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Nowhere Stream

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Nowhere Stream

Abstract
This is a film review of Nowhere Stream (2023), directed by Luis Grane.

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Author Notes
Rachel Wagner is Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Ithaca College. Her work centers on the study of religion and culture, including especially religion and film and religion and virtual reality. Rachel's first book, Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality (2012) is part of the Media, Religion, and Culture series at Routledge. Her second book, Cowboy Apocalypse: Religion, Media, Guns will be out in 2024 from NYU Press. Rachel teaches courses on religion and culture; religion and film; religion and media; religion and gaming; religion and science fiction; gender, New Testament; and religion and health. Most of her courses include elements of media and culture analysis. Rachel also teaches in the Honors Program.

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Nowhere Stream is directed by animator Luis Grane, who is also supervising director on the TV series Carol and the End of the World. The film is intimate, artful, and clearly intended to relay the message: “Get off your screens!”

We are introduced to the main character as he sits immersed in front of a computer. Is the character on the screen or in it? Are we viewing him, or are we him? The character’s head (also our head?) is shown bobbing amidst numerous identical heads, carried along in a stream. We too become objects in this streaming factory line, carried along without control. The film flips periodically into absurdist representations of the man’s keyboard presented in first-person point-
of-view. He pounds away at keys filled with water; a waffle filled with jam; a child’s toy computer. At one point, worms and slugs crawl over a deactivated keyboard with only the keys “help” and “end” left functioning.

Perspective is unreliable. Are we the head in the stream or the head watching the screen? Is the image we perceive real? Are we real? The images we view periodically resolve into images on the screen that the character views. We see a flow of technological marvels, perhaps the source of the character’s search for meaning. First, an artificial intelligence app offers this inscrutable advice: “Be yourself but don’t look at the mirror.” A televangelist advises online that: “We receive words that are not our own.” The keyboard is depicted bejeweled with plastic hearts as the man seeks a companion via online dating.

Sound in the film moves between the lonely clacking of a keyboard and unreal sliding of a synthesizer. Hit pause and you’ll likely see a still that is itself a work of art: the cityscape at which our character peers is industrial, but also pocked with smears of color, as if it is a negative impurely developed. We move from silent city to clicking keys, back and forth, as if the character cannot decide where he belongs.

The film has an obvious question and an expected answer. When the screen fails to offer us all we think we need, what do we do? Instead of choosing the “end” key, the character chooses “cut” instead, without the paste. Despair seems to win. And yet, he ultimately finds his way back to life, and no longer trapped inside the darkness of a world lit only by screens. Instead, he now lives near a real-life stream, a space in which his whole body is engaged.

Though the lesson is obvious, the artfulness of the film destabilizes it just enough so we are caught off guard. We are invited to notice anew the screen right in front of us, right this minute. How are we engaging in it? What are we missing by setting our sights only on the threads of
connection that digital life can provide? What sounds might we hear, what sights might we see, and how might we live larger were we to leave that screen behind, even for a while, and breathe fresh air? Grane’s film is itself a breath of fresh air, and a reminder that I am expected elsewhere right now, with people who love me.