

The End of Everything

Millennium Anxiety in Gregg Araki's *Nowhere*

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ABSTRACT

With its idiosyncratic cinematic language, *Nowhere* (1997), directed by independent American filmmaker Gregg Araki, notably conveys a sense of acceleration and anxiety associated with the impending turn of the millennium. One of the film's many fast-paced sketches—showing a young couple ending their relationship—serves as a corollary of a doomed generation caught in the vortex of rampant technological development in an era of excess and disposable emotions. Through sound, framing, and editing—and involved in the context of Y2K concern and Christian eschatology—Araki creates a universe where nothing is permanent, where everything ends.

Gregg Araki's film *Nowhere* (1997) pulsates with the energy of transgression. Like its predecessors, this chaotic example of independent cinema reveals a profound conscience of cinematic conventions while simultaneously rebelling against those formalities. A particular scene—showing two characters ending their tumultuous relationship—highlights the concept of “millennium anxiety,” a much-discussed (and somewhat abstract) notion imbued in media and cultural conversation throughout the 1990s, connoting a collective sense of uncertainty about the symbolic arrival of the third millennium.¹

Nowhere is the final piece of a trilogy known as “the teenage apocalypse trilogy” (Hart 33) and arguably the most apocalyptic manifestation of the group. The film displays a mosaic narrative with an ensemble cast, featuring the protagonist Dark (James Duvall), an eighteen-year-old college student who believes his death is impending. Many young characters with one-word nicknames like Egg (Sarah Lassez), Lucifer (Kathleen Robertson), Mel (Rachel True), Zero (Joshua Gibran

Mayweather) or Ducky (Scott Caan), populate this frenetic and hyper-saturated universe. Set in Los Angeles during a single day, Araki's film does not present a discernible classical narrative arc, favoring chaos and fragmentation over causality. Throughout the day, the connections between the parts are established through fast-paced sketches—almost all of them invariably flooded with diegetic music—that show the characters' interactions while addressing a torrent of issues, such as sexual awakening and orientation, relationship boundaries, eating disorders, drug abuse, religious fanaticism, celebrity culture, existentialism and, ultimately, the end of the world. A party held during the evening becomes the convergence point where all the subcultures collide, and where fragile egos—underdeveloped teenage personalities struggling for affirmation—break. Through the deaths of two characters and the alien abduction of a few others, the film conveys a melancholy theme of impermanence in an erratic time and place, thereby producing a bleak portrait of a (doomed) generation that cannot help but accept the end of everything. The ending that these

¹ The term “anxiety” is loosely employed here, considering its colloquial expression rather than its strict medical definition.



Fig. 1 | Still from the opening scene of Araki's *Nowhere*, 00:24:17. UGC, 1997.

(purposefully) one-dimensional characters collectively experience coincides with the end of the century, mainly defined by abrupt technological changes and the apprehension over the Y2K phenomenon.²

Despite the film's coherent sense of aesthetic identity, the scene in question is detached from the main narrative because of its unique traits (Fig. 1). Most notably, the formerly omnipresent music is replaced by remote, indistinct traffic sounds, and the sardonic tone of the dialogue is suspended, making way for vulnerability and introspection to emerge.

Running slightly over one minute, the scene consists of four different camera positions, resulting in twenty-one editing shots. The shot/reverse shot dialogue is enclosed between two establishing shots, with opposite tracking movements, and there is an isolated insert of a dirty hand. This conventional approach to scene construction, a strong legacy of Classical Hollywood, is subverted by the number of cuts—it is closer to music video standards than that of narrative cinema—where the accelerated rhythm underscores the substance abuse subtext. The action is minimal: Cowboy (Guillermo Diaz) arrives at what is possibly the fringes of a highway, where his heroin-addicted boyfriend Bart (Jeremy Jordan) lies, after injecting himself. Cowboy wants to make an ultimatum. The

low angle long-shot that opens the scene shows the silhouettes of the characters against a bright purple sky. Bart rests on a metal structure from the back of a hotel advertisement, where a neon heart and the word “rooms” can be seen. The framing gives the impression that the tip of the heart-shaped sign rests right above Bart's chest. Colourful yet unclear, the shot contrasts the visual noise of the metal girders and the tranquility of the chromatic scheme, particularly the violet-tinted sky. This idealized, abstract portion of the city echoes the film's off-screen opening line, spoken by Dark: “LA is like, nowhere. Everybody who lives here is lost” (00:00:15-00:00:18). *Nowhere's* Los Angeles is an amalgam of colours and textures with few (if any) recognizable locations. It is an assembly of non-places (Augé 76), and the characters are as lost and disjointed as the spaces around them.³

A visibly concerned Cowboy (Fig. 2) confronts his boyfriend and tells him he can no longer deal with his addiction. The dynamics of the dialogue are established by the camera angles and framing. Cowboy, disappointed and mournful, appears smaller and therefore powerless, while Bart is seen from Cowboy's point of view, on an unsettlingly tight close-up, with his head upside down (Fig. 3). After hearing his lover's threat, Bart, whose reactions are manifestly slow and apathetic,

² The Y2K problem, or “the year 2000 bug,” was a widely held concern that, at the end of 1999, computers would not be able to compute the abbreviation 00 in 2000 and would cause a massive collapse in information systems around the world. Except for a few minor occurrences, the transition was uneventful (Tapia 267).

³ The concept of non-place, as defined by French professor of anthropology and ethnology Marc Augé, considers technological development and globalization to produce a discourse about the relations individuals establish with the proliferation of modern transient areas, like highways, shopping malls, or airports (Augé 76).



Fig. 2 | Cowboy confronts Bart from Araki's *Nowhere*, 00:24:21. UGC, 1997.



Fig. 3 | Low-angle shot of Bart from Araki's *Nowhere*, 00:24:33. UGC, 1997.



Fig. 4 | Bart extends his dirty hand in Araki's *Nowhere*, 00:24:50. UGC, 1997.

makes a vague promise to get sober and extends an unkempt hand (Fig. 4). Cowboy ignores the gesture and leaves the scene. In a film with a considerable amount of close-ups, the dirty hand consolidates an aesthetic strategy that reveals the tactile dimension of the moving image.⁴ In various scenes, the protagonist uses a video camera that produces grainy, low-resolution pictures (Figs. 5 and 6) that entail haptic visuality qualities (Marks, *Touch* 3). Here, the brief insert of the hand—a direct reference to the haptic—not only alludes to the possibilities of

film as a multi-sensory medium but also invigorates the narrative: Bart's gesture is a cry for help, or a thin vestige of love wherein the dirt straightforwardly describes the character's deplorable circumstances.

As the micro-romantic tragedy unfolds, the film—whose prevalent nonverbal discourse is filtered here through Cowboy's perspective—makes a moral statement against excess. Isolated and geometrically confined between strict lines, Bart embodies the consequences of succumbing to a lifestyle of continuous self-destruction. For less than three seconds, the wistful image of his abandoned body pauses the turbulence of the plot. Apart from this small glimpse, there is no time for contemplation in *Nowhere*. Static moments are rapidly consumed by the film's voracious pace, leaving the spectator longing for breathing space.

A state of anxiety affects the film's diegetic world as much as the viewer. As previously inferred, the editing, mise-en-scène choices, and the actors' crude performances contribute to the construction of a meaning that is symptomatic of the cultural and social context surrounding the production and release of the film as a cultural object (Bordwell and Thompson 62-63). Focusing on the examined scene and its bizarre aftermath—Bart commits suicide after being encouraged by a televangelist—the degradation of life caused by external forces (drugs, television, urban geography, alienation) mirrors the general attitude and anxieties regarding the anticipation of the year 2000. The religious undertones related to the fates of these young people directly evoke Christian eschatological discourses and the numerical and chronological importance of the arrival of the third millennium (Tapia 269). Scholarly discussion about this symbolic transition tends to address a “felt condition that unsettled a naturalized sense of temporal and historical progression” (Balanzategui 68), or, as put forward by Jean Baudrillard, the idea of the year 2000 was even associated with “terror” (9). With his provocative trilogy—especially with its conclusion—Araki has delivered a peculiar portrait of unsettling times, best observed two decades later, with the privilege that time allows.

If the nihilistic approach to the inevitability of death defines the ethos of *Nowhere*, a more concerned (and openly pessimistic) mindset related to millennial distress surfaces sporadically. Bart and Cowboy's moment—with its minimal dialogue, the asymmetry of the characters' positions, the messy advertisement-like surroundings, the frantic succession of shots, and the overall troubled mood—epitomizes this atmosphere of apprehension and, along with many other instances, makes *Nowhere* a product of its time, a *memento mori* for the twentieth century. ■

⁴ As studied by authors like Canadian film and media theorist Laura U. Marks, the moving image is capable of generating sensory responses beyond sight and sound. For the author, touch or smell are effectively stimulated by audiovisual content (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* 2).



Fig. 5 | A detail from Dark's camera—Montgomery (Nathan Bexton)—in Araki's *Nowhere*, 00:08:28. UGC, 1997.



Fig. 6 | A detail from Dark's camera—the alien—in Araki's *Nowhere*, 00:08:28. UGC, 1997.

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