In this lecture we will look at the ways that four creative minds in the 20th and 21st centuries have grappled with the question of understanding vs. experience in the search for meaning in the world. Each has, in their own idiosyncratic ways, continued and transformed the legacy of Nietzsche’s proclamation that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world justified.” In particular we will look at the Composer John Cage, who brings silence, randomness, and the sounds of every day life into the sphere of music, Pierre Schaeffer, the father of Musique Concrete and Acousmatic music, the film critic and sometimes-Christian mystic Andre Bazin, and finally the Portland, Oregon-based director Gus van Sant, whose film Elephant, we will examine in this class.

When we looked at Nietzsche we talked about the idea that focusing too much on the “big picture”, what it all means, what it all amounts to, that this can make us devalue our actual experience of life. This can play out in a variety of ways: it might mean focusing too much on trying to understand what a movie is about, what point it’s trying to make, while ignoring our experience of the movie’s aesthetic qualities.

\*\* In the case of creating a work of art, a piece of music, a story, this might mean organizing everything so that it leads up to a climax, the most important moment of the narrative – the moment that gives meaning to the rest of the narrative – in the example of Eisenstein’s Alexander Nevsky this took the form of the battle on the ice – meant to depict a struggle where good triumphs over evil, restoring order to the world.\*\*

Alternatively, this might mean measuring the value of our lives in terms of future career success – or a hope that our names might go down in history - or even a hope for an eternal afterlife. But in each case, there is a trade-off where the actual value of our lived experience of the world is subordinated to a hope for some future reward. For Nietzsche, experiencing the world in its fullness involves embracing every aspect of our lives; it involves not just the acceptance of our fate in a meaningless world, but in fact the love of this fate, Amor Fati. It involves a recognition that our attempts to fully understand the world will ultimately prove futile, and so we should focus on coming to the fullest experience of every moment of our lives. But what does it mean to experience the world to the fullest? How might we go about actually doing this?

Well, we can look for examples of how to approach this idea in the work of various artists and thinkers of the last 70 years or so. And as we will see, every creative person has their own approach to it.

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For John Cage experiencing the fullness of the world begins by embracing silence as music. Cage recounts how at some point in the 1940s he had an experience on a trip to Harvard, where there was an acoustics lab that contained an anechoic chamber - a room constructed to be completely silent - Cage enters the chamber and stays there there for some time listening to the silence as intently as possible. And after a while he begins to perceive two clear and distinct sounds -- a low-pitched sound and a high -pitched sound. After noticing this, he goes to the engineer in charge of the room and asks -- if the chamber was designed to be silent why there were these two sounds in the room - and the engineer explains that the low sound was the sound of his circulatory system - and the high sound was the sound of his central nervous system -- after this experience he writes " try as we might to make silence, we cannot...Until I die there will be sounds, and they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music." And so, with Cage see here that silence is an impossible ideal - it's something we can never experience - we are embodied beings in the world - sound is our destiny - and so we should embrace it for what it is. From this insight he comes to write what is probably still his most famous piece 4’33”, a piece of silent music. But of course the piece is not silent at all - in fact there's an abundance of sound in every performance of the piece - the sounds of the world around us. And just as Marcel Duchamp brought a found object from every day reality - in fact an object that usually has pretty negative associations attached to it - that is, a toilet - and inserts reality into the aesthetic sphere of art -- Cage brings the world of the everyday sounds that surround us into the aesthetic sphere of music.

And so for Cage, to experience the world to its fullest involves as he says “letting sound come into its own” or letting sounds just be sounds –

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This is an approach to listening where we try to hear sounds not in terms of what they mean – or how we can use them to efficiently navigate the world or manipulate it to our advantage, but to just try to listen to sounds on their own terms. And for Cage, like Kant, this sort of aesthetic activity allows us to get over our typically self-centered relationship to the world – it prepares us to love the world without self-interest. Cage also talks about this in terms of getting rid of the glue – the glue is that aspect of our awareness that seems to impose order and structure on the world – the way, for instance, when we look at the mutant giraffe dog – even though it really is a picture of two dogs, our eyes and brains make everything stick together so that we see it as a single dog with a long neck. Or as Kant says – the fact that we can’t help but experience the world in terms cause and effect. It’s hard-wired into our brains. Now of course, it's a good thing that our eyes ears and brains work this way – if they didn’t we probably would have died out a long time ago. But we should be mindful of the fact that the ways our minds and bodies structure experience can make the world seem to make more sense that it actually does. And if we are to listen to sounds just as sounds, independent of the abstract meanings or uses we attach to them this will require us to move beyond trying to make sense of them – to try to come into a pure experience of sounds on their own terms, to simply hear them as the unique and individual sounds that they are.

One thing Cage does to take the focus away from understanding in favor of experiencing, involves the use of randomness in composition, so that the composition of a piece is no longer the result of subjective choices on the part of the composer, rather the music arises from operations of chance – flipping coins, rolling dice, the use of the Chinese fortune-telling book, the I-Ching. And its interesting that even in the face of random data, humans still hear patterns where there may not actually be any – our brains can’t stand meaninglessness – we constantly impose meaning and order on the objects of experience. But cage thinks that if we can get past our habit of imposing order and meaning on everything we experience, we can enter into a sort of higher state of mindfulness, a state of enlightenment where we become aware of each moment of our lives. And of course Cage is deeply influenced by the meditative practices of Zen Buddhism in this pursuit.

But in any case, the randomness of chance music certainly brings the experience of the moment to the foreground – there are no longer any climaxes, there is no thorough-going unity between part and whole – on logical consistency that moves the musical narrative along, all there is, is the experience of one moment bleeding into the next moment and the next and the next, and the next and the next and the next and the next and the…... And its interesting to contrast Cage and Nietzsche here – for Nietzsche our path toward overcoming the tyranny of understanding involves subjective creative activity – making subjective choices about what we believe, subjective choices about how we want to re-create our lives and our world. But for cage, the point is to get past the tyranny of subjectivity. To create music in which subjective choice plays a considerably diminished role – composing by flipping coins – where the notes of a piece are determined by objective features of the world: the physical characteristics of the coins, the law of gravity, laws of probability and so on.

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For Pierre Schaeffer, the father of Musique concrete, the elements of subjectivity and objectivity merge in an interesting way in his approach to the question of understanding the world vs. experiencing it.

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Like Cage, Schaeffer is interested in getting to an experience of sound itself, or letting sounds just be sounds – but his approach is quite different; it involves a process that he referred to as reduced listening, which is an exercise in phenomenology – the study of experience. This process begins when we listen as closely and attentively to a sound as possible - when we do this, we try to bracket out everything that's not a strict sonic characteristic of the sound we perceive, we bracket out our ideas about what caused of the sound, what the sound means, we even try to bracket out adjectives we might normally use to describe the sound (words like rough, smooth, distant, clangy, etc.) rather we just listen as closely and attentively as possible. So for example, rather than hearing a sound we might normally describe as “a low, continuous, distant but intensifying roar” and thinking “aha, that's a car engine, getting closer" and taking this to mean, “better not cross the street if I want to stay alive”. We try to ignore all these aspects of our experience - we try to bracket out everything in the world except the actual sound we are perceiving, we bracket out every thought, every sensation, every association - until we arrive at the pure object of perception that is our experience of the sound itself – essentially, we arrive at a pure object of consciousness - the sound object or objet sonore. Now why might we want to do this? Well, Schaeffer thinks that there is something pure, something ideal about experiencing sound in this way, because it removes sound from all the biased associations we might have - ideas about a sound’s relative goodness or badness, beauty or ugliness, attractiveness or disgustingness, it removes ideas about the utility of sounds, it removes everything that is external to the experience of sound itself - and he thinks that by bracketing out all these things we arrive at the objective core of our experience - the sound as we actually hear it. This process removes the false abstractions we use to understand the world - what we arrive at when we bracket out the world in this way is the pure reality of this specific experience of this specific sound – and nothing else. And so we arrive at the true and infallible core of our experience, which cannot possibly be false.

Now what does it mean to say the core of our experience cannot possibly be false? Well, think about it this way — let’s say I’m a civil war soldier and a doctor has amputated my leg - I’m recovering in the hospital and the missing leg starts to hurt - the doctor assures me that I’ve got nothing to worry about because he cut that leg off, so I’m really just hallucinating - well, he might say that, but I really DO feel my leg there. Now, one thing we can say about this situation is that even though I may be objectively wrong about whether I actually DO still have that leg, I cannot possibly be wrong about the fact that I subjectively FEEL as though I still have that leg. And so there is a necessary truth to the subjective perception itself - but this truth is not a matter of whether my hallucination corresponds with external objective reality, rather the necessary truth arises because I cannot possibly be wrong about the fact that I am hallucinating, in other words I cannot possibly be wrong about my own subjective experience.

And of course Schaeffer as a good Frenchie - is really just exploring a famous proof made 300 years earlier by Rene Descartes. A proof that ends with probably the 5 most famous words in all of Western philosophy. Against the backdrop of medieval dogma, in the early days of the scientific revolution - Descartes asks if we’re not just going to blindly accept God’s word as the foundation of truth and knowledge about the world – what foundation do we have? - how can we be certain of anything at all? maybe everything we experience is just a big hallucination - or in contemporary terms - maybe everything is a simulation. How can I even be sure that I really exist? And Descartes' solution is to say that the one thing we can do is doubt everything. We can even doubt that we ourselves exist. But the one thing we can’t doubt is that we are doubting. And since doubting is a form of thinking he says - I think, therefore I am. Which is very interesting, because it means that the one thing that we can be certain of doesn’t come from outside our thinking, rather it’s built into the very act of thinking itself. In other words, truth arises from the internal subjective world of thinking, not the external objective physical world.

And this very similar to what Schaeffer is doing – but the big difference is that instead of saying I think therefore I am – Schaeffer would say I experience therefore I am. Because before we can think about the world we have to experience the world.

And so this is what it means to arrive at the sound object through reduced listening – it’s a process where we arrive at an awareness of our experience of sound where everything external is stripped away - leaving only the pure, ideal object of experience - the sound object or objet sonore – which is true and infallible.

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In the 1950s, Schaeffer was deeply involved in audio research at French Radio; he saw the new medium of audio tape recording as a powerful aid in the practice of reduced listening. Recording removes the visual information associated with sounds, and often makes it harder to identify the sources of the sounds we hear. He felt that erasing the physical causes of a sound allowed for an approach to music that opens our ears to the true objective reality of the sound itself. Schaeffer talks about this approach to composing in terms of Acousmatic Music, after the akousmatikoi, the followers of the cult of Pythagoras, who worshipped Pythagoras and considered his teachings to be divine dogma. The akousmatikoi believed that beyond the false world of appearance, the way the world merely appears to us, lie the truths of mathematics invisible but eternally true. And in the same way that the akousmatikoi believed the physical world of appearance distracts us from these spiritual truths, For Schaeffer, the images associated with the apparent causes of sounds, prevent us from hearing the true, ideal sound objects, appearances distract us, they make us pay attention to things that are extraneous to the sounds themselves – just think about the way that closing your eyes, or being in darkness allows you to hear music more deeply. This phenomenon is at the heart of reduced listening.

And Schaeffer often talks about this process of reduced listening in terms of excavation of digging down to the pure experience, of going underground, so that beneath all the various causes and meanings a sound might be associated with in everyday experience, at the level of pure experience, we can glimpse the underlying unity of seemingly different or even contradictory things, so that the sounds of water and fire, for example, when presented as sound objects, divorced from their sources, these sounds may actually fit together quite nicely in a musical texture. Schaeffer talks about this process in terms of the myth of Orpheus, the demigod of music who goes to the underworld to rescue his bride and whose harmony tames all the torments of Hades. But we’ve seen a very similar idea in Schopenhauer as well, how music connects us at the subterranean level of feeling – and Shaeffer’s idea is also a lot like the way that Freud talks about free association in dreams - the way the mind subconsciously connects seemingly disparate and contrary images, sounds or ideas based on their formal similarities.

In Schaeffer we have a notion of experiencing true reality in its fullness that involves coming to the true core of experience, stripping away everything inessential, in order to get to the ideal purity of the sounds themselves. And in this way,Schaeffer is playing with an idea we will see when we look at the classical aesthetics of Plato and Aristotle, but from the inside out.

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For the realist film critic Andre Bazin, experiencing reality in its fullness points us in a different direction. Bazin tells us that film is a means of illuminating the "sacredness of reality” in the way it captures every detail of reality – the actual complexity manifest in the real world – And this is in contrast to the imaginary idealizations or imitations of reality that painters or writers produce.

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And Because Bazin is a deeply religious Catholic and believes that the world as God created it is sacred, he thinks there is something blasphemous about cutting up a film - something sacrilegious about the way films rearrange the world through montage –

For Bazin, to rearrange the world in this way is to distort reality, to distort the true nature of the world as God created it. And in exaggerated editing techniques like in Eisenstein’s early films - Bazin sees an attempt on the part of the director to impose his interpretation of reality; the director attempts to take the place of God in conferring meaning on the world.

And this is true not just in montage, but whenever an artist make a heavily stylized and idealized representation of reality — in painting for instance.

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I mentioned the way that representational painting imitates reality – like that portrait by Caravaggio — it imitates reality by stripping away the seemingly insignificant “noise" of the world to focus on what the painter considers to be the most important or essential or ideal aspects of reality.

For Bazin, the best approach to filmmaking is to simply let the world be the world that it is, the world as God created it. And so he is most interested in filmmakers that avoid cutting up reality and forcing it into defamiliarizing arrangements of shots - filmmakers that avoid exaggerated expressive techniques –

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like the nightmarish and heavily stylized mise-en-scene of expressionist films like the Cabinet of Dr. Cagliari. Rather, in films like Citizen Kane, by Orson Welles , Bazin sees two primary visual techniques that neorealist filmmakers employ to approach the sacredness of the world as it is: the Long Take and Deep Focus – In a long take, the world is presented as a whole, a continuum, not as a fractured series of short, separate shots from a fragmented assortment of different angles. In some films, long takes last several minutes, hours or even the complete duration of the film, which creates a strong sense of unity, and allows supposedly less significant events, that in a normal Hollywood film would take place in between shots or in between scenes, to unfold onscreen.

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In the use of deep focus, Bazin sees an alternative to the manipulative techniques of a typical Hollywood film. Rather than choosing for the viewer what to pay attention to, through the use of cutting, strategic camera angles, or the way that films use focus to emphasize certain elements of the image. Deep focus, when combined with a wide field of vision and complex mise-en-scene is a situation in which the viewers choose for themselves what to pay attention to – everything in the image is equally clear – it is a breakdown of the typical hierarchy of importance in the way idealized narrative realist films depict people, events and objects. For Bazin, the experience of a long scene in deep focus is an exercise in freedom, the sort of free will that makes morality possible, the freedom that is both a gift and a burden. The film no longer holds our hand, no longer tells us what to think or what to pay attention to, rather we are cast into the full complexity of reality itself and have to make of it what we will. For Bazin, like his colleague and contemporary, the existentialist philosopher Jean Paul – Sartre, we are condemned to be free – we cannot renounce our freedom to choose how we experience our lives. Even the choice not to think about life, not to worry about finding meaning in the world, is still a choice – we have to choose not to be free – which is itself a freely made choice – and so we cannot escape our freedom, even though we might like to. There’s perhaps something comforting about the idea of not having to choose anything for ourselves, of being led by the hand through life, but for the existentialists even this is a freely made choice, but it is a false choice, a choice that denies what it means to be human, a choice that tries to ignore the glorious and awful tyranny of human freedom.

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But beyond this, Bazin thinks cinema also illuminates the sacredness of reality in its unique articulation of time. Because the camera picks up the nearly infinite complexity of every single moment, Bazin thinks that in each frame of film, each fraction of a second dilates into an eternity of rich and complex detail. And its interesting to compare how Bazins approach to film differs from a more typical approach to narrative, that is, in the traditional division of plot and story. We have seen the way that plot functions to give meaning to all the chaotic events of the world by stripping away the insignificant or random events to focus on just a few events that give the most idealized form of the story, the events that most effectively push the narrative along. But with Bazin we see a major departure from idealized narrative realism, like that found in Hollywood Realism or Soviet socialist Realism, as we saw in Alexander Nevsky, which focuses on idealized content, where the real complexity of the world tends to be filtered out. With Bazin every supposedly insignificant detail of reality is celebrated. And , for Bazin, just as in the case of Montage, idealized narrative amounts to a form of blasphemy – it amounts to a human attempt to usurp God by forcing human meanings upon the world, by ignoring all the incomprehensible detail of reality. For Bazin, to have faith, really amounts to trusting in the incomprehensibility of God. Faith amounts to a realization that as much as we try to limit God into rational categories that make sense to us, God, the divine, the sacredness of the world, always manages to slip out of them. That God is the infinite, and the infinite cannot be contained by the minds of finite beings like us.

And so for Bazin, the true purpose of narrative is - once again - to illuminate reality. Bazin advocates an approach to filmmaking which has come to be called : cinema verite - the cinema of truth or realistic cinema, cinema that uses documentary style techniques to get at an unmediated experience of reality. there is always an endearing sense of roughness in cinema verite. Among the techniques commonly employed is the extensive use of hand-held cameras, in contrast to the situation in a typical mid-century Hollywood studio film, where they would place the cameras in the perfect or most ideal arrangement, to capture the main events of a story.

Another aspect of cinema verite is pervasive improvisation - by the actors, by the director, as well as the cinematographer and camera operators. Sometimes filmmakers like Gus van Sant use untrained actors - high school students in the case of elephant. There is always an immediacy to this sort of filmmaking - a quality that is hard to preplan, that’s hard to capture through the idealizing apparatus of industrial film technique.

And this immediacy flows into the way these sorts of films approach sound. In cinéma vérité there is usually very little post-production editing of the sound - and usually no post-production dubbing of sound, which in the 50s was a standard practice of the film industry. Rather cinema verite makes extensive use of direct sound — sound that is recorded on site - often with a single microphone. And one of the interesting effects of this approach is that sometimes, the ambient sounds of the world are more present than the dialogue - in fact sometimes you can’t even hear what the characters are saying. There’s a great example of this sort of thing in Jean-Luc Godard’s Breathless : just as the main protagonist, Michel - is about to tell us which city has the most beautiful women on earth - an ambulance roars past, obscuring his voice. And again there are theological implications of this. Jean Renoir, a friend Bazin and devotee of his ideas once said that, had they lived in the 14th century, directors who use dubbed voices in movies would have been burned at the stake - because they preach the duality of the soul. there is a strong connection we often make to the quality of a person’s voice and the status of their soul. Or as Walter Murch, the sound designer whose work we encountered in Apocalypse Now, as Walter Murch has pointed out, it’s interesting that depictions of the devil, like in the Exorcist, often play with a dubbed voice that seems completely incongruous with the body we see on screen, so that for instance, we might see a little girl with the voice of an old woman, etc.

And it’s also really interesting to compare the approach of direct sound, to the extensive use of dubbing in a movie like once upon a time in the west. Once upon a time in the west raises dubbing from a mere contingency of international film distribution, it raises it to an art form — the strange sense of hyper-reality that the film creates through its approach to dubbing is both sumptuous and uncanny – It doesn't look like Charles Bronson is playing the harmonica, in fact, It doesn't look like any of the sounds in the opening scene are actually attached to their visual sources. But this is due to a lack of detail. Every sound is presented with an impossible richness of detail, recorded in stunningly high fidelity. But fidelity to what exactly? What sort of reality is this scene meant to simulate? The overabundance of sonic richness and clarity create an experience that seems more real than reality itself, it seems hyper-real. Later on, we will see another evocative and affecting use of dubbing in the Club Silencio scene from David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive.

But for all Bazin's brilliance and his influence on filmmakers of his generation, it’s interesting that he never made any films himself. And I think to a certain degree this may be because there is perhaps something overly pure, overly naive about his conception about film as truth. For one thing, he states at various times that film captures reality directly without any sort of mediation. And this idea made him the target of many film critics in the 2nd half of the twentieth century – for critics from the semiotic tradition of film theory, who as you might remember tended to hold that the medium of film and the message it conveys both communicate their own meanings and ideologies — that the way an image is recorded or the way the camera is set up, relative to the object its filming - already presupposes something about the importance of that object. The way for instance Alexander Nevsky’s heroism and masculinity is communicated by the fact that he is usually in the center of the frame, and in fact often takes up most of the frame - the way he is shot from a low angle, which communicates a sense of stability, of strength. But even beyond this sort of thing, The camera necessarily records only slices of reality - it slices into reality – the camera presents just a fragment of the complexity of the real world (and a pretty selective fragment at that).

But beyond this - there is something a bit puritanical in the way Bazin talks about his distaste for the innovative techniques of avant garde film makers - and so you can understand how numerous filmmakers - even those that agreed with his notions about films ability to illuminate reality - how a large number of filmmakers might want to move beyond the limitations of his theories - and so in the work of Filmmakers like Jean Luc-Godard, but also as we’ll see in Elephant by gus van sant, there’s a nice synthesis between elements of cinema verite and more avant garde filmmaking techniques. And I should stop here and say - if you’ve never seen Godard’s Breathless - go watch it right now come back to this lecture later - you can watch the film online through the library’s media streaming service.

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Where Bazin held that there was a neutrality, an unmediated quality about the way film captures reality, in Elephant, Gus van Sant, is specifically interested in exploring the mark that technology etches into the version of reality that it records. One example of this is the presence of digital distortion in some of the sounds we hear, for instance when alex is playing the piano - rather than treating this distortion as a problem to be solved in the interest of some idealized representation of the film world, van sant leaves it there as a document of the real world in its actual relationship to the technologies that record it. So that rather than thinking of recording technology as an impartial or neutral lens through which we can get a hold on reality, the film treats recordings of reality and recording technology itself as being a part of the very world that it records.

You can see a similarity here to the way that for Freud and Darwin, the rational mind is part of the embodied world and not in some separate, impartial, disinterested world of spirit. This, by the way is also the main point in the article, Modernizing Vision, by Jonathan Crary. That article charts the motion away from a model that takes thinking about the world as being somehow outside the world, toward a model that places the act of thinking about the world within the very world that it is thinking about - so that we can start to see that rationality, observation, or the use of recording technology are not neutral or impartial lenses through which we can access reality, rather they are always already within the reality they are meant to record, or describe.

And of course for Crary, because these modes of examining reality are actually within the reality they are trying to examine, they are subject to the same sort of scientific and technological manipulation that the rest of reality is subject to. So that for instance, when we watch a movie, we are not neutral, impartial observers of the mere facts of reality, rather the act of observation is itself subject to manipulation by the things we’re watching.

But there are other ways that elephant explores the mark that filmmaking leaves on the reality it records. there is an interesting counterpoint between the profilmic - the reality that is before the camera - and the positioning of the camera itself.

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You can see this really clearly in the moments where the film uses deep focus - for instance on soccer field, here we see people going about their business playing soccer, doing aerobics in the back ground, Michelle, the girl in the wisconsin shirt runs on screen and then off again - reappearing a few moments later in the distance.

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The film seems designed to draw our attention to the fact that the camera is only capable of capturing a small slice of reality - that the true complexity of the world unfolds mostly outside of what is shown onscreen.

Compare this to a typical movie in which every cut seems to just coincidentally align with the most important images and events in the story - so that you perhaps begin to forget that there is a whole world that exists just beyond the camera. in Elephant, there is a beautiful and instructive lack of alignment between the camera and the world it is filming that opens our awareness to the true depth and richness of the world.

Or compare the fact that the narrative unfolds in a counterpoint of repetitions. The way that a single event is shown from multiple perspectives, unfolding the multidimensionality of every event. Where Bazin describes cinemas ability to illuminate the sacredness of the moment through the complex photographic detail of every frame of film, elephant expands this idea to an immense proportion.

But it’s interesting to consider Bazins notion of the sacredness of the world, the sacredness of the moment in view of the incredible banality and profanity of a mass shooting. Is this just part of God’s incomprehensible plan? Is this the sort of thing Nietzsche thinks we should embrace in Amor Fati, the love of fate? Is this just one more part of our senseless lives that we should celebrate?

This sort of violence in our society seems so intractable, so meaningless, that it seems to approach mythic proportions, like the dark fate of Oedipus. But I don’t think that is the lesson to take from this film. We shouldn’t think that just because a problem is complex or the world doesn’t seem to make sense, that we should stop trying to make sense of it. The ability to rationally understand a problem and fix it is one of the coolest things humans can do. So what if the ultimate meaning of existence is always beyond our reach? Clear and pragmatic thinking really can make the world a better place. And so we should do everything we can to understand the senseless violence of our society and put an end to it. And so even as important as it is to experience the world in its fullness - undestanding is just as important to the complete picture of what it means to fully be in the world.