

Laura Mulvey in conversation with Griselda Pollock

GP – Griselda Pollock

LM – Laura Mulvey

GP: Hello Laura. Welcome to this virtual presence at the conference organised by MaMSIE, at Birkbeck and CentreCATH at Leeds where we are aiming to explore the status of the mother: real, social, economic motherhood, and the imaginary mother about which psychoanalysis makes us think. This leads to considering the role of the mother in feminine subjectivity and the role of the mother in culture. So we are going to be exploring a number of things during the course of this conference and we were very keen to invite you to participate because of *Riddles of the Sphinx* – as one of the most important events, not only in feminist cinema and avant-garde poetics in the 1970s, but one of a very profound series of reflections by feminists in the 1970s on motherhood and the meaning of the maternal in culture. So I'm going to ask you a number of questions to try and take us from the larger picture closer to the actual text. So the first question I'd like to put to you is to think a little bit about the 1970s, about feminism and why motherhood and the maternal seemed to be such an important part of feminism in the 1970s. Do you have any thoughts on why that was such a central question for us then?

LM: The question of motherhood was of enormous importance in the early days of the growth of women's political consciousness in the Women's Movement before it engaged with the more abstract questions and principles of feminism. Motherhood was one of the first issues around which women organised themselves. Furthermore, the status of the mother in patriarchal society raised questions that ranged from those of immediate social, everyday experience to the more abstract issues of culture and ultimately led towards the psyche, towards the unconscious that structured patriarchy. In their early consciousness-raising discussions, women brought on to the agenda practical questions about how women's oppression was experienced in everyday life, articulating and beginning to analyse those common denominators of oppression from which they were particularly suffering.

Motherhood was central to this debate first of all as specific to the female body and female experience – parenting was almost exclusively divided by gender in those days. But there was also a ‘topography’ of motherhood: it occupied a space, the domestic, enclosed, interior space of the home that existed in binary opposition to the public space of social and political discourse as well as male work across all classes. Metonymically, this interior, the isolation of women’s work within the restricted and defined space of the home, led to the interiority of the maternal ‘mentality’ associated with sentiment and suffering, that feminine feeling that existed, once again, in binary opposition to masculine rationality. From a practical point of view, one of the first questions that emerged was how to challenge the isolation of domestic space and the isolation of domestic labour? How political organisation should and could involve collectivity and women working together?

GP: Thank you very much. Let's move on to a second and related question which you've already intimated which is that there is the social and political analysis of women's situation and organisation to change it, but also something very important in the 1970s in which you were involved, which was the emergence of a different kind of theoretical-political engagement with psychoanalysis as a means to reflect on the imaginary and psycho-social dimensions of the maternal. Would you be able to talk a little bit about how you see that move happening? This is more, I suppose, connected with what you were talking about, the abstracted theoretical reflections stemming from feminism as opposed to the practical politics of the women's movement.

LM: To my mind, once the politics of the female body came to include the politics of images of the female body, a more theoretical dimension inevitably began to emerge. In the early days of marches and demonstrations, key questions were to do with women’s control of their own bodies, their fertility, for instance, abortion on demand or free contraception. At the same time, women protested against women’s exploitation in imagery, the ‘this ad exploits women’ stickers are one example, as well as the demonstration at the Miss World competition in 1971. For me personally, I think that it was writing about, reflecting back on, the Miss World demo in 1971 that led me to think beyond the need to protest at the fact that women’s bodies were exploited through eroticisation and move towards the need to analyse its signification. What

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did the endless reduction of the image of woman to the sexual mean? What did it say, not about women, but about the patriarchal unconscious? Thus there was a move from 'This ad exploits women' to the more abstract question: 'What's the relationship between the politics of a woman's lived experience of her body and representations of her body?' And this involved establishing that there was a gap between the two: the lived of 'women' and the represented 'woman', which then necessitated a move from organisation on the basis of the every day to considering more abstract principles: how patriarchal, capitalist society reified the woman's body, how experience was alienated, in the image and in representation. So this meant a shift into questions of the meaning of representation, of images of women and ultimately, their relation to the unconscious, to questions of castration anxiety and fetishism, for instance. So I suppose I'm suggesting that once questions of imagery became political; theory, semiotics and psychoanalysis inevitably followed. I don't think there was an expectation that Freud and psychoanalytic theory would provide easy answers to feminism's theoretical questions. But psychoanalysis did supply a vocabulary through which they could be addressed. This was the point at which Freudian theory could offer a way in, like a chink in the door in which a small at least crack of light could illuminate some of the problems that early feminist theory were trying to address. But while the politics of woman as spectacle involved addressing issues, as I just said, such as fetishism etc, motherhood raised very different kinds of questions in relation to the social unconscious, most particularly the Oedipus complex. While the 'images of women' problem led to Freud, and his theories of fetishism in particular, the problem of motherhood was illuminated more particularly by Lacan and his conceptualisation of the Oedipus Complex around a shift between the maternal Imaginary and the patriarchal Symbolic Order. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the first translations of Lacan into English (1966) and his influence began to have importance for feminist attempts to theorise motherhood. The Lacanian concept of the Imaginary as the pre-Oedipal phase in a child's development, in which the physical relationship between mother and child existed in a mutually self-sufficient dyad, seemed to address the problem of women's exclusion from the public sphere of culture and 'the Law'. The paternal threat of castration would initiate the child's development into subjectivity; a crisis moment out of which the physical contentment offered by the maternal body would be left behind and

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devalued. Out of this sense of loss, of the maternal body and the child's imaginary sense of wholeness, came the paternal principles represented in the first instance by language itself, a system that was ruled by laws and the 'Law' of the patriarchal Symbolic. As in the case of feminist responses to Freud, this relationship between a maternal 'Imaginary' and a paternal 'Symbolic' seemed to offer a means to theorise the way that the maternal, and implicitly, the feminine as such, was devalued and excluded from the world of culture, art, politics and all those things that combine to create a dynamic social system. To understand how this system was founded on an unconscious structure seemed to offer an important insight into how it worked... but, of course, without offering simple solutions for change. In the first instance, it seemed important to articulate the problem...

GP: So we have established a sense of the specificity of the women's movement's understanding of lived experience, and then the need to understand how that is articulated with or interwoven with or reshaped by representation. This has taken us into the realm of psychoanalysis which offered a vocabulary to think this through, even while what it offers is not complete, and has to be worked on itself by feminist theory. The way that both lived experience and representation was worked on was, in part, through an engagement with the language of cinema, or, in the case of Mary Kelly the visual arts, conceptual art. There were films such as your *Riddles of the Sphinx* to which we're coming on in a moment, but also Chantal Akerman's key films such as *Jeanne Dielmann (1975)*, *News From Home (1976)* and *Les Rendez-vous D'Anna (1978)*, The maternal is very much there in the mid-1970s, including obviously the poetic text of Julia Kristeva, *Stabat Mater* which both speaks out of the transformed subjectivity of the mother in immediate post-partum experience of having a child as well as reflecting on that in relation to images of the Virgin Mary and Catholic Marian theology. So there's a moment at which aesthetics and poetics becomes a crucial place for women to think about the maternal. Could you talk about your place in that constellation and begin to take us towards *Riddles of the Sphinx*? Why did you make that film at that moment? Why did film seem to be a way to think this through?

LM: Can I start with our first film? When Peter Wollen and I first began to make movies together in 1974 with *Penthesilea Queen of the Amazons*, we were interested in forging what

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we thought of as ‘an objective alliance’ between avant-garde strategies for questioning the conventions of cinema and feminist rejection of conventional cinema’s exploitation of the image of woman. Practically speaking, this was one way in which we could rationalise our own collaboration and our working methods. Peter had always been interested in avant-garde aesthetics as politically radical, not only in film but in art and literature in general, whereas I had become interested in the avant-garde more as a strategy of negation, from the perspective of feminism. For me, despite the enormous richness and complexity of the cinema, it had invested in the image of a woman as a kind of front for, a materialisation of, its own excess: a fusion of the beauty of cinema and the reified beauty of femininity. This meant that an avant-garde aspiration, within a modernist aesthetic, to strip cinema down to its own specificity and materiality offered a strategy for a feminist desire to deconstruct cinema as it had evolved around the spectacle of woman. For me, as I said before, this was primarily a negative aesthetic, a negation of the dominant, a move towards opening up a small space in which a different kinds of questions, a different kind of aesthetics, could emerge. In his article on ‘Counter Cinema’ Peter articulated and elaborated this approach. But beyond the question of the avant-garde idea we were both interested in making a theoretical film. Making films theoretically. So not using avant-garde aesthetics as such or personally, but also as a means to think about how the medium of cinema could be used to put forward ideas and explore ideas. Nowadays this kind of cinema is quite commonly referred to as the essay film, which has its own long history pre-dating the mid-70s, and I think we were more involved with that tradition and that genre than we were aware of at the time. But we were also very anxious not to leave narrative behind. Although there was a strong reaction against narrative and narrativity within the avant-garde at that time and traditionally, we felt that story telling was important. We wanted to hold onto its place in the cinema but we also acknowledged that story telling included and articulated human emotion, human gesture, human relations, not just in the cinema, but in fiction of all kinds. In the cinema, however, emotion materialises in gesture, facial expression and indeed through the language of cinema itself – its movement, colour, framing etc. etc. So those are some early ideas. *Riddles of the Sphinx* was our second film and we were trying to move rather beyond a negative aesthetic as such, to experiment with, to take a step towards, something new. That was where the question of motherhood

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came in: although it was important as an issue for feminism, as a theme it seemed to enable a ‘reinvention’ of words and images. Within psychoanalytic theory, motherhood is associated with the pre-Oedipal, when the bodily closeness of the mother-child relationship both excludes and pre-dates language. We were interested in questioning this understanding of the Oedipal dynamic, trying to open up the dyad and find a gap out of which words and images relating to motherhood could emerge. This involved taking and mutating the basic Lacanian principle that a child acquired language as its relation to the maternal body was transcended. We were also interested in Kristeva’s concept of the chora, the meaningful sounds that belong to the pre-Oedipal stage in which the maternal dominates. Needless to say, this was an experiment; we were not suggesting a fully formed theoretical answer to the Freudian or Lacanian concepts of the Oedipus Complex. But in order to ask these questions we had to make a point of insertion between those fused bodies of mother and child. I think it was similar to Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* project in which she used her relationship with her own child to trace the elegant movement from the physical bond between mother and child to a further stage, not that of fully formed language, but one in which objects and images play an important signifying role. For instance, the way that objects express both the child’s curiosity about the world and the mother’s curiosity about the child. I felt that there was perhaps some equivalent between this focus of the signification of the object and the literal quality of the cinema, the way in which cinema simultaneously captures the object’s everyday-ness, through its own look, the mechanical eye of film, its own object-hood as it were. Furthermore, the cinema can invest signification in objects without recourse to language. So there seemed to be some overlap between the theoretical questions at stake in both *Riddles* and *Post-Partum Document*. I think *Post-Partum Document*, *Riddles of the Sphinx* and *Jeanne Dielmann* – Chantal Akerman’s film – were also influenced by minimalism, by the kinds of aesthetic legacies that were coming into circulation from the avant-garde. But they were also influenced by a kind of intuitive minimalism that came with a feminist rejection of representational excess. So the avant-garde aspiration to create a new radical way of seeing for a new radical politics, was extended to a feminist aspiration to create a radically new way of seeing for a feminist politics of representation, towards a re-figuration of the cinema and a feminist use of cinema for a reinterpretation of the everyday and everyday

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life. So in this sense, although we were interested in going back and raiding ideas from essay film and so on, we were also very interested in the cinema's potential for reflecting on the everyday and on its own literalness in its relationship with what it saw.

GP: Can I move onto the text in a way? I would like us in the last section to focus on *Riddles of the Sphinx*. I'd like to put to you that the script that you wrote for the *Riddles of the Sphinx* and that is spoken within it, sometimes by you, sometimes by the voice of the sphinx, makes *Riddles of the Sphinx* not just a cinematic text but a major piece of feminist poetry. It is a conjunction of feminist poetics and feminist philosophy, shall we say. We could look back now. I'm not just thinking about theory in practice, but this very interesting question: where does a new understanding emerge? And you've talked about a gap in psychoanalysis. You've talked about a sort of gap opening up in cinema, but I wonder if we could look at a couple of aspects of your writing, this *écriture* of the film itself. We've got the script with us and obviously there's this concept that you introduce with the opening text, in the second chapter called 'Laura speaking', where you talk about the idea of the sphinx as the figure for posing the problem or the questions facing women in relation to the mother and living motherhood. So you call the sphinx an imaginary narrator, not the voice of truth and not an answering voice, but a questioning voice, a voice posing a riddle but also representing motherhood for women under patriarchal law as a riddle. This idea of women confronting a riddle, do you have thoughts about how you see that then or how you see it now? Do you think we still are confronted with the riddle of, as you say it so beautifully, motherhood and how to live it or not to live it? You know there's a question of the choice that we have now. It seems so central to the film, that women were confronted with something that they had to do something quite radical to be able to think out. Is motherhood still a riddle for us all?

LM: Well I think that necessarily motherhood is a riddle! A polemical point coming out of feminism at the time was that motherhood is not a simple, natural way of bringing a new human being into the world, but an enigmatic and strange confrontation inscribed into a culture; this raises the question of how that culture understands or misunderstands the process of bringing a new human being, not only into its world, but into society and how it will then understand itself within that society. This is one of the reasons why feminism found

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psychoanalytic thought so fascinating. Freud articulated the way in which femininity and motherhood present a major problem for human culture but also the way in which an individual's assumption of subjectivity, its induction into society is also difficult and traumatic. How those transitions take place, whatever kind of process of parenting is there, is a socially determined trajectory and one in which the valuation invested in motherhood is of the essence. Freud implies that through these socialisations a society inscribes its own unconscious into the individual unconscious. In addition to the psychoanalytic dimension to *Riddles*, a number of the questions and points that we were considering were primarily cinematic. In *Penthesilea* we rebelled against the edit, the place of point of view, the invisible movement of the camera around different points of fiction, as a key element of the negative aesthetics that I mentioned earlier. It was made up five twenty-minute chapters, each consisting of two reels of 16mm film joined together invisibly. In *Riddles* we wanted to continue that resistance to the edit, to continue to work with the long take. But we wanted to move out of the negative aesthetic and evolve the extended shot into a strategy, which had more meaning, more poetics, more significance. It was out of this combination of the cinematic and the conceptual that we shot the central section of *Riddles* in thirteen circular panning shots. These 'circles' represent the enclosing space of the domestic interior, a topography that can be safe and comforting as in the image of a nest, but also constricting as in a prison. Not only did this cinematic strategy oppose the more linear space of conventional narrative but it seemed to represent the dilemmas faced by both mother and child trapped in a dyadic relationship. The idea is established in the kitchen sequence, which was shot to exclude the exterior (no windows were visible); the outside was invisible, and the mother's face was invisible. While excluding the exterior emphasised the enclosed space of the domestic, framing emphasised the mother-child dyad, but slightly exaggerated as a quite chunky two-year-old being still carried around by her mother. The voice over consists of a very rough association of ideas that Peter and I put together, we listed a series of phrases and words associated with the domestic...

GP: I think the sphinx is very poetic at the beginning and then it becomes more political and analytical as we move into the space where Louise is forced to go out of the house and then face separation from her child, the anxiety of the mother leaving the child at nursery and

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having to go to work and encountering some of the issues around motherhood in the workplace, making friends beginning to be active in some kind of collective. And then we have an amazing scene in the playground where the voice of the sphinx as a voice off comes back again and you write: 'Questions arose which seem to form a linked ring, each raising the next until they led the argument back to its point of departure'. And you asked questions which seem to kind of summarise what we've been talking about: 'Do women need special working conditions? Can a childcare campaign tackle anything fundamental? Should women's struggle be concentrated on economic issues? Is domestic labour the problem? Is it the division of labour?' And then you finally come to this very crucial question: 'Does the oppression of women work on the unconscious as well as the conscious? What would the politics of the unconscious be like? How necessary is being a mother to women in reality or imagination?' You pose some of the most profound issues with which I think we struggle, using the figure of the questioning voice. But I wonder if you have thoughts on that scene and the idea of 'the politics of the unconscious'? This rams together social change with the fantasmatic and the theorisation of subjectivity. It seems to me this is one of the pivots of the film before we then take Louise back to her mother where a genealogy of women is staged. Then into the coincidence of her relationship with Maxine and the dream sequence and then finally the scene, which is also one of my favourites, in the British Museum when we almost shift from centring somewhere in Louise's experience to finding the child Anna as the enunciator as her voice takes over. There's a very beautiful movement. I wonder if you could think back a little bit about the playground scene and the Egyptian room which is where we end with Anna almost in a sense remembering the whole film that we've just been through, not just as her memory, but as the formation of feminine subjectivity, both fantasy and memory of her childhood.

LM: Yes, yes. Absolutely. The playground sequence was intended... as I was saying, this relates to Mary Kelly's project... to articulate, to convey, the need for feminism to think theoretically, without leaving behind the enormous importance of women's everyday experience. How, that is, to move between the personal and the political and between economics and the unconscious. But these issues were only just coming into conscious articulation, they could only be formulated as questions, partly as you pointed out earlier,

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using the idea of the voice of the sphinx as a questioning voice, but also because it didn't seem to be possible at the time to conceive of answers. This reminds me of the way in which this period seemed to be a threshold: women were beginning to articulate the instances of their oppression and reach towards the theoretical structures with which to analyse them, but the questioning form hovered between the earlier moment of silence and the possible future moment of answers. There would be time to think, and not only theoretically, but through in different forms of representation – art, writing, essays, movies and so on – about the invisibility of the female unconscious, the problem of finding the female unconscious. On the one hand, psychoanalytic theory was a means towards articulating the problem but then it also itself placed the maternal, particularly in Lacanian terms, outside language, restricted to the pre-Oedipal. So it seemed valid to begin by looking for ways in which representation and conceptualisation emerged before the patriarchal Oedipal, but rather than with an answering voice, to continue with a questioning voice. Now I think perhaps that the 'questioning' voice was in some sense an answer... perhaps implicitly we were suggesting that the voice of the maternal, and the voice of a feminist alternative 'poetics' that addresses the problem of the maternal, is always one of questioning, revolving around enigmas, within an aesthetic of the hieroglyph rather than transparent rationality. And certainly in terms of our relationship to cinema we were looking for a cinema, which would not be transparent, which would avoid erasing its materiality. So a cinema that was hieroglyphic, non-transparent and that demanded a thinking audience or a Brechtian audience and so on, was both a transitional strategy but possibly also an aesthetic that needed to be considered in its own right. So here questions of cinema aesthetics meet those raised by the problem of the maternal...

GP: Yes, I think that's absolutely fascinating. And I'm going to just ask you one last question which takes us to this British Museum, because it seems as if there they are puzzling over hieroglyphics, so there's a kind of inscription into the film of this very concept of another kind of language and another kind of moment. It brings the Egyptian rather than the Greek Sphinx that you start with back into play. Joan Raphael-Leff has written a very wonderful paper called 'If Freud was an Egyptian', to ask why Freud was not interested in the myths of Isis and Osiris as opposed to Oedipus. But what I find so fascinating here is the film opens up at the point at which it shifts in the course of the final voice over, from, as I said, where we've

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been centred on in terms of the mother, child and Louise's experience, the mother as a subject negotiating loss, separation and memory, to the daughter. So in some sense you move towards femininity itself having to understand itself in relationship to a memory of the mother. Including the real labour and experience involved in social motherhood, the maternal is no longer just a question of being a mother or understanding the process of socialisation by means of maternal parenting. The maternal also poses the question to she who comes through it what it means to be a girl. You make a wonderful point when the voice says '*Capital delay body, she would place the box and close the lid, she could feel her heartbeat, she felt giddy with success as though after labouring daily to prevent a relapse into her pristine humanity she'd finally got what she wanted. She shuddered. She heard a voice very quiet coming from the box, the voice of the sphinx growing louder until she could hear it clearly, compellingly and she knew that it had never ever been entirely silent and that she had heard it before all her life since she first understood that she was a girl. The voice was so familiar yet so faintly easy to forget. She smiled and in her mind she flung herself through the air...*' and we move into this cinematic representation of the acrobats. But its always struck me that this sudden recognition that somehow the question of the maternal is an important question for the constitution of the feminine subject irrespective of her later decision to join in the act of motherhood or not.

LM: Oh yes, I see what you mean.

GP: But somehow it's shifted beautifully to open it up to the question of what is the mother in our memory or in our culture. And this is quite affirmative. Anna recognises it as something that will be of joy to her and I wondered, do you remember where that came from or how you thought that particular ending?

LM: Could I just kind of move back to point out that, although I've been emphasising non-linearity of the story and the way that it's constructed around tableaux and fragments and so on, there is also a linear development out of the literal spaces in which we composed the opening sequences of the movie towards the final three in which the space gets more and more broken up and fragmented. (And in the last three sequences the camera moves in another direction.) The fragmentation of spatial homogeneity of the spaces begins with the

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Mary Kelly sequence, which quotes her quoting the Post-Partum Document; thus her theorisation of motherhood through a work of art initiates the last phase of the movie. This sequence is followed by the mirror sequence that also fragments space but with an accompanying voice, a strong emphasis on the presence of language, but a language which doesn't completely make sense. It's a kind of dream, not dream, language. So that language itself acquires a texture in which there is a pleasure in words and their significances but they don't work together to convey an overall meaning. Once again, there is an attempt to conjure up a materiality and resist transparency but here in terms of language as well as the cinema itself. But I think in the museum sequence there was certainly a way in which we were trying to condense a number of themes that had come up throughout the movie in general. But that was very difficult to do – at least on a conscious level! Peter wrote both these final texts and although they came out of our preliminary discussions... discussions about how the movie would end... I think there's a lot of Peter as a writer there in those final sequences. For instance, 'capital delay body' uses the concept of 'delay' as the point of pause, a moment of stop for reflection, in which human consciousness gathers itself to confront those materialities out of which it is constructed, whether it's the materiality of the body or the materiality of economics. Thus 'delay' then represents the process of stopping to think, and out of that gap it might be possible to make images... not necessarily understanding quite what you're doing! I remember Peter saying that 'delay' also referred to Marcel Duchamp's 'A Delay in Glass'. But for me there are a lot of evocative images in that final voice over, things like 'looking into the box', the association with Pandora; and then the visual, almost photographic memory of the mother, the memory of the mother's body caught in time in a specific gesture... and so on. These images don't all necessarily fit together perfectly and I might have forgotten precisely they were supposed to work, after all, this is how many years ago? Thirty.

GP: Thirty-three.

LM: Thirty-three years ago. But certainly we used the Egyptian room at the British Museum to evoke the enigma through the hieroglyphs, which are themselves a hybrid of the iconic and the symbolic, but particularly as inscribed onto these ancient traces of actual bodies. There might have been an element of play with the pun on 'mummy'... Overall the sequence

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reiterated idea of the need to return to the past and the need to re-read the past, especially the sense that the maternal relationship is, in a sense, always of the past, lost in a vague memory that can only be summoned up as enigma. Another key image was that of the mother and child as walk into the museum, into this representation of the past hand-in-hand. The child is in some ways freed from the maternal grasp that had been the initial image of the story section of the film. At the same time as positing the mother's right to free herself from the infant and articulate her place in culture there was also the way in which the child had the right to free itself from a maternal grasp that responded to motherhood as a 'problem', at the absolute centre of social and individual experience but somehow undervalued and relegated to the cultural margins. Instead of a traumatic break with the mother's body, in which the dyad was violently split apart by the presence of the paternal, how motherhood could be articulated within a culture that defined itself by excluding the maternal... Intuitively, at the time, it felt as though this might begin to be possible through a gradual evolution of elusive images, almost lost memories, half articulated words and phrases and so on. Something like that.

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