Elective Affinities?

History and Photography

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The conceptual history of the term "elective affinity" refers to the "force" that causes chemical reactions. A broad definition of chemical affinity is when substances enter into or resist decomposition. Since the late eighteenth century it has become less and less common to use the term "elective affinity" in chemistry. Soon after 1800 the phrase was adapted in literature, and in 1809 Johann Wolfgang Goethe chose the term as a title for one of his classic novels, *Wahlverwandschaften* (Elective Affinities). He thus used the expression as an organizing metaphor for the conflict between responsibility (culture) and passion (nature). In the novel, not only reason, but society and its norms effectively inhibit the "natural" matchmaking of the protagonists.

Thirty years later, another "natural" couple entered the stage: photography and historiography. How would the protagonists perform? Would anyone inhibit this match? When Daguerre and Talbot announced their respective discoveries in 1839, it was taken for granted that photography would become an important means with which to document objects, people and – when technically possible – events. To many contemporary observers the new technology promised to offer exactly what was expected of historiography: truthful documents of people, events and nature. In 1821 the Prussian philosopher and politician Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) wrote the following in his essay, whose English title is "On the Historian's Task":

> "The historian's task is to present what actually happened. The more purely and completely he achieves this, the more perfectly has he solved this problem. A simple presentation is at the same time the primary, indispensable condition of his work and the highest achievement he will be able to attain. Regarded in this way, he seems to be merely receptive and productive, not active and creative." (von Humboldt 1967: 59)

Only three years later, in 1824, the German historian Leopold von Ranke wrote his famous programmatic dictum: The aim of the historian is "merely to show how it actually was" (Ranke 1824).[1] Fifteen years after that, when photography had emerged, did it not finally provide the means with which to "show how it actually was"? This was what its early advocates claimed. Most of them were scientists, such as the physicist Dominique Francois Arago (1786–1853); the geographer, naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), the brother of Wilhelm von Humboldt; and the mathematician and astronomer John Frederick William Herschel (1792–1871). Journalists also welcomed the new invention with enthusiasm. They all agreed that photographs were exact documents, undistorted by human perception. As one of the inventors of photography, the mathematician and scientist William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877), asserted, photographic images were made by the "pencil of nature" and not by human hands.[2] Historians were less enthusiastic about the new technology. They were not convinced that photography could have any use as an actual source for historical enquiry. More importantly, they regarded themselves as readers of documents, not beholders of images. They had always been authors, interpreters and creators of texts based on written evidence. They were philologists (and were becoming more so every day). Their main field of research, broadly speaking, was usually written accounts of who did what and why. Written evidence was envisioned as the best available trace of thoughts and intentions. Historians had thus moved away from "the historian's task" as described by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the first decades of the nineteenth century. To most historians in the nineteenth century, photographs did not reflect what people thought. Photographs were thus denied the status of subjective statements (reserved for works of art) that required the interpretive powers of a historian. As the renowned German historian Johann Gustav Droysen claimed in 1857, "photographic resemblance is the dreariest" (Droysen 1977: 87). He believed there was no truth in photographic images because they

1 Preface, vf. Original: "Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beygemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwartiger Versuch nicht: er will bloss sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen." (My translation)

2 'Pencil of Nature' was the title of the first book to be illustrated with photographs. It was published by William Fox Talbot (1844–1846).

were mechanically produced, and they presented only the surface of a person or object.

Throughout the nineteenth century, historians stressed their interpretive and creative powers because they were struggling to advance their own profession and did not want to be seen as simply documenting facts and deeds. There were several professional and political reasons for this, such as the organization of university departments and the role of historians in the process of nation – building, etc. (for the sake of space this topic will not be discussed in detail here).[3] With the advent of photography, photographic documents had the potential to undermine this position. However, they did not do this directly, but subtly. The combination of history and photography highlighted the reproductive qualities of historians' work, not the creative aspects. Although historians did not want to be seen as mere "photographers of the past", the German contemporary encyclopaedia Brockhaus from 1894–6 still referred to the primary or natural type of historiography as the *chronological record of events*.[4] Historians in the nineteenth century were eager to stress that their task went beyond this mandate.

Thus, historiography resisted the elective affinity that seems so "natural" when one reads the quotes from Ranke and Humboldt. From the historian's point of view, there was an affinity to text, which was seen as their "natural" ally. All types of images – paintings, engravings and photographs – were

3 For a more detailed discussion see Jordan (2011: 111–122); Körner (2008: 23–28); Tschopp (2012: 135–166).

4 Definition for Geschichte in the encyclopaedia 'Brockhaus Konversations-Lexikon': "Es gibt zwei Arten der Geschichtschreibung, die referierende und die pragmatische. Erstere, welche die ursprüngliche ist, berichtet nur die Thatsachen, ohne deren Verknüpfung und Erklärung zu versuchen; sie hat sich noch erhalten in den Zeittafeln (Synchronismus), welche dem Leser oder Lehrer die Ergänzung des ursächlichen Zusammenhangs der mitgeteilten Ereignisse überlassen, und in den Regesten- und Annalenwerken, welche bloße Vorarbeiten für den Geschichtschreiber im eigentlichen Sinne fein wollen, für welchen sie die Überlieferung sammeln und läutern. Die pragmatische Geschichtschreibung, die heute als die eigentliche gilt, befaßt sich mit der Erforschung und Darlegung des ursächlichen Zusammenhangs der Ereignisse, der Wirkung der Verhältnisse auf die maßgebenden Persönlichkeiten und der Rückwirkung dieser an die Verhältnisse." (U.a. 1894: 889)

rarely used, if at all. But Pandora's box had been opened, and the evils unleashed.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many scholars (most of whom were not from the field of history, however) suggested the affinity of photography with history, time and again. The meteorologist James Glaisher, who was one of the jurors in the Great Exhibition in 1851, said the same year: "Great service, too, will the plain and truthful records of Photography afford to the historian of future ages." (Great Britain 1852: 244) He thus became one of a long line of scientists who challenged the partial and voluntary blindness of historians toward photographs. According to Glaisher, it would be the historians of future ages (and not his own) who would finally look at photographs as more than "plain and truthful records", and not merely as historical evidence in need of all interpretive forces. It was thus Siegfried Kracauer who redrafted the relation between photography and history in his posthumously published *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Kracauer 2009) (although he was not the first to do so). In it, he wrote that neither photography nor history simply copy "reality"; nor is this their primary task.

Today, it is beyond doubt that historiography and photography mould and model their respective objects. To cut a long story short, it was not until after the subjective and creative potential of photography was acknowledged in the 1970s and the "historian's task" had undergone a re-evaluation that using photographs as a source became a possibility within the discipline of history. Not only influences from within the discipline, but also the critical reception of methods and theories from sociology, anthropology, economics, literature studies, philosophy and art history supported the reorientation of historiography. Visual sources became more important and were acknowledged as subjective interpretations of reality and no longer as mere plain records. Still, the documentary value of photographs as evidence of material conditions continued to loom in the background. In the words of the historian Susan Crane, "In some quite ordinary and useful ways, we still assume that photographs are the most accessible, unmediated forms of representation." (Crane 2008: 310) Photographs thus came to be seen as subjective statements and objective evidence at the same time. Since the last decades of the twentieth century, research has shifted its attention from a picture's content to its context. In contrast to the nineteenth century, the "raw" documentary value of a photograph (in other words, the picture and its subject matter) is taken

less into account now as a reliable source in studies of history. In the following, I will present an interpretation of a contemporary photograph (taken in 2005) to demonstrate a recent approach toward this form of historical evidence. It is important to note, however, that the subject matter as well as the photograph as an object contain valuable information that plays a more minor role in contemporary historiographical studies than could ever have been expected by those in the nineteenth century pondering the potential of photographic evidence.

A GEORGIAN VILLAGER:

One Image, Many Messages

The ways historians look at photographs have profoundly changed since the days of Humboldt, Droysen and Glaisher. Although it is an over-simplifying assumption, nineteenth-and early twentieth-century historians were likely to scrutinize a photograph's subject matter and the resemblance between the image and the object being photographed. Their approach toward portraits could be termed physical and psychological. Typical questions were: Is this how X looked? What can we learn about the character of this person? Does this corroborate with what was written about them? In contrast, contemporary historiography (to put it simply) stresses the potential of the medium of photography itself as well as its distribution channels and reasons why the photograph was taken. It also raises questions about the cultural meaning of a photograph, its significance in discourses on race, class and gender and its political use (which will be highlighted in the following analysis). It is important to note that the photograph as evidence supports both approaches.
I will exemplify how content and context shape the history of a photograph and its meaning by analysing a photograph taken and published in 2005 (fig. 1).

Fig. 1: AGeorgian Villager

http://siteresources.worldbank.org/NEWS/Images/YM-GEC020.jpg (accessed 14th February 2013).

The photograph depicts a person: an elderly man looking straight into the camera lens. The focus is on the face (and bust) of the man. The background is blurred, but we can recognize a group of people there. The man must have been aware of being photographed. The photographer, Yuri Mechitov (*1950), seems to have used a telephoto lens. The reproduction of the image is slightly tinted in sepia tones.

As a "naked" document, the story of the image is as follows. This is an elderly man who was alive in 2005. He represents a Georgian peasant. We can deduce that he is probably not a rich man. We can ponder his gaze and his condition. The group in the background may indicate that there was some sort of gathering the photographer attended. End of story. This reminds us of a text written in 1858 about photography:

"Posterity, by the agency of Photography, will view the faithful image of our times; the future student, in turning the page of history, may at the same time look on the very skin into the very eyes of those, long since mouldered to dust, whose lives and deeds he traces in the text." (The American Journal of Photography 1858: 148)

We indeed look into the very eyes of the man. But what is the context in which this photograph was taken and published? Who took this photograph for what purpose? Anyone can download the photograph from the website of the World Bank.[5] It was published online for the first time on 12 October 2005 as part of the "photo gallery" that the World Bank features regularly on its website. The title of the gallery in which the image was published is "Growth, Poverty, and Inequality: Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union".[6]

The caption provided by the World Bank reads: "A villager, hoping to earn some money, is still unemployed. Georgia." The photograph was re-released in another of its photo galleries with the title "Enhancing Job Opportunities in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union" published on 1 November 2005. Although the caption remained the same, it is clearly not the "message" of the photograph to claim that the man had not found any employment between mid-October and early November 2005.

The Georgian photographer, Yuri Mechitov, also has his own website where he presents himself and his work. He is a professional photographer who is active in different fields of photography, including advertising, portraiture and documentary photography. He claims "now I find I like to shoot people" and that he is "happy to get in the art-world". The latter is an indicator that his images should also be read as "art" and not merely as records.

What we know from the photographer and the caption corroborates with the evidence provided by the photograph and what our gaze can easily decode. We have no reason to distrust the photographer and no reason not to believe what the photograph does not actually show, and no media can directly represent: that the man is a villager, that he is unemployed or rather "hoping to earn some money" and that the whole scene took place in Georgia and that the photograph was probably taken in 2005.

5 The World Bank is an institution which was established in 1944. It has over 185 member countries and employs more than 10,000 people. Its main goal is to "reduce global poverty". The World Bank's policy and actions are highly visible and closely monitored by its opponents.

6 The photograph can be downloaded from the following website: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/NEWS/Images/YM-GEC020.jpg (accessed 14 February 2013).

In such a photograph, the difference between what it shows and what it communicates in a specific context is evident. This observation touches on several central points in the debate surrounding photography as historical evidence. What are the themes of photography? What visual strategies are employed? How can we conceive the relation between local and global? What constitutes a "historic moment"? What are the emotional qualities of photographic images? How do social realities translate into visual representations? To answer these questions, we have to consider, for example, the social biography of a photograph and its potential audiences, intended function, the aesthetics applied as well as its wider historical and cultural context.

But first we have to ask: Why would the World Bank publish such an image? Its photo galleries are part of the World Bank's "News Section" on its website and, as such they belong to the domain of public relations. Journalists are "encouraged to use the photographs" presented there, which are free of charge. The purpose of the images in this section of the World Bank's website is not to document people or events; they are used to cast a positive image on the whole institution and its activities. What the World Bank wants to document is its concern for people in areas of economic distress. That the photo is free to download emphasizes that the World Bank is generous and open.

The portrait of the man lends a "face" and an emotional quality to an abstract process, according to Western viewing patterns. It is all about the economic and social development in Eastern Europe, were the World Bank was (and is) engaged.

As a portrait, it centres our attention on people and opens up the social or human dimension of economic distress. What happens to the economy will have impact on ordinary people on the street. In short: The World Bank programme is for the common people, like the villager in Georgia looking for a job.

How does the picture relate to the titles of the photo galleries it forms a part of, "Growth, Poverty, and Inequality: Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union" and "Enhancing Job Opportunities in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union"? The image is situated in Eastern Europe. The man is labelled "Georgian" and as such a member of a troubled minority. Many people, so the titles suggests, are still suffering from the breakdown of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union. The West is not indicated, neither is the policy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, both of which have

been important players in the reorganization of the economies of the Eastern European countries. However, the photograph is linked to the possibility of a brighter future (economic growth will reduce poverty, the man will find a job, opportunities will be enhanced).

Aside from the World Bank and its intentions, the photograph transports another set of meanings: The image belongs to an iconographic tradition of depicting the unemployed and poverty (old man equals old age equals poverty), and its aesthetic form is also rooted in older traditions of recording social conditions. Early examples are photographs by Thomas Annan (1829–1887), who recorded the housing conditions of the poor in Glasgow in the 1860s, or Jacob Riis (1849–1914), who pointed his camera at slums in New York in the late 1880s. The efforts of the Farm Security Administration (1935–1944) to support the reform agenda of the Roosevelt administration from the mid-1930s onward are another case in point. In all these cases a sober form of representation based on facts guided the photographers. They all strove to highlight the misery of the poor without exposing them as mere victims. However, the images did not just record facts; they followed the aesthetic principles of "good" photographs, meaning they were technically perfect and constructed an intelligible representation of poverty and misery fit for middle-class audiences. Documentary photography in this sense is more than recording; it creates a political statement through aesthetic means. This, however, connects documentary photography with art photography.

In this photograph, Mechitov applied the mode of documentary photography as it was elaborated Europe and North America in the 1920s and 1930s. The sepia tones are a strong indicator of two quite different meanings: Tinting today usually denotes "artistic" in popular discourse while it also denotes "historic" because modern photographs look different and old photographs are often slightly faded and, due to chemical processes, partly discoloured, often giving them a sepia tone. "Historic" means that this form allows the contemporary Western beholder to interpret this picture of poverty and unemployment as a relic from a bygone age in (Western) Europe. Attention is shifted toward the formal and aesthetic qualities of the image. What then can we learn from the creation, distribution and use of such photographs/images as Mechitov's in the specific context of the World Bank? There are at least three stories to consider here. First, the photograph indicates the forms and functions of the World Bank's press relations. Second, the aesthetic form of the image denotes the photographer's effort and offers a reading of the image

as “art”. Third, images such as this one embody the iconographic traditions of representing poverty, unemployment and economic distress and, as such, form part of a larger discourse on these topics.

This brings us back to the basic question, which can be reformulated as follows: Are photographs truthful records, and is there something like an elective affinity between photography and history? We could argue that they are “truthful” in a superficial way, because they show what the person behind the camera actually saw and, as records, they are indeed “natural” materials used for historical inquiry.

In the example here, I have treated the image as historical evidence proper. It is important to show what it factually represents, and how. I have also included an evaluation of who produced it, where and for what purpose. The institutional background is of special interest in this respect. In short: The photograph as an object has been contextualized and its content and form analysed. The simple idea of “seeing” has emerged as an active process involving the producer, distributor and beholder. This process follows rules that vary according to time and place. Symbols, signs and objects in an image can carry different meanings – in a Russian context, for example, a Georgian villager may very well be associated with crime and vice, but not usually with misery and poverty. Seeing is a form of organizing knowledge and of weaving a net of signification. I therefore propose that combining iconographic with historical analysis can reveal the most probable intended meaning of the photograph in a given historical situation. This is the realm of meaning and significance in the historical process to which an image as a piece of visual evidence belongs.

This is not an elaborate analysis of a photograph that includes an in-depth investigation of the formal and aesthetic qualities of the picture alongside a more complex consideration of the specific as well as more general political and cultural context. I merely illustrate how important the context of an image is. There are different stories that can originate from a single photograph. Two avenues of research have been sketched here: the PR strategy of an institution, and the history of an iconographic tradition. The story of the subject of the image, the “Georgian villager”, remains untold, although this would have been expected by the nineteenth-century observer quoted above: “the future student, in turning the page of history, may at the same time look on the very skin into the very eyes of those, long since mouldered to dust.”(Price

1973: 4) This illustrates the massive change in the way historians work with photographs.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND HISTORY: OBJECTIVITY VS. SUBJECTIVITY

At this point, it is important to sketch the development in the way historians work with photographs, as already indicated in the introductory remarks. The past twenty years have witnessed a notable increase in research on visual culture in general.

Most of these studies on visual sources can be attributed to the broad field of cultural studies. A great variety of methodological and theoretical approaches are currently applied in historical analyses of photographic images. While iconographic approaches are very important here, structuralist and post-structuralist theory are prominent in cultural studies. Semiotics has informed critical photo-historical studies alongside feminist, colonial and post-colonial theories (for a summary of the recent theoretical discussion see Wells 2009). Although even so-called "mainstream" historians in the twentieth century never completely dismissed visual evidence, pictures were mainly used to illustrate arguments or to add a specific dimension. Images were rarely the starting point of an investigation, and they seldom played more than a supporting role. This changed with the shift in research mentioned above. The more media (especially visual media) came to be seen as an important factor in the historical process, the more the structure, content and context of the images were scrutinized. Since then, images have thus become acknowledged as equal to textual evidence.

Social history, to which the photograph analysed here may be attributed, was a late adopter of the iconic, visual and cultural turns. These turns mark a departure in the humanities toward non-written sources. The insight that (modern) societies heavily depend on media and symbolic communication also plays a key role in this issue. However, in the German case, a type of social history, *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (history of society), put forward by Hans-Ulrich Wehler and others, has been especially slow in adapting new currents of research (Jäger 2009: 7–23). The main focuses of this type of historical investigation have been basic structures, large social formations (classes) and socio-economic conditions. Photographic images have been

and still are conceived as documents according to this line of thought – in other words, they provide evidence of the material conditions of everyday life. There is a greater interest in the actual subject matter than in the discursive practice to which the images belong.

However, images play an active part in forming the ways we interpret reality. Individuals, organizations and institutions such as governments act according to the data they collect and interpret. The medium used is not a neutral system of transmitting information. To some people, an image of an Eastern European man may be picturesque; to others, it may be a call for immediate political action. There is some tension between the truthful status bestowed upon photographs (or images) by historians and what these images might actually be doing. In other words, the images, just like the historians, act as interlocutors between the viewer/reader and the event. The choices made in the depiction of history are as subjective as those made by historians when they formulate their own narratives. However, we must distinguish between the different kinds of images used by historians: the visual records taken from the period under discussion, or the depictions of historical events produced at a later date. In addition, that some historians subjugate images to illustrative ephemera, putting them on the margins of "true" history, denies the fact that images have their own history, with their own dynamics, and do not merely serve other narratives (Arnold 2004, 2009).

Of the many "mainstream" historians who have used images, it is perhaps the work of Peter Burke and Francis Haskell that relates most closely to our concerns here. In his book *Eyewitnessing*: *The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Peter Burke argues that images have the same historical value as texts and oral testimony, for they record acts of eyewitnessing (Burke 2001: 14). His attention is on pictures – especially prints, photographs and so forth – that are contemporary with the events they describe. The popularity and accessibility of these mass-produced images may reduce their status as artworks, but it does not detract from their value as historical evidence. What is often lost in the interpretive process is the intrinsic history and analysis of the images themselves. Instead, they are taken at face value in order to provide eyewitness accounts of the past. Thus, for a social historian, the photograph with the caption "A villager, hoping to earn some money, is still unemployed. Georgia" might present evidence of the social conditions of peas-

ants in Georgia in the early twenty-first century. The intrinsic history of social and documentary photography, with its own rules, would thus be excluded from consideration.

Most of the photographs social historians use as evidence are classified in three categories: 1) records of social conditions, 2) documentary photography and 3) industrial photography. To the contemporary observer, photographic images of social conditions have always been seen as a kind of document; these documents are accompanied by explanations (description, publication information, commentary, and other images referring to them). The point I am trying to make is that these images shape what was, and is, considered to be "reality". They take part in the processes that configure how people conceive of themselves and society with the consequence that people (politicians included) tend to assume that images have an influence on other people. Thus, photographs influence not only what we see literally, but also what we see metaphorically – or what we believe others might see, which, consequentially, influences their behaviour.

In conclusion, there are two fundamental approaches to using photographs as historical evidence in history. The first is through interest in the subject of a photograph. This seems to be a nineteenth-century approach. The focus of more recent investigations of photography is less material culture, customs and conditions and more meaning in terms of class, gender and race relations. However, photographs still provide information about material culture, objects and specific ways of presenting social status, which other sources rarely procure. In these cases, we need to know exactly what is represented. It is therefore necessary to reconstruct the situation in which a photograph was taken (when, why and how) in order to understand the interaction between the photographer and the subject. It is our purpose to collect as much evidence of the people involved as possible and of the historic circumstances in which the picture was taken. It is vital to establish whether or not the image is an original, or whether it has been tempered with.

The second approach explores the socio-cultural meaning of the photograph for a specific situation. Why an image was taken and published and what clues are available to the contemporary beholder about the text, context and media are important questions. It is unnecessary in this case to determine whether or not a person depicted is really what or who the caption suggests they are. Hence, the "villager" might actually live in a city, or be an actor,

etc. Although secondary, it still important to reconstruct the exact circumstances of the image's production. More important is the distribution (or use) of the image. Thus, the process in which a specific meaning was achieved can be reconstructed, and the specific impact of visual communication on certain discourses (race, gender, class, identity, alterity, etc.) can be evaluated. This does not mean we should ignore the process of taking a photograph or neglect the role of the photographer or technical restrictions, etc. Instead, it shifts our attention from the subject of a photograph to its uses, emphasizing its cultural and social meaning. These concerns have been highlighted frequently since the 1980s by photography and cultural historians, including Alan Trachtenberg (2008) and John Tagg (2009).

Here and now, it seems obvious that we should approach photographs with all the analytical instruments that have emerged over the past few decades. By the same token, it seemed natural to nineteenth-century observers that photographs were simply documents of what happened. Photography entered history through a wide-open and popular door. Professional historians shied away from this door, preferring a side entrance instead.
Attributions assigned to photography in the first half of the nineteenth century made it difficult to conceive of photography as anything other than a mere soulless (and reduced) reproduction of reality. Attributions in recent research are quite different. The link between the design, production and distribution of an image is taken as instilling a specific meaning into a photograph. The ambiguity of "meaning" is often stressed by cultural historians. However, our own practice of research results in bringing out one certain meaning based on the questions asked and theories applied. What cultural historians sometimes tend to forget is the actual subject of a photograph and its story. Like Horst Bredekamp says, we also tend to forget the specific dynamics of an image, its aesthetic history and communication with other images (Bredekamp 2010).

An 'elective affinity' leaves its imprints on all parties within a process. One could even say that it changes them and that it generates new tasks, challenges and opportunities that none of the partners could have imagined before in the years of interaction. Photographs were first excluded from historical analysis, then they were reluctantly accepted as a "window to the past" or as appropriate illustrations. Finally, they were recognized as a rich source with which to analyse various processes of subjectivation. Images, especially photographs, are no longer seen as 'raw' or 'natural' sources that merely

show what was there. It is generally accepted that they transmit values and creeds; they are recognized as important elements in social, political and cultural discourses and can no longer be ignored. The inclusion of visual evidence has opened up new avenues of research in historiography and has changed approaches towards topics such as gender, race, class and colonialism. Recent general textbooks on historical methodology include large sections on images, something which would have been unthinkable thirty or forty years ago (Lengwiler 2011).[7] The potential of visual evidence seems unfathomable.

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