiritual composition, the geometric, mandala pattern framing this God-like figure and the common theme of striking, saturated hues place of natural colours throughout his artwork.

Though their artworks remain visually different, both *Amaringo* and *Aoyama* transform altered perception into a form of connection, whether that be social connection through deep-rooted tradition, or a connecting of multiple cultures. Their work is a testament to psychedelia being more than just a warped form of seeing, but an altered perception expressed through tradition, societal values, and cultural identity. It was previously explored

how altered states can change culture, now it is seen how culture can change altered states in this way. Western views of altered perception as purely neurological are challenged here, and the idea of cultural influence directly affecting individual perception is considered. Therefore, perception is not only personal, but deeply cultural, fluid, and shaped by belief.

CHAPTER 6: *Romanticisation of the 'Artist on Drugs'*

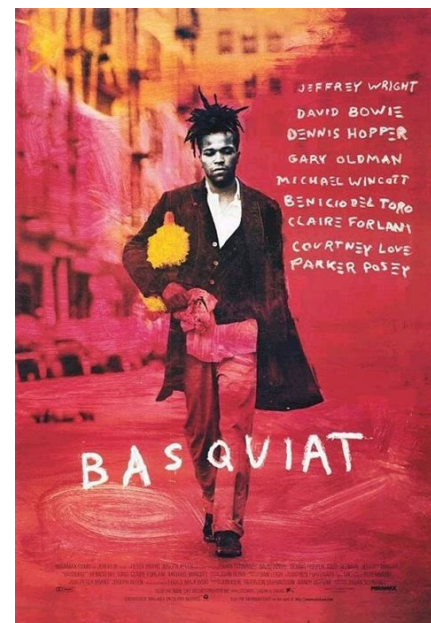
Now and throughout art history, perception-altering substances have been often glorified as: “...catalysts for creativity and altered forms of consciousness.”. Curator and artist *Hilde Lynn Helphenstein* (b.1985) reflects on her sobriety following her romanticisation of substance use: “I definitely thought that it helped with creativity. I didn’t know that that pursuit would come with a lot of misery.” (McMahon, 2023).



This myth is reinforced with the romanticisation of artist *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (1960 – 1988), who’s creative output is often viewed in tandem with suffering and substance use. After a heroin overdose at the age of 27, *Jean-Michel Basquiat’s* death caused him to be somewhat mythologised among art circles. Within *Basquiat* (Schnabel, 1996), a dramatised movie depicting his life, there are even comparisons drawn between him and artist *Vincent Van Gogh* (1853 – 1890).

Much like *Van Gogh*, his death skyrocketed the value of his paintings, with his art dealer immediately claiming a 50 percent share on all work in his estate. His exploitation was further exemplified when the curator claimed to have sold at least 20 percent of that work, leaving “...a void of knowledge about *Basquiat’s* last work” before subsequently disappearing from the public eye completely (D’Arcy, 1992). This tragic tale of the suffering artist parallels that of *Van Gogh’s*, making the comparison apt and insightful.

Though this comparison holds weight and demonstrates profound insight into both artists, the film itself serves as a testament to the romanticisation and exploitation of the ‘tortured artist’ trope often seen in media. Instead of an accurate and objective portrayal of *Basquiat*, the film includes many clichés – framing his suffering and substance use not as context, but as part of his allure as an artist. Certain scenes of substance use and suffering, overlaid by soft music, create a harmful juxtaposition. The film



frames *Basquiat's* pain as something desirable, reinforcing myths surrounding substance use that solidify the idea of suffering as inseparable from artistic genius. While the film portrays his drug use as romantic and poetic, the reality was far from ideal.

According to *Basquiat: a Quick Killing in Art*, *Basquiat's* final residence was littered with bloody sheets and syringes (Hoban, 1998, pp.314–318). A stark contrast to the dream-like film sequence discussed previously, and a scene so intense it was considered too upsetting for the artist's father to see. An unseen, yet very real, part of substance use that is often ignored when romanticised artists are involved. This misrepresentation also continued after *Basquiat's* passing.

Following his death, a gallery show was promptly curated by Vrej Baghoomian (n.d.) in honour of the late-artist's work, an event described as "... a glitzy affair" with attendees formally dressed and adorned in diamond jewellery. "There they dined, this predominantly white crowd, surrounded by *Basquiat's* fierce, angry-looking paintings.". Baghoomian, who owned over 30 of *Basquiat's* paintings, promptly took the opportunity to sell them – taking advantage of the paintings' sudden increase in value. These 'angry paintings' remain a poignant and ironic metaphor to the exploitation the artist faced. From humble beginnings to life of struggle, he is now remembered through extravagant shows and seen as a mythical legend in the art world.

Examples like this solidify the myth of the 'tortured artist' requiring altered perception to create artistic masterpieces, bringing us further from appreciating the complexities of mental illness, cultural context and artistic production in relation to substance use. The psychedelic counterculture movement of the 1960s only amplified this societal normalisation, with many artists at the time seen to have 'unlocked' their creativity through psilocybin and LSD. Upon further analysis however, substances during this movement were a bridge between unspoken suffering and altered perception – a form of escapism, with creative output and societal standards becoming distorted as an indirect result. The normalisation of these substances has also seen significant increase with many scientific studies now considering psilocybin for its medicinal potential. Nora Volkow (b.1956), MD, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse noted regarding aiding mental health disorders: "Psychedelics may offer the opportunity to get a very fast and lasting response..."

going on to label them as possibly “*lifesaving*” for some (*Stringer, 2024*). Rebranded from criminalised to commodified, this normalisation of psychedelics as a romanticised artistic tool can lead to potential risk factors such as addiction becoming forgotten. Once again building upon the layers of misrepresentation surrounding struggling artists.

Although addiction can affect anyone, studies suggest that creatives are statistically more likely to experience substance abuse than non-creatives. (*Burton, 2025*). Studies show that for those microdosing psychedelics, open-mindedness and creativity score much higher than compared to those who do not (*Anderson et al., 2019*). This then begs the question if it is the romanticisation of the ‘*tortured artist on drugs*’ or if these substances are the cause of some creatives in the first place. Neuroscientist *David Linden (b.1961)* states in conversation with *Scientific American* that this may not be the case: “*There is a link between addiction and things [that] are a prerequisite for creativity. You don’t become addicted because you feel pleasure strongly*” (*Linden, 2011*). For creative individuals, experiencing intense emotions can positively impact artistic output. This, however, contributes to a significantly higher risk of mental health issues such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and depression (*Kyaga et al., 2013*). As a result, substances such as psilocybin may be used to cope with symptoms or to regulate emotional wellbeing. This artistic distortion, like *Utermohlen’s* late-artwork, may be a way to release the disrupted feelings mentally. Distortion, in this way, could therefore demonstrate simultaneous suffering and attempted self-healing. When romanticism is abundant, it is easy to ignore the suffering behind the distortion – but in the end, it is the suffering that shapes it.

CONCLUSION

The drive to alter perception in art is one that runs deep throughout human history and can be seen across countless different cultures. However, as deep as these arguments may go, they merely scratch the surface of this topic and its implications for humanity and society as a whole.

When reality feels unliveable, it seems to be human nature to desire rebellion or escape. The 1960s expressed this desire through hot colours, abstract advertisements and music festivals – a stark contrast to the new industrialised order of society. Escapism through psilocybin use connected hundreds of thousands at the time, providing a coping mechanism viewed simply as a novel cultural shift from afar. From posters containing clear typography and natural colours to dream-like, abstract advertisements, this silent rebellion echoed throughout art. Through the documentation of these distorted advertisements, the simultaneous mass warping of societal expectations was recorded visually in real time.

It is assumed that our individual perception is consistent when unaltered. However, artist *Claude Monet* is a prime example of how the physical deterioration of eyesight translates into art over time. In comparison to artist *Isaac Abrams*, intentionality is questioned and the visual deterioration of *Monet's* eyesight is recorded throughout his life.

Deterioration visualised through art is repeated following the dementia diagnosis of classically trained artist *William Utermohlen*. Used as a form of self-healing, art for *William Utermohlen* provides interesting contrast to that of psilocybin artist *Amanda Sage*. Mental health issues can be overlooked when a bright, kaleidoscopic painting is the evidence, an argument reinforced through the schizophrenic hallucinations of *Louis Wain*.

His artwork provides valuable insight to the striking similarities a schizophrenia diagnosis has in relation to psilocybin use, with research on the brain's *DMN* confirming these similarities on a neurological level. From both *Utermohlen* and *Wain's* work in context with psilocybin artists, it is evident after analysis that altered perception runs deeper than purely physical.

While schizophrenia is a mental health disorder currently treated through medication, within other cultures, it appears to be idealised – seen as a bridge to connecting with lost

ancestors. This same disconnect in beliefs can be seen within psilocybin and art. For many, drug use is seen as something to be pitied and addiction is frowned upon, yet when artistic creation results from this ‘tragedy’ the victim is transformed into an artistic icon. This cultural disconnect is echoed in the work of *Pablo Amaringo* and *Tokio Aoyama*.

Psilocybin can alter perception to a degree that may seem unnatural, yet the work of *Pablo Amaringo* and *Tokio Aoyama* show how cultural framing shapes the art that follows.

Originating from a culture that embraces the psychedelic brew ayahuasca, *Amaringo* depicted tribal ayahuasca ceremonies within his art, taking artistic liberties in visualising religious figures in the process. This cultural connection of ayahuasca to tribal traditions is mirrored in the way *Amaringo* connects his peers with these religious beings through his artwork.

Aoyama, in comparison, blends cultures through art. By mixing elements of Japanese and American life in his paintings, he challenges our understanding of psilocybin’s effect on our views. He claims his use of psilocybin is unnecessary to create art, yet his artwork bares striking resemblance to artists that do. No matter how much perception is altered, our cultural biases remain unfazed through the medium of art.

Although psilocybin can seemingly create artistic genius like that of *Amaringo*, it is this normalisation of substances like psilocybin in the media driving these dangerous myths. Artist *Jean-Michel Basquiat* is a legend in art that utilised the benefits of mind-altering drugs to create artistic masterpieces without any harmful side effects – that is what the film *Basquiat (1996)* wants the audience to believe at least. The continuous misrepresentation of this struggling artist persisted following his overdose at age 27. The romanticism of his character was so intense that despite his death being the direct result of a drug overdose, his image of being the ‘tortured artist’ who found himself through drugs remains mythologised to this day.

For all the fascinating artwork it can lead to, substance use in art often overlooks the truth. Beneath the hot colours and geometric patterns lie fragility, illness and coping mechanisms frequently left unspoken. Just as a spider’s drug-altered web fractures and fragments, so too does the artist’s vision shift under the influence of psilocybin or illness. Distortion, here, is not a flaw but a warped form of seeing. In the end, whether born from illness, culture or psilocybin – to understand the artwork, we must first understand the artist. The one consistency carried throughout each chapter is that these distorted artworks originate from a

distorted body and mind. The resulting artwork isn't flawed, merely a new structure – an altered web.

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