

The revelation was instigated by Twitter, unfortunately.

The movie was *The First Siren*. I watched it for a quiet personal movie night, my friends from lab bailing on me at the last moment.

(Just me, a glass of wine, dimmed lights, and a comfortable robe. Oh, and a brownie in a mug.)

It was not really my kind of movie, but the ending was quite special. Subverting the post-apocalyptic premise into becoming a cult-based horror flick was pretty inspired, I suppose. People online certainly thought so. It felt like every third post online was from someone who watched it, and every second post was someone reacting to everyone talking about it. Essays upon essays unpacking themes, videos going frame-by-frame finding shreds of foreshadowing, and one genuinely funny meme. (The rest were pretty bad, as per usual.) But one sentence stuck out, one I saw a hundred times when I scrolled through my phone on that couch.

“I wish I could forget this movie, so I could watch it again for the first time.”

And having drunk to the bottom of my glass, I saw no reason to not think, “Well. Why not?”

Memory is a tricky thing. This is the exact reason I have job security. We are invested in the study of making it less tricky, which was always going to be harder than it sounded. But, at the moment, I was going a different angle.

My deskmate noticed that I was staying later than usual, but he didn't really make a big deal of it, I got into these productive moods occasionally, usually saying something about curing alzheimer's within a week.

(I never did. But Felix was a good friend. He got married this summer, and made the mistake of letting me give a speech. It was a lovely disaster.)

I had a corner of my home dedicated to prototyping. I didn't like having lab sponsors look at obvious failed prototypes, so I misbehaved and failed out of their sight. But today, I decided to make something that wouldn't need to move to the office, something just for myself.

A simple device to forget *The First Siren*.

It looked ugly, but I knew it would work. Well, at least ninety-eight percent so. Self-experimentation was like that sometimes.

But affecting memory is one thing -- the point of the exercise is recreating the *experience*.

To test this, I established a log. Here, I would systematically document my present thoughts and feelings on the film. Not merely a overall review of its cinematic quality (decent, but the first and third acts

dragged), but a record of all the *qualia* of the experience. Whether I saw the twist coming (not really), the emotions (or lack thereof) I felt as I saw it, and the idiosyncrasies that came from my personal viewing (why did that door lock from the outside?).

And then I left myself some highly specific viewing instructions, to make this as controlled as possible. Whether this somewhat above-average river could be crossed a second time.

And then I used it.

As expected, I felt like I lost time. Of course, the entire process took less than a two minutes, but it felt like waking from a power nap.

For a moment, I wasn't entirely sure it worked. There was no way for me to reasonably tell what could have been lost. But, my eyes hit the notebook I left behind. It had clear instructions to watch an apparently mediocre film called *The Last Siren*. I had written myself a full over-explanation of the experiment, on the off chance I would have accidentally forgotten too much.

(I didn't. As I planned, I had clear memory of everything -- the device, my life, my breakfast, even writing the note -- just this movie and everything relating to its plot and details had vanished. It was odd, remembering writing a review, but not remembering any of its contents. Then again, much the same could be said for my entire high school experience.)

So, I got a glass of wine, made a brownie in a mug, and wore my robe, and prepared for my second first viewing of *The Last Siren*.

And then I watched it.

It was not really my kind of movie, but the ending was unique. Subverting the post-apocalyptic setting into a cult-based horror flick was a bit of a swerve, but it had done something interesting with the genre. My first instinct was to scroll through my phone to see the discourse around the movie, which was exactly what my review told me.

I chuckled at how predictable I was. Perhaps I had some higher expectations going in the second time (if it was good enough for a clean slate, then it must mean something, right?) but otherwise I was quite beat for beat. The first and third acts dragged on for too long, there was no reason for that door to be locked from the outside, and so on. I even did myself a favor of telling myself what the only good meme was, yet another point on which I completely agreed with my past self.

I was point for point consistent. I had perfectly recreated the original viewing experience. The river was crossed a second time.

With this success under my belt, there was no reason to not use the device in its intended, recreational use. To be safe, and for my own amusement, I still pre-wrote reviews of movies before erasing them, albeit in less extravagant detail than before. I also made a brief automatic code that would systematically add any movie I forgot to a special playlist, to keep things nice and organized.

Instead of waiting for the next new blockbuster or hidden discovery, I now had a constant, renewable supply of my favorite cinema. It felt quite environmentally responsible, to be able to watch and enjoy *Rosa Viejo* without any wear and tear. According to my records, I had gone through twelve watches by now, and every time has been a delight.

(But my queue did grow and shrink beyond that one movie. By design, this was usually a surprise. It became a game, to watch a movie and predict my notes. When I watched *Masked Man versus Pig Warrior*, I could do nothing but see all the flaws in the costumes, and when I looked at my notes to myself, I had simply written "Zipper." Well done, past me.)

It seemed like a shame, however, this private pleasure.

The simple fact was that this device had nearly no ethical applications. This cinephile experience was perhaps the only one, aside from perhaps a very narrow slice of therapy. The implications of a bad agent using targeted memory loss were, in a word, terrifying. Especially if scaled up to industrial levels.

(If nothing else, film studios could get away with rereleases much easier. We don't need the cultural stagnation of a fiftieth *Exa-Man* origin story movie.)

Therefore, to keep this a secret was my only moral option. Which was fine enough by me, our center's sponsors can mind their own business.

Unfortunately, it was soon my turn to host the lab movie night.

Cleanup was rather easy. The mass of the experimental space took place within my own head, so all I really needed to do was file my notes and shove the device in a closet. I spent a longer time baking shortbread cookies for my labmates.

(They seem to think baking is harder than it is. Really, so long as you can follow instructions, then you can bake. I don't tell them this.)

I made a specific choice to put on *The Intercept 2* for the lab. It was a movie I had no real strong feelings on, so I never once used the device on it. (The only memorable moment from it was the gratuity of the lead actor's shirtlessness. I've seen better.) Therefore, it was a good choice for a dozen drunk scientists to rip into.

Partway through, during a set piece elevator fight scene Felix made a joke about how the protagonist looked like a Juan. There were only a few giggles from the truly inebriated among us, of which I was not part.

After the credits, I was taking dishes and glasses back to the sink, and Felix offered a hand in this while his spouse napped on the couch. He wondered why I didn't get his joke about Juan, since he was making a direct reference to my favorite movie of all time, *Rosa Viejo*.

Whoops.

As the rest of the guests left the party and his spouse slept, I quietly explained, as tactfully as I could, since we were friends and all (we were, right? I talked at your wedding), that I developed highly unethical equipment for self-experimentation inspired by some Twitter posts.

To my relief (embarrassment?), Felix decided that none of this was quite out of character for me.

I invited him to also have his mind wiped of *The Intercept 2*, since he seemed to enjoy it.

He respectfully declined.

The next few weeks at work were remarkably normal, excepting Felix occasionally teasing my movie watching habits (He could keep a secret quite well, I knew from experience. His price for silence was some light teasing. The things I do for the sake of the world.)

But by design, the novelty of a permanent supply of good old-yet-new movies had not worn out.

Well, so long as they remained good.

Enter: *Petal's Wind*.

It appeared on my device's playlist one day, though I don't recall when it appeared (As always, by design. I feel I must always clarify this.) And so I casually watched it, not knowing what to expect.

What I got was, well, something unremarkable. A vapid and lazy boy-meets-girl story that had a fourth act that lasted an eternity. So. The plot was nothing special. The set design must have been built on the leftovers of a Hallmark special. The characters were just three cliches stabled together and altogether unrelatable. It wasn't even bad enough to reach the level of *Masked Man versus Two Pig Warriors*, which is technically awful to the point of becoming my new favorite movie.

In short, it was boring. There was no need to watch *Petal's Wind*.

I thought it over for ten minutes before relenting, and accepting my past self must have noticed something I hadn't. So I retrieved my notebook, where I kept my reviews of all the movies on which I had used the device. Although I have recently been more terse since *The First Siren*, I had always been meticulous about documenting some of the various qualities of my experimental subjects.

There was no mention of *Petal's Wind*.

So.

Why did I choose to forget it?

My viewing experiments were unintentionally put on halt. Whereas before I was constantly watching quality films for the first time, I was now making myself sick doing repeat viewings of *Petal's Wind*.

Needless to say, it didn't really improve on the second, third, or tenth viewing.

(My initial hypothesis was that I had forgotten to record a message. Probably when I was wine drunk last Friday.)

I spent my third watch-through keeping my eyes peeled on the background, mayhaps to see if there was something of interest under the surface.

(There was nothing except for an errant boom mike.)

After my fourth watch, I decided to read the credits carefully. Perhaps there was some surprise of casting.

(There wasn't. In third grade my history teacher left school to make movies, but she had nothing to do with this production. Looking her up, she was arrested for possession without a license when I was in sixth grade.)

On my eighth watch I replaced the soundtrack with Pink Floyd.

(...)

After my tenth watch, I made myself some croissants to try something, anything, that wasn't listening to the interminable fourth-act monologue of *Petal's Wind*.

Seeing that there was nothing within the movie itself, there was only one conclusion. The meaning of the movie must have come from *outside* the bounds of the medium. My true first viewing must have taken place under special circumstances.

(I had now concluded that there was a chance I had purposefully left no notes for myself. Perhaps as a gutsy attempt to stress-test the efficacy of the erasure, to see if I could remember the positive *context* of a movie independent of the movie itself. That, or I had left nothing as a challenge for myself. Either way, thanks, past me.)

First, I thought, perhaps the release of this movie meant something to me. If so, it would be easy to verify. However, it hit theaters when I was in fifth grade, well before I became a patron of the local AMC. As I understand, I would have been busy making a shoebox diorama of sumerian farmers. The only life-changing experience at that point would have been a hot-glue burn.

So now I simply needed to see if I had watched this movie in any one of my happy memories from fifth grade until today.

Not the tightest search space, to say the least.

I called up a few of my friends, going in reverse order of present familiarity. I gave a bit of a dodgy explanation about how I wanted to catch up and how I recently watched *Petal's Wind* and how it was just so familiar and did they remember if I watched it at their birthday/wedding/bar mitzvah/graduation?

(At the front of the list was Felix. He immediately told me that he hadn't heard of this movie, and tried to ask "was this about that device?" right before I hung up to escape that conversation.)

None of them recognized the movie by name or description. Many were confused, but glad to hear I was still alive out here in their own long, roundabout ways. They gave a usual affirmation that we should talk more often, and I politely agreed.

(Neither of us really meant it. By the end of the list, none of them remembered me.)

The context I first watched this movie wasn't with friends. Likely, it wasn't a happy one.

The device always had a second possible application. Perhaps, I had fallen into a mood that night, and had memories I decided I'd rather live without.

It was a possibility, but an unhappy one in my sober light. Because now I had a duty to uncover and relive whatever that experience may be.

Regrettably, I still had their numbers saved on my phone. I knew I had, but now that I was forced to confront that fact, I disappointed in myself.

I called the first number. She picked quicker than I was prepared, and I was flat-footed.

(We talked for an hour. Her more than me. She wanted to apologize. I wished she wouldn't.)
I called the second number. It rang agonizingly long before going over to voicemail. I hung up, but then he called back a second later.

(We talked circles around each other, like back then. I thought we would last. He thought he could learn to love me. We were both wrong.)

I called the third number. It was blocked twice. I waited three days, and made the call from the lab phone, when I was alone, and they picked up.

(They were still angry with me. I couldn't blame them.)

I called the fourth number. She answered on the fourth ring.

(We were together for over a year, and when I moved we promised to keep talking. We didn't. She was alone in her house that evening I called, leaving her on her own to wrangle the kid. They adopted him two years ago. When I hung up, I found myself crying, for some reason.)

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Anyway none of them remembered the 4.5/10 nineties film *Petal's Wind* or any of its insufferable fourth-act monologue.

Researching movie showings was easier in the twentieth century. Libraries would keep systematic track of newspapers and other ephemera, and so it'd be likely that week-by-week showtimes would be archived. Indeed, I could call certain libraries and get copies of their microfiche newspapers across several months. However, more recently theaters and TV broadcasters have forgone the print medium, letting their release schedule be forgotten immediately upon release. Therefore, tracking my possible intersections with a particular movie got paradoxically harder for more recent years compared to older ones.

I was explaining this all to Felix as he patiently drank some ice tea. He wanted to know how the experiments with the device had gone, and I decided to fill him in on the events of the past months, including my frustration with a disappointing movie by the name *Petal's Wind*.

He kept a patient ear on my story, from my dalliances with developing the device and a system of documentation, to my unsatisfying new-first-time watch, to my attempt to reconnect with old acquaintances (though, I skimmed over a few conversations). I explained that my current plan was to figure out any possible point where I may have seen this movie for the first time, using all the power of

the library system at my disposal. From there, I could possibly deduce my motives for forgetting it in the first place.

It was at this point I noticed he was smirking, and had finally succumbed to a giggling fit.

He then informed me that I had, in fact, almost certainly had never watched *Petal's Wind* before.

What?

Felix had added it to my playlist, without me ever using the device on the movie.

What.

He then said, "Remember how you hid a rubber spider in my drink at my wedding? And how I freaked out in front of everyone? Now we are even."

He then walked out, telling me that I just got epic pranked, brah.

What.

The garbageman saw me as I was throwing away a large amount of electronics. She offered to take it, since even though it was ugly, it was probably still salvageable for parts and reuse. I told her that I'd rather it be completely crushed and compacted. She then asked if all this was something I made.

I told her yes. But not to ask me how. I had forgotten all about how to make this device.