



Beyond Talking Animals: Redefining Anthropomorphism and Nonverbal Storytelling in *Flow*

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Abstract

The article examines *Flow*, the Oscar winning animated feature by Gints Zilbalodis as a landmark in nonverbal storytelling and minimal anthropomorphism. Unlike conventional animated films, where animals are given voices and human social roles, *Flow* communicates without dialogue. The film communicates emotional depth and agency through sound design, body language and visual framing. It shows a restrained form of anthropomorphism where the animals retain their animality, but their gestures and interaction become legible through character-driven action. *Flow* models an ethical anthropomorphism that fosters empathy and offers a decisive departure from the heavily anthropomorphized tradition of mainstream animation movies.

Keywords: animation movies, nonverbal storytelling, anthropomorphism, animal agency flow

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Anthropomorphism is considered as the tendency among humans to see human-like characteristics in non-human agents. According to the Oxford Dictionary, “anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a god, animal or object.” Anthropomorphism has always been an ambiguous concept. Animals are the most common non-human targets of people’s attribution of mental states. In animation, anthropomorphism serve as a bridge transforming animals into characters that express emotions and ideas. Classics like *Robinhood* and *The Lion King* exemplify this tradition where animals speak and embody human social roles. Such

portrayals often erase animality of these characters and make them proxies for human concerns.

Against this backdrop, *Flow* directed by Latvian filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis represent a striking departure. *Flow*, an Oscar winning silent animated film released in 2024 follows the life of a solitary cat and several other animals like a golden labrador, a capybara, a-ring tailed lemur and a secretary bird navigating a flood ravaged world. The movie stands out because of its absence of dialogues and its disregard of humanisation of animals. The anthropomorphic effect is through body cues, sound effects and the narrative situation. The film distinguishes itself from other numerous



anthropomorphic movies in its lack of witty banter and cartoonish caricatures of animal characters. The movie invites the audience to empathise with the nonhuman creatures on their own terms. This approach aligns with the post humanist effort to decenter the human perceptive offering “animals-eye, in the moment immediacy” that feels unconventional in the field of animation. The movie completely let “animals be animals” and avoided the imposition of human speech and traits. This article examines the nonverbal methods by which *Flow* achieves anthropomorphic storytelling, including the use of silence and sound effects, expressions and behaviour, careful visual perspective and world building

The most striking aspect of *Flow* is the complete absence of spoken dialogue. In traditional animation anthropomorphic animals behave like humans, translating nonhuman experiences into human. Samantha Baugus observes how *Flow* “proposes an anthropomorphic narrative mode that pushes against the logocentrism of anthropomorphic texts that created space for nonhuman stories that remain intelligible to a human audience.” By foregoing speech, Zilbalodis ensures that animal communication remains “distinctly nonhuman” while still making the plot comprehensible to humans.

The silence in *Flow* cannot be considered a void but a canvas for many other cinematic elements. The sound effects and music in place of dialogue guides the audience attention. Natural sounds like water flowing and dripping, wind and animal sounds are heightened in the absence of speech pulling the audience into the sensory world of animals. For instance, the cat’s vigilant state of mind and the complete silence in the forest are established by the gentle crunch of leaves under its paws and the distant calls of crickets early in the film.

Music is an integral part of the movie. In an interview with The Film Stage the director states how they tried to be more “expressive with music and sound and animal voices.” The voices used for these characters are of real animals, not humans mimicking animals. The whimpers of cat, the bark of the dog and trills of the birds are all authentic sounds

that add to the realistic aspects of the movie. The context of these howls and whines offer insight into the animals’ state of mind. The musical score of this movie mirrors the journey of these animals. Gentle melodic motifs underscore the moment of solace and bonding between animals whereas urgent themes overshadow danger and conflict. In one scene we can see the animal enjoying the peaceful sunset with peaceful harmonies in the background. In contrast tension is ratcheted up using rapid percussions and strings during a later scene where the cat is chased by secretary birds. We can hear a similar tense crescendo in the score where a herd of dogs chases the cat. The voices, background score and even the silence mirrors the intensity of the moment and demonstrate how the movie guides the audience without dialogues.

Flow also used body language, movement, and visual expression to convey the story realistically. Zilbalodis has explained that his goal was to tell “a story about animals behaving like animals” while still “interpreting and creating a performance” for the audience. Physical gestures and actions externalise the inner state of animals. The cat is characterized as cautious and self reliant but is also capable of showing annoyance and frustration. In one scene the cat, annoyed with the lemur’s hoarding of objects, deliberately knocks away one of lemur’s beloved possessions, a trinket. Here we as audience might read the cat’s gesture as annoyance. A real cat may swat at objects playfully. In this case the context of the situation frames it as an anthropomorphic situation implying that the cat can feel frustrated and act on it. Baugus claims that when the audience actively rejects “an anthropomorphic interpretation, the whole interaction becomes nonsensical”. Every animal character in the movie has its own movement style and posture conveying personality traits without dialogues. The movement of cat is extremely stealthy and agile. When frightened it puffs its fur, pins its ear, and arch its back which are classic signals of fear in a cat. The labrador moves energetically, with its tongue lolling, tail wagging and circling excitedly. Here the labrador is presented as a foil to the wary cat. The optimism shown by the labrador encourages



the cat to trust others. The lemur shows very springy, erratic motions throughout the movie. The way it clings to the scavenged possessions shows the possessive nature of lemur. The characterisation of cat and dog were closer to reality, but lemurs in reality do not collect shiny things. The secretary bird stands tall and moves in a regal manner befitting its prideful and predatory instincts. *The Guardian* states that all behavioural details are minutely observed. Instead of “stamping human personalities” the movie encourages us to see “elements of ourselves in the animals”. The movie does not present animals as caricatures, giving them human mannerisms. Here anthropomorphism is used in a restrained manner and mostly relies on the audience empathy and interpretation. The animals in *Flow* express numerous emotions nonverbally like courage, loneliness, affection, hope etc.

The visual frame and camera movement in the movie is used appropriately to align the audience with nonhuman perspectives. Zilbalodis who also worked as the cinematographer states that “everything is designed for what you see in the film”. Many shots are shown at the eye level of the animal to give the audience a sense of being on the ground. The flood sequence at the beginning of the movie engulfs the audience in the catastrophe, making them feel as if they are caught within it along with the cat. The frame is filled with waves and debris that dwarfs the small animal. This intentional point of view keeps us immersed in the animal’s subjective experience. This helps the audience to adopt their gaze. Laura Mulvey’s concept of gaze critiqued how cinema traditionally aligned with the perspectives of a male. Here the gaze is subversively nonhuman.

The colour palette of the film also shifts according to the mood. The early scenes of the forest are lush green and bright. After the disaster strikes, the colour dulls mirroring the character’s grief and uncertainty. We can also find a dark colour scheme in the movie after the huge storm where all the animals drown. In the visual narrative of *Flow*, the cat moves from the periphery as a solitary being to a shared space with others, symbolizing companionship with other species.

Certain environmental elements are also used to externalize the emotional state and growth of the character. In the beginning of the movie water is the antagonist. The cat fears the water and the flood nearly drowns it. But overtime, we can see that the cat overcomes the fear of water and learns to swim. The scene where cat swims alongside the whale shows the transformation of cat from being fearful to embracing change. The lemur’s attachment to the remnants of human civilization is portrayed with subtle humour. Even though the lemur mourns the loss of its possessions, it moves on to help his friends. This showcases his growth of character from selfishness to solidarity.

The creative decision in the movie reinforces the idea that animal in the movie are beings with their own wills and desires. The cat’s decision to share the fish with other animals and secretary bird, the capybara extending a paw to invite the lemur aboard, the secretary bird defying its flock to protect the cat, all these moments convey intention and choice without the use of internal monologues. This level of narrative agency for animals is rare in animation movies. By not forcing the animals to a human mold, the film challenges the anthropocentric paradigm where human experience is the default narrative focus. *Flow* uses a light touch of anthropomorphism but stops short of completely subsuming the animals to human characters. It is upto the audience to bridge the gap imaginatively.

Flow opens the possibilities of nonverbal storytelling and can be considered a milestone in animated anthropomorphism. The movie “speaks without words” and encourages the audience to engage with cinema. The movie demonstrates how silence can be as eloquent as speech, that sound design and music can deliver narrative information typically conveyed through dialogues, and that animal characters can successfully carry the plot when granted authentic behaviour.

In *Flow* anthropomorphism work as a mode of identification rather than illusion. Here anthropomorphism is used as a bridge to connect viewers to animal protagonists while honouring their animality. In the industry known for its talking



caricatures of animals, *Flow*'s approach is a bold artistic statement.

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