MEMORY WITH AN EROTIC ADDITION: REFLECTIONS ON CINEMA, NORMATIVITY AND IDENTITY[1]

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I follow Bensusan's lead regarding the need of addition for the constitution of memory and explore in what sense love can in occasions provide the necessary addition while improving, rather than jeopardizing, the normative standing of memory. To illustrate the relationship between memory as a source of knowledge and love, I make use of a variety of examples taken from films by Buñuel, Bergmann and Kore-eda, from literature and history, and from personal experience. Likewise, I rely on ideas from traditions ranging from feminist and antiracist standpoint epistemology to Wittgenstein's discussion of rule following.

KEYWORDS: Bensusan's *Memory Assamblages*; love and knowledge; standpoint epistemology; rule following

I'm quite incapable of disagreeing philosophically with the artist formerly known as Hilan. My philosophical passions and ideas are a proper subset of his. So, as other times, I will try to offer a personal expansion of some of the things he says, as they strike me.

Memory is, indeed, fragile and vulnerable to all sort of influences. Memory, to be such, as it is forcefully argued in *Memory Assemblages* (Bensusan 2024), needs addition. Memory is not given, and it is not so even in a more dramatic way than other forms of obtaining information and knowledge, like experience or testimony. Testimony and experience are both subject to contextual influences and, also, to our emotional state. We give very different epistemic weight to the very same piece of information depending on whom it comes from or on our

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emotional relation to them, if any. Sometimes we trust or distrust someone as a consequence of very problematic prejudices or, at the very least, of irrelevant factors (see Miranda Fricker's discussion of epistemic injustice, Fricker 2007). But it does not follow from this that we need extra evidence, or the capacity to offer a neutral argument (Crary 2018), in order for us to obtain knowledge from others on some occasions. We sometimes develop a sensibility, perhaps due to our genealogy, perhaps due to a personal history of suffering and of sharing it with others with similar, that opens for us new possibilies of acquiring knowledge from what we are told.[2]

But, in the case of memory, whole tracks of temporally extended items can become something radically different. What we hear from memory, and the very coloratura of what we hear, changes as we change. A city that before was a source of sweet memories from childhood, of memories of blissful early parenthood, of movies enjoyed with friends, of intimacies shared at night, can become a desertic landscape of rejections, a place haunted by the ghost of imagined kisses. Moments of personal pride can reappear as moments of humiliation. Evenings of boredom may become a shelter from disappointment and reveal themselves as peaceful events where throwing stones at a river was all that was needed to feel safe in the company of a loved one.

In this commentary I want to insist on the unique role that love plays amongst the additions that memory needs to tell us something about the world. One of the reasons why nothing is given, and a fortiori, nothing is given once and for all, is that to be capable of remembering, we need others. There are many ways to remember correctly and many ways to do it wrong. Remembering has a normative nature, not a representational one. A creature considered in isolation is not a creature that can remember. If I can remember something, others should be able to grasp my memory, to make sense of it, perhaps even to share it. We need training to remember, we need to be corrected and encouraged, we must remember sometimes in ways similar to the ways others do (Wittgenstein 1953/2001: §§223-4). How are we taught to remember?

The culmination of Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following (§§241-242) has

2 Of course, this is a form of disjuntivism with respect to testimony analogous to the more popular one regarding experience (McDowell 1993, 1982).

sometimes been interpreted in communitarian terms (Hilan briefly discusses some related issues in the section "Ineffectivity through divergence"). There is a better interpretation, though. We need a certain constancy in our results (in measurements, is Wittgenstein's example) if we are going to be able to understand each other and to be said to be speaking the same language: shared definitions won't do. This does not mean that you may not be the one who has the richest memory of a place or a conversation, even if your memory departs from those of everyone else. It's not whatever we, as a community, think that happened that constitutes what actually happened. It only makes sense to say that the community is right if it also makes sense to say, on some occasions, that it may be wrong: the difference between "it seems correct" and "it is correct" is needed as much for us as it is for me. But, as I mentioned above, to be able to depart from the way other people remember, we need other people to have introduced us into the remembering game.

Linguistic communication is the usual suspect when it comes to account for such introduction, but music and singing deserves a moment too, especially in cultures and traditions without written forms of language. In a recent article on the end of peasantry in Western Europe and, in particular, on the disappearance of rural Irish-speaking communities in the isolated islands in the West of Ireland, the Aran Islands and the now uninhabited Blasket Islands, the Irish novelist and journalist Colm Tóibín (2025) starts by calling attention to the absence of folk songs or dances in the most deprived areas of Spain or Ireland one or two centuries ago. He recalls some comments by Buñuel on his pioneer documentary *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan* (land without bread), filmed in 1933 during the II Spanish Republic. Buñuel, replying to criticisms about the rough and naked theme and grotesque approach of his movie, "Why don't you show something nice, like folk dances?", answered: "Las Hurdes didn't have any". There is such degree of poverty, abandonment and hunger that they don't even have the kind popular song full of lament and despair as, for instance, those of Calabria. Songs are possessed with memory and are a very human way to add to memory, to make it vibrant and animated.[3] They disappear when there is nothing to remember.

3 A wonderful example of songs as repository of culture and as actual maps of huge desertic territories are the Australian Aboriginal songlines passed over for generations as means to navigate very long distances through the detailed description of the land contained in song cycles (Chatwin 1987).

Tóibín offers a particularly dramatic example of such an event. He quotes the cartographer Tim Robinson: "In the early nineteenth century travellers in Ireland used to remark on the habitual singing of the peasantry at work, and after the Famine the silence that had fallen on the countryside was heard as deeply sinister and mournful" (Robinson 2011, "Chapter 10: The song of granite").[4,5]

While songs carry communal memories within them, cinema is a form of art particularly suited to reflect on memory. One of its great masters, and one of the masters of memory, Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, has given us some particularly humane and delicate examples of memory's richness and complexity. I'd like to mention too early movies from the end of last century, a TV

4 In this commentary I won't touch the topic of spectral realism and hauntology, also central to Hilan's proposal. However, I'd like to quote from a different book by Tim Robinson, where ghosts are the only traces of a lost and almost forgotten past. Robinson worked for years on extremely detailed maps of Connemara and the Aran Islands. He went as far as marking every rock and cove of Innishmore, the biggest of the islands. He writes: "I have gone hunting for those rare places and times, the nodes at which the layers of experience touch and may be fused together. But I find that in a map such points and the energy that accomplishes such fusions (which is that of poetry, not some vague "interdisciplinary" fervour) can, at the most, be invisible guides, benevolent ghosts, through the tangles of the explicit; they cannot themselves be shown or named." (Robinson 1986, "Timescape with signpost"). It is difficult not to be reminded of the final passages of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Interestingly, Tóibín, after this quote, returns to the topic of singing and refers to Joe Heany, the master of *sean-nós* or old-style Gaelic a capella singing, itself a musical way of recording events, often of a tragic nature, such a famines or massive emigrations. Perhaps, after all, what can be neither named nor shown, can be whistled and sang: generations of slaves across America are the most impressive example of this.

5 To close this brief exploration of the effects of brutal imperialism at the heart of Europe, and coming back to the role of language as an introduction to normative practices and traditions, let me quote from Brian Friel's play *Translations*, set in pre-Famine colonised Ireland. Hugh, a highly-cultivated, heavy-drinking member of an Irish-speaking community in Donegal, is talking to the English lieutenant and lamenting the cultural loss that replacing Irish for the allegedly more civilised English would mean: "Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception—a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to . . . inevitabilities" (Friel 1980: 418-9). Language as a repository of tradition is also a theme for McDowell: "The feature of language that really matters is rather this: that a natural language, the sort of language into which human beings are first initiated, serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what" (1994: 126). This idea becomes even more dramatic when it comes to languages in danger of disappearing, often the languages of the dispossessed. Similar thoughts to the approach to Irish Gaelic that we find in Friel's play are beautifully expressed by Isaac Bashevis Singer in his Nobel prize acceptance speech, regarding Yiddish: "Yiddish has not yet said its last word. It contains treasures that have not been revealed to the eyes of the world. It was the tongue of martyrs and saints, of dreamers and Cabalists – rich in humor and in memories that mankind may never forget. In a figurative way, Yiddish is the wise and humble language of us all, the idiom of frightened and hopeful Humanity" (1978).

documentary, *Without Memory* (1996), and his second feature film, *After Life* (1999), as I believe that together they illuminate what I take to be a central lesson of *Memory Assamblages*. The documentary follows Hiroshi Sekine, a man who lost his memory because his doctors decided, ultimately as a consequence of governmental funding cuts for public health, to stop giving him some vitamins he needed after an operation. He becomes uncapable of acquiring new memories. Of course, this kind of condition has been very popular in recent cinema, from sweet romantic comedies like *50 First Dates*, to hilarious characters like the fish Dori in *Finding Nemo*, to ingenious noirs like *Memento*. But what Kore-eda is interested in is identity and how to construct it without memory. In his words: "Sekine himself doesn't even recognise that he has a personality. But meeting his family proved to me that you can have an identity that depends on other people's memories. So even when you die, part of your identity will reside in others" (Romney 1999).[6]

Sekine's is an extreme case. However, we all rely on others, not only to be able to start having memories, as I mentioned above (there are no memories prior to us being language users that we can retrieve, after all), but even to retain and perfect the ones that we already have. Others are a crucial addition to memory; without them, nothing can be assembled. Memories without others are blind. Putting all this together we find a theme that crosses through Bensusan's work: identity is always relational.

After Life, a small, modest masterpiece, looks at the issue from a different angle. In the movie we are presented with a range of characters, some have just died, some died a while ago, working together with a cinema crew trying to give shape to one specific memory from their lives. They must choose their memory and then help the crew record it to their satisfaction: they will expend the rest of eternity contemplating that remembrance, that sole memento from their lives. Again, there are others involved, both in the selection of the memory and in its elaboration. One character is told that she may not have taken the best decision: a trip to Disneyland is not a particularly unique personal memory (interestingly, a memory of contemplating the blossoming of cherry trees, a very popular activity in Japan with even a word to refer to it, *hanami*, does not get a similar

6 https://www.theguardian.com/culture/1999/sep/28/artsfeatures2

advice). Some of the people working on the project are themselves dead, they just feel unable to make a choice. Part of the authenticity of such a scenario comes from the subtlety of Kore-eda, but also from the fact that some of the characters are played by non-professional actors talking about their actual memories. None of these memories is given, their texture is open-ended. There is something clearly artificial about the need to fix them forever and the resistance of some character has as much to do with that than as with having to opt for one memory rather than for others. Memory without addition is empty.[7]

The protagonist of Ingmar Bergmann's 1957 film *Will Strawberries*, an aging doctor and scientist confronting his past on the occasion of his receiving a high honour, starts his day by reflecting that our commerce with humans mainly consists of criticism and that his solitude is a reaction to that realisation. However, as the film shows, "When you think like a hermit, you forget what you know", as Will Oldham puts it in his song "New partner". We never cease to need to look at ourselves from the point of view of those around us. (There cannot be knowledge when we have no one to correct our mistakes.) The doctor takes refuge on memories from his childhood, only to realise, thanks to his daughter in law, much younger but much more insightful regarding his character, that his politeness and his professional generosity have always been disguises for his coldness and selfishness. His daughter in law is blunt at first, but he finally accepts her perspective on him when she opens up her own heart and when both show that they love each other very much: others, especially loved ones, play an additional role for our identity and for our capacity to remember (and the equally important capacity for our identity, to forget). In one of the rare instances in Plato's writing where Socrates is proved to be wrong, and by a woman at that, Diotima, establishing a parallel between love, beauty and knowledge, points out that, as there is something that lies between being attractive and being repulsive, there is also something in between ignorance and knowledge, namely true belief that one cannot justify (*Symposium* 202a). And, since love loves attractiveness, and

7 That having the will to remember could be the addition necessary for memory to be constituted could be a way to understand Leonard Cohen's verses in "Tonight will be fine":
Oh sometimes I see her undressing for me
She's the soft naked lady love meant her to be
And she's moving her body so brave and so free
If I've got to remember, that's a fine memory.

knowledge is attractive, love occupies this space between knowledge and ignorance (204b). Love desires knowledge and (please allow me a momentary lapse into etymology), very conveniently, philosophy itself is the ultimate manifestation of such a desire.

Love has a great impact on memory too, on how we remember and forget, on what we remember and forget. Love and attention are intimately connected, and the texture of our memory depends partially on attention. One of the ways in which love and attention are linked is wonderfully expressed by Iris Murdoch, who insists on the Platonic theme of love as an urge to know by means of the "extremely difficult realisation" that someone other than ourselves exists and of the "indefinitely extended capacity" to imagine the being of particular others (Murdoch 1959: 51; see also my commentary to Hilan's previous book, where I explore the consequences of Murdoch's ideas about love for self-knowledge; Pinedo 2021). Love, attention, knowledge and morality are deeply intertwined in Murdoch's philosophy and I believe their links offer an excellent opening to look at one of the ways in which addition may enrich memory. The motivation provided by love goes beyond wanting to know the loved one: it also leads as to pay attention both to things that interest them, to the specific manner in which they show their interest on those things and even to the nature of love itself (James Baldwin (1964), bell hooks (2000) or Martha Nussbaum (1990) have written wonderful pages on these topics).

But we also may look at our own past with different lenses, see our previous actions and experiences partially through their eyes and, sometimes, we may achieve a personal version of W.E.B. DuBois's liberatory "double consciousness" (1903). Memory reached through this process of triangulation between perspectives can be particularly rich and, dare I say, particularly objective (Davidson 1991; see also Bensusan & Pinedo 2007 and Pinedo 2021). Coming back briefly to Plato, it is interesting that ignorance appears as the incapacity to realise that one can be wrong (204a). Here again Murdoch seems to be completely in tune with Plato: love implies such a capacity, implies openness to our acceptance of error, starting with respect to the being of our loved ones: ideally, we should be ready to be proved wrong by them. Of course, there are ways other than love to force our attention, terrible ways rather than extremely difficult ones. DuBois' idea of a double consciousness is not erotically motivated in the way that

I used at the beginning of this paragraph. Double vision is achieved as a consequence of being subjected to the vital need of knowing what those with power over our lives want, expect and belief and of heavy cognitive work aimed at survival. I will come back to this.

I would like to dwell on these thoughts, on objectivity and normativity characterized by the recognition of the possibility of error, applied to memory. Normativity and the problems with givenness have been constant obsessions for me since my doctorate and I have had unforgettable moments of philosophical pleasure exploring these common obsessions with Hilan. These interests are part of the background of his new book and they appear explicitly in various occasions, and I want to test some thoughts on the idea of a privileged epistemic perspective under the light of Hilan's proposal. One of the reasons that it seems natural to fall in the temptation of appealing to memories as something fix, something that will be inevitably distorted by any addition, is that it may seem that not doing so robes us of a standard against which we may measure the correctness of our recollections. To put it bluntly: if memories are not given, remembering something would cease to be factive, would cease to imply that such a something happened. If we accept that memory without addition is empty, how could we avoid the temptation to conclude that all memories are on a par, that no memory is more faithful to the world than any other? Wouldn't we lose our hold on what makes some memories better than others? This would mean that there is no distinction between being correct and seeming correct, no possibility of error, no normativity… and no memory, just projections from our interests and from our power to impose a point of view.

As I see it, the solution to this dilemma lies in the application to memory of a central preoccupation of feminist standpoint epistemology. Furthermore, the emphasis on the epistemic role of perspective connects smoothly with some central commitments of Hilan's work, particularly explicit in the last ten years, in his recent defence of indexicalism, but also in his interest on monadologies, process philosophy and externalism (Bensusan 2021, 2017, 2008). Donna Haraway, in one of the most widely discussed papers in the last 50 years (1988), sets herself to propose a conception of objectivity which avoids both the idea of universal rational accessibility, what can be called, following Alice Crary, the neutral conception of reason, but also the radical constructivist reaction

according to which we must abandon the idea of objectivity altogether, as no perspective can be shown to be better than any other and, hence, every claim to knowledge is tainted by whatever it is projected from the particular perspective from which it is made and any conception of how things are must give way to the admission that there are just different understandings of things. Haraway is worried about the consequences of this dilemma for feminist approaches to science, but I think her way of presenting it, and of showing a way out, can be equally useful for the thought that addition doesn't cancel out the distinction between better and worse ways of remembering.

Haraway makes the argument in terms of perspectives and concludes that they are essential for knowledge, not just in the discovery process, but also in the very constitution of its object. Haraway claims not only that standpoints need not be in the way of knowledge, but that there cannot be knowledge without location. This goes against "aperspectivalism", which eliminates points of view and presents knowledge as something that could be recognized from everywhere or from a mythical view from nowhere (at best, an addition of all possible views), but also against the abandonment of any epistemological project in favour of the idea that perspectives triumph by sheer power and not by their capacity to be in touch with reality. Knowledge is situated. "The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision" (1986: 583; "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims", p. 589). Even god has to do mathematics to know the expansion of π, to use a Wittgensteinian image much liked by Hilan. One motivation behind the suspicion of perspectives is that, if we accept their epistemic credentials, it seems that we still need some way to compare better and worse perspectives and that this can only be done in terms of the idea of the best perspective or of a standard which involves no perspective at all. And the problems of the "view from nowhere" image lead us back to the other horn, for instance, to claim with Susan Hekman that "it is a "logical consequence" of embracing situated, perspectival knowledge that 'no perspective/standpoint is epistemologically privileged'" (Hekman 1997: 351; quoted in Kukla 2006: 89). Behind both sides of the dilemma is a commitment to a conditional: if perspectives are epistemically relevant, then all perspectives are epistemic equals. It is this conditional that needs to be rejected

to make standpoints compatible with a normative conception of knowledge.

What we can say about perspective is also relevant for memory assemblages, for traces that cannot be separated from additions. There are no dislocated memories, memories as givens that are faithful to what happened. But we don't need the best memory to rank different ways to reach the past (Hartry Field (2009) makes an analogous point about norms and argues that only a previous commitment to the idea that the comparison between norms is a purely factual, representational matter leads to appealing to the best norm, the one that best represents normative reality, in order to rank normative practices are more or less suited). Not all that seems correct is correct: we need to remember from one place or another. The appeal to perfect, disembodied, aperspectival memory, like the appeal to a neutral rationality potentially accessible by anyone, often hides, as Haraway and other standpoint epistemologist that oppose the dilemma have pointed out (Daston 1992, Kukla 2006, Haslanger 2017, Toole 2022), the particular and privileged perspective of those with more power to say what happened and what did not, which concepts are useful and which ones refer to nothing, what is a distorting addition and what a transparent view of the past. So, while it may be a perfectly objective, factual matter that stone, iron or bronze were successively used to make hunting weapons, whether that is an unquestionable and neutral way to separate prehistorical ages is not. To propose other forms of classification of the past, for instance, in terms of cooking techniques, is only open to the accusation of being ideological if we think that the traditional consensus involves no evaluation but only given facts (see Sánchez 2022). Equally, only taking as an axiom, as straightforwardly factual, that pre agricultural societies were egalitarian and post agricultural ones are necessarily hierarchical and characterised by inequality and bureaucracy (as has been explicitly defended by champions of neutrality such as Steven Pinker or Francis Fukuyama) leads to thinking that a rejection of that axiom, even if done in terms of painfully careful attention to archaeological records, is a political project (Graeber & Wilson 2021).

What some librarians and historians have called "the problem of the archive" is an instance of this situation: even written or visual records from the past, sometimes thought of as paradigmatically neutral, tend to be strongly biased. In a recent article on a controversial portrait of Francis Williams, an 18h Century

liberated Jamaican slave and a famous mathematician and intellectual during his lifetime, the historian Fara Dabhoiwala (2024) summarizes the problem as follows: "Our surviving written and visual materials from the past are not neutral. They don't do equal justice to different people and groups. On the contrary, they perpetuate the disparities of the past. And this is a particular problem for the era of the transatlantic slave trade. Millions on millions of men, women and children were kidnapped, enslaved, systematically abused and murdered yet the only now remaining traces of their lives were created by people who treated them as disposable ciphers. We have to engage with this hostile and dehumanising evidence in order to speak about the enslaved and the silenced because we have almost nothing else, but it's extremely problematic material".

However, we should not conclude, if we take Bensusan's ideas at heart, that any of the previous additions to the past is on an equal footing, that they either distort it equally or that they offer pictures that cannot be compared in terms of their merits. That would be to fall on a version of intellectualism regarding memory. Briana Toole (2022) forcefully argues for the idea that the rejection of perspectives and, with it, of standpoint epistemology as incompatible with traditional epistemology rests on the intellectualist assumption with respect to knowledge criticized under that label by Jason Stanley. For Stanley intellectualism is "the thesis that knowledge does not depend upon practical facts", i.e., upon non-epistemic factors (2005: 6). Toole analyses the thesis in terms of a dual commitment, what I have called aperspectivalism and an atomist view of knowers, for which knowers should be understood in abstraction of, among other things, their social position, their interests and other contingent, allegedly non-epistemic features. Only the abstract knower can have the appropriate dislocation necessary to have a view from nowhere (Lorraine Code speaks of the "dislocated individual of the atomistic tradition", where "sociality is erased for theoretical purposes, treated as incidental or intrusive", Code 1995: 16, 73). Intellectualism regarding memory implies that any addition to the past should be eliminated on pains of distorting our understanding of what happened. Furthermore, a memory that properly records the past is one that anyone should be in a position to have, regardless of any of their allegedly non-mnemonic properties. To repeat: that our memory, like our knowledge in general, is always situated cannot imply that any memory is just as good as any other. In fact, this

popular, Ratzingerian negative conception of relativism couldn't be less relativistic: to claim that, once that we introduce perspectives into knowledge, we are condemned to give up the idea that some of them may be privileged, is to appeal to a neutral position from which to rank perspectives, even if only to say that each one is as good as any other (see Ashton 2020: 329-330).

I'd like to finish by making a circle which I hope it is not read as a disguised "Bergman, Kore-eda and me" move. I pointed out at the beginning of the paper some examples of memory being brilliantly explored in cinema and I found in the examples I gave an insistence on the role of love and addition for our understanding of memory. My earliest memory, if it is such, is this: I'm walking over a bridge holding my grandfather's hand and I can see some sheep crossing under the bridge, below us. I can place the memory in time and space very precisely: it's August 1969 and we are in a small town in La Rioja. I was 2 years and 2 months old. Do I really remember this? This much I know: the trip from the south of Spain to La Rioja was one of the happiest moments of my grandfather's life. He got to meet his daughter-in-law's family, my mother's family, who were extremely welcoming and kind. It was probably the first time that he saw grass… and walked on it. And, I can only guess, to enjoy all this with a small grandson by your hand must be very nice too. He constantly talked about that trip, for a long time. At least a couple of times a year, even when I was already 10 or 11, he would remind me of the bridge and of my reaction to the sheep. It seems to me that this is a case in between an actual memory and one instance in which we seem to remember, but actually we know what happened because we have been told. I think this makes sense: by being reminded of that experience before I had time to forget it, the memory was reinforced, and it is real. There is no question of the event happening. What I wonder is whether I remember it happening or I was just told that I lived through it. My love of my grandfather and his enthusiasm about the whole thing makes the memory, well, memorable. I have gone back to that bridge and it looks like a much smaller version of what I seem to remember, which in a sense makes me tilt in the direction of accepting the memory as mine, rather than the mere result of being told. One way or another, it has many layers of emotion added to it.

Interestingly, the next memory I have is also strongly patrilineal (so much that it makes me wonder what explains that my childhood family memories don't

include more of my mother, despite her constant loving presence, instead of male figures that were only occasionally available, I also tend to dream more of absent people that of people that are part of my every day; this is probably off-topic, although it tells me things about the nuances of addition). My father takes me to the edge of the road and tells me this: "Manolín, when I was your age, my grandfather took me to the edge of the road and said: before you cross the road, you must look left, then right and then left again; if no car is coming, then you can cross". I still remember my great-grandfather's advice, especially when I travel to countries where they drive on the other side of the road. He died before I was born, I only know him through photographs. I cannot have a memory of him telling me this, it never happened. But the image of him replacing my father in the memory is sometimes as vivid as the memory itself. I don't know what this shows, but I felt this was a good place to share it.

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