Articles (Theme)

ANIMALS AT THE HELM: RETHINKING REDEMPTION AND SOLIDARITY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE THROUGH "FLOW"

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Abstract

This article analyzes Gints Zilbalodis' dialogue-free animation *Flow* within a posthumanist and ecocritical framework in the context of the Anthropocene. The study examines the film's narrative structure, audiovisual atmosphere, and animal representations in relation to the literature of Braidotti, Haraway, Garrard, and climate justice. The reversal of the flood and "Noah's Ark" motifs away from anthropocentrism, as well as the coexistence of interspecies solidarity and conflict, and the ecological lament theme, are highlighted through the final beached sea creature. The findings demonstrate that *Flow* humanizes animals, enabling empathy without resorting to anthropomorphism, and renders concepts such as climate migration and

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shared vulnerability more visible through poetic language. In conclusion, the film highlights the power of animation to represent the Anthropocene and prompts reflection on the ethical and political responsibilities that accompany it. The study also discusses how silence, color palette, and long shots function as aesthetic strategies that guide the viewer toward an intergeneric perspective.

Keywords: anthropocene, posthumanism, ecocriticism, animal studies, ecocinema

HAYVANLAR DÜMENDE: ANTROPOSEN'DE KURTULUŞ VE DAYANIŞMAYI "FLOW" ÜZERİNDEN YENİDEN DÜŞÜNMEK

Öz

Bu makale, Gints Zilbalodis'in diyalogsuz animasyonu *Flow*'u Antroposen bağlamında posthümanist ve ekokritik bir çerçevede çözümler. Çalışma, Braidotti, Haraway, Garrard ve iklim adaleti literatürüyle filmdeki anlatı yapısı, görsel-işitsel atmosfer ve hayvan temsillerini inceler. Tufan ve "Nuh'un Gemisi" motifinin insan-merkezcilikten uzak biçimde tersyüz edilişi, türlerarası dayanışma ile çatışmanın birlikte varlığı ve finaldeki karaya vuran deniz canlısı üzerinden ekolojik yas teması öne çıkar. Bulgular, *Flow*'un hayvanları özneleştirerek antropomorfizme kapılmadan empati kurdurduğunu; iklim göçü ve müşterek kırılganlık gibi kavramları şiirsel bir dille görünür kıldığını gösterir. Sonuç olarak film, animasyonun Antroposen'i temsil etme gücünü teyit eder ve etik-politik sorumluluklara dair düşünmeyi teşvik eder. Ayrıca çalışma, sessizlik, renk paleti ve uzun planların izleyiciyi türlerarası bakışa yönlendiren estetik stratejiler olarak nasıl işlediğini tartışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: antroposen, posthümanizm, ekokritik, hayvan çalışmaları, ekosinema

Introduction

The Anthropocene era, in which we currently reside, is defined as a period marked by irreversible ecological and climatic changes on Earth (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Steffen et al., 2011). The human species' dominant power on the planet has given rise to multiple crises, including the climate crisis, biodiversity loss,

environmental destruction, and social injustice. Global warming, increasing extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and the threat of a sixth mass extinction are the defining elements of this era (Ceballos, Ehrlich, & Dirzo, 2017). Indeed, scientists have pointed out that many species on Earth are facing extinction due to human activities, and they warn that humans may ultimately be preparing their own demise (Ceballos et al., 2017). This decisive impact of humans on the environment has become traceable even in geological records and biogeochemical cycles (Steffen et al., 2011). Therefore, Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen proposed calling our modern era the Anthropocene, meaning the "age of humans" (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000).

Although the term "Anthropocene" originated as an Earth-science proposal, its contemporary use has become especially widespread in the humanities and social sciences as a critical framework that critiques the damage caused by an anthropocentric worldview to the natural world.[2] So much so that critical interpretations of this concept emphasize that the responsibility for the crisis is not evenly distributed among all of humanity, since the drivers and benefits of industrial expansion have been concentrated in specific regions, classes, and industries. Some thinkers have proposed the term "Capitalocene" as an alternative to "Anthropocene," particularly due to the destruction and inequalities created by the capitalist industrial system (Moore, 2016), which highlights the connection between the ecological problems we are experiencing and the social injustices rooted in capitalism. In this context, the concept of climate justice becomes important in crises such as climate change: the burden of the crisis falls on the shoulders of groups that are historically the least responsible (the poor, countries in the Global South, or non-human living beings) (Schlosberg, 2013). Indeed, climate justice discussions underscore the fact that those most affected by the consequences of the climate crisis are those who contributed the least to its creation.

Art and media play a critical role in the effort to understand and represent these multi-layered crises created by the Anthropocene. Amitav Ghosh emphasizes that the climate crisis is also a "crisis of imagination," highlighting that traditional narrative practices struggle to grasp a large-scale and destructive phenomenon like climate change (Ghosh, 2016). With the increasing number of climate-themed works in literature and cinema in recent years, a genre often referred to as "cli-fi" (climate fiction) has emerged, placing climate change and ecological disruption at the center of narrative imagination. This crisis has begun to be conveyed to a wide audience through disaster scenarios or post-apocalyptic worlds. Especially cinema, with its post-apocalyptic atmospheres and disaster scenes, serves to raise social awareness by imagining the potential consequences of the climate crisis.

In this context, the 2024 Latvian animated film *Flow* offers a unique and striking example. *Flow*, directed by Gints Zilbalodis, is a completely visual-narrative film without dialogue, depicting the struggle of a group of

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[2] Although the term "Anthropocene" is widely used, it has not been ratified as a formal unit of the Geologic Time Scale; in March 2024, the IUGS, on behalf of the ICS, approved the decision to reject its formalization as an Anthropocene Epoch (International Commission on Stratigraphy [ICS] & International Union of Geological Sciences [IUGS], 2024).

animals surviving in a world where humans have disappeared after a major flood disaster. This story, whose main character is a black cat, may seem like an adventure on the surface. However, its subtext contains a deep allegory about the climate crisis, ecological destruction, and post-apocalyptic life. Thanks to its dialogue-free structure and universal themes, the film reached a wide audience worldwide.

The most striking aspect of *Flow* is that it establishes a narrative in which human characters are entirely excluded. Throughout the story, not a single human enters the frame; rather than claiming a literal "animal perspective," the narrative foregrounds animal experiences by centering their movements, encounters, and vulnerabilities. This preference elevates the film beyond a conventional environmental work, transforming it into a posthumanist narrative, that is, one that decenters the human subject and foregrounds nonhuman agency and relationality (Braidotti, 2013). This structure, which shakes the anthropocentric perspective, invites the viewer to experience the world through the eyes of other species, foregrounding what Haraway calls "situated knowledges," namely that perception and knowledge are always partial and standpoint-bound (Haraway, 1988; Haraway, 2008). This non-human focus created by Zilbalodis is evident in the film as both an aesthetic innovation and a philosophical stance. Indeed, some critics have emphasized that *Flow* is not just an animated film, but a profound work that touches upon social themes such as the climate crisis and migration (Coyle, 2025; Aydın, 2025).

In this article, the film *Flow* is analyzed within an ecocritical framework (Garrard, 2012) and from the perspective of animal studies. First, the theoretical approaches of the Anthropocene, posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013), and ecocriticism, along with their relationship to animal representations, are discussed. Concepts such as criticism of anthropocentrism, interspecies relationality and ethics (Haraway, 2008), and climate justice (Schlosberg, 2013) are examined. Subsequently, the film's narrative structure, visual language, atmosphere design, and character representations are examined in detail. How *Flow* reinterprets the flood motif and the Noah's Ark metaphor, incorporating elements of interspecies solidarity and conflict, and how it visually depicts a post-human world are evaluated in a multidimensional manner, also in relation to discussions of interspecies liminality as a shared threshold experience of survival (Taşdizen, 2024). Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections examine the ethical and political lessons that can be drawn from the film, offering a general assessment of the role of art in the Anthropocene era, using the example of *Flow*. This study aims to reveal the unique contribution of animated cinema to narratives themed around nature, non-human life, and multiple crises by analyzing the film *Flow*'s representations on these axes.

Theoretical Framework: The Anthropocene, Posthumanism, and Animal Studies

The concept of the Anthropocene is closely related to the critique of the anthropocentric worldview. Etymologically, the Anthropocene, derived from the combination of "anthropos (human)" and "cene (age)," defines the era in which humanity has become a powerful actor capable of influencing ecological and geological processes on Earth (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Bekaroğlu (2022) defines the Anthropocene as "an important concept that describes the impact of humans on the world's ecosystems and our planet"; he explains that human-caused irreversible damage is often discussed as marking a new geological epoch, although its formal status as a ratified unit of the Geologic Time Scale remains contested (International Commission on Stratigraphy [ICS] & International Union of Geological Sciences [IUGS], 2024). Atmospheric chemists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000) emphasize that human impacts on the planet since the Industrial Revolution have left traces in every field, from fossil records to climate cycles, making it appropriate to name the current geological epoch the Anthropocene.

However, the ongoing debates surrounding the concept of the Anthropocene raise the question of whose impact this term centers on. While the discourse emphasizing "the central role of humans in geology and ecology" points to the overall impact of the human species, it can obscure the fact that not all humans are equally responsible. Therefore, some critics have suggested using the term Capitalocene, stating that the true driving force behind the Anthropocene is capitalist production relations (Moore, 2016). The concept of the Capitalocene, favored by figures such as historian Andreas Malm and Jason Moore, highlights the destruction caused by industrial capitalism and the fossil fuel economy on the planet, drawing attention to the socio-economic origins of the process that triggered the climate crisis (Malm, 2016; Moore, 2016). This perspective reminds us that the climate crisis and environmental destruction are the work of "humanity" as a whole, but specifically of a certain subset of humanity (e.g., industrialized wealthy countries and companies). Therefore, when understanding the Anthropocene era, the principle of climate justice comes into play: the fact that the sections of society that have historically contributed the least to climate change (poor communities, indigenous peoples, and nonhuman beings) are the most severely affected by the crisis is seen as an injustice (Schlosberg, 2013). The film, *Flow*, allegorically renders this injustice by depicting animals as bearing the costs of human-driven disruption; in the finale, the beached giant whale, struggling for life, can be read as an emblem of the "innocents lost in the climate crisis." While almost all the animals in the film survive, the demise of the giant whale presents the audience with a bittersweet truth: "Even at best, we will lose a lot," a reality that reminds us that the climate crisis will leave irreversible losses. At the same time, the film is already structured around an earlier, off-screen loss, the disappearance of humans, so

the whale's death intensifies a world in which absence and extinction have already been established as the baseline condition.

One of the approaches developing in the humanities to understand and critique the crises caused by the Anthropocene era is posthumanism. Posthumanism aims to remove humans from their privileged and absolute subject position by offering a radical critique of the anthropocentric tradition of thought (Braidotti, 2013).[3] In Braidotti's account, this decentering is grounded in a zoe-centered understanding of life that extends ethical attention beyond the human. In contrast to humanism, which places humans at the center, it argues that "non-human" or non-human subjects can also gain subject status and be placed at the center of narratives. Tarcan and Kancı (2022) state that posthumanist theory proposes the "dominance of non-human subjects" as a means to overcome humanism, suggesting a shift to a paradigm where beings other than humans can also be active and decisive. Here, "posthuman subjectivity" refers to an understanding of the subject that is not exclusive to humans, allowing animals, plants, and even material entities to be treated as agents that participate in meaning-making and ethical relations rather than as a passive background to human action. This approach is open to viewing animals, plants, and even inanimate matter as carriers of subjectivity, rather than attributing the concept of the subject solely to humans. This is where the critique of anthropocentrism comes into play: Posthumanism questions humanity's privileged position in nature by rejecting the understanding that sees humans as the absolute center of the universe. Instead, it adopts an ecocentric or multi-centered perspective, placing nature, ecosystems, and other living beings at the center of evaluation. Kautz (2024), while proposing an ecocritical toolkit for representing non-human entities without anthropomorphization, emphasizes the necessity of a shift "from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism" from an ecocritical perspective. This also highlights the importance of giving non-human characters in stories emotion and agency, but without falling into anthropomorphism by making them appear completely human.

Although animal studies as an interdisciplinary field predates the popularization of posthumanist approaches, with foundational ethical interventions by scholars such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, it has increasingly converged with posthumanist thought in its critique of human exceptionalism and its focus on human-animal relationships. This discipline, which gained momentum with the "animal turn" in the humanities (Ritvo, 2007), aims to critically examine the human-animal duality while studying the representations of animals in history, culture, literature, and art. At the heart of animal studies lies the acceptance that animals are not merely symbolic figures or instrumental beings for humans, but entities with intrinsic value as subjects in their own right, possessing emotions and experiences. This field questions the ethical standing of non-human animals, fostering interspecies empathy and the pursuit of

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[3] Braidotti uses zoe-centered thinking to foreground life as a more-than-human vitality shared across species, proposing an ethical and political reorientation away from human exceptionalism (Braidotti, 2013).

justice by moving beyond anthropocentrism. As Wolfe (2010) states, while posthumanism introduces the concept of "post-human," it actually proposes a new relationship with the networks surrounding humans, such as animals, machines, and ecosystems, and rejects human exceptionalism. In this regard, the representation of animal characters in literature and film, along with the meanings attributed to them, is a central issue in animal studies and in recent screen scholarship on animal narratives (Beeler & Beeler, 2022). Jacques Derrida's paradox "I am my animal(s), therefore I am" (Derrida, 2008), or Donna Haraway's concept of "companion species"[4] (Haraway, 2008), are examples of humanity's search for relationships with other species without placing itself at the center. The film, *Flow*, which is the focus of this article, presents a unique narrative that deserves to be evaluated within this framework: In the film, animals are not merely anthropomorphic figures endowed with human characteristics; on the contrary, they largely retain their own species-specific behaviors and gain a distinct subjective position.[5] This is reinforced by the film's reliance on movement, gaze, proximity, and species-typical vocalizations rather than human speech or moralizing dialogue, allowing agency to emerge through embodied interaction instead of human-coded characterization. This way, the audience sees the animal characters not as "imitations of humans," but as individuals who are the subjects of their own worlds. This approach achieves the goal of moving away from anthropocentrism, a goal shared by both posthumanist and animal studies. In the analysis that follows, Braidotti's zoe-centered ethics and Haraway's situated perspective serve as guiding concepts to examine how *Flow* constructs animal agency and ecological vulnerability without recentering the human in the narrative.

Ecocriticism theory, on the other hand, provides the necessary tools to analyze the cultural texts of the Anthropocene era. Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary critical method examining human-nature relations in cultural narratives (including literature and film) and the representation of environmental concerns, has been institutionalized as a field since the 1990s (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Garrard, 2012). Glotfelty formulates the fundamental question of ecocriticism as "How does this work depict nature and ecological relationships?" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). An ecocritical analysis seeks to reveal the value and meaning attributed to non-human entities, such as animals, plants, and landscapes, in the work, as well as any awareness or criticism of environmental issues. The concept of ecocinema, developed through an ecocritical approach in cinema, refers to both the environmental themes in film content and the environmental awareness films create in the audience (Rust & Monani, 2013). For example, Hayao Miyazaki's animated film *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and post-climate disaster films such as *Waterworld* (1995) and *Snowpiercer* (2013) have been examined in ecocritical scholarship (Zhang, 2024; Mattson &

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[4] Haraway's "companion species" concept emphasizes co-evolutionary entanglements and "becoming-with" across species, challenging a human-centered account of agency and ethics (Haraway, 2008).

[5] A comparable move can be seen in recent scholarship on Jerzy Skolimowski's Eo (2022), where animal subjectivity is foregrounded to unsettle anthropocentric narrative habits (Burgos, 2025).

Gordon, 2022; Wilson, 2019). These types of films dramatically visualize the consequences of the climate crisis using images of the apocalypse, allowing the audience to imagine the end of the current ecological trajectory and possible new beginnings. Koncz and Villas-Boas (2024) state that in many climate-themed disaster films, the apocalypse is depicted as a kind of "opportunity for a new beginning," with religious and mythological motifs intertwined with scientific concerns; *Flow* makes this intertwining especially visible by reworking the Noah's Ark narrative as an "ark without Noah," where animals, not humans, are left to navigate survival.

The film, *Flow,* provides a highly suitable text for this ecocritical analysis. The film uniquely blends the aforementioned Noah's Flood myth with post-apocalyptic themes. In *Flow*, where a great flood has submerged the world, the story of Noah's Ark is almost reversed: this time, the ark is filled with animals, and there is no "Noah" figure (human leader) to guide them. The animals themselves steer the ship; instead of a human at the helm, we see a secretary bird guiding their fellow creatures. The scenes in the film where animals use and steer boats strikingly visualize the metaphor of a "Noah's Ark without humans" (See Figure 1). This preference symbolizes the shattering of the usual anthropocentrism in the Anthropocene narrative: in times of disaster, there is no human savior; animals must determine their own fate. Thus, the film presents a post-humanist picture in which humanity's central position on Earth is either lost or never existed (Braidotti, 2013). Posthumanist philosophy argues that non-human entities can also become subjects; *Flow* does exactly this by directly presenting an experience from the perspective of animals. Moreover, in doing so, it avoids the exaggerated anthropomorphism commonly seen in animated films: it attributes emotion and agency to animal characters without making them speak like humans or completely humanizing them (Wolfe, 2010). At the same time, the film can still invite limited anthropomorphic projection through narrative alignment and affective cues, even in the absence of human speech. Ultimately, the result is a narrative that shifts from an anthropocentric perspective toward a placocentric and ecocentric understanding of coexistence, in line with the aims of ecocriticism (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Kautz, 2024).

Flow, while depicting a world facing the multiple crises of the Anthropocene, promotes the decentering of humans and the subjectification of animals with a posthumanist and ecocritical vision. The critique of anthropocentrism, the idea of climate justice, and the theme of interspecies solidarity are interwoven in the film. In line with this theoretical framework, a detailed examination of the narrative and visual elements in the *Flow* film will be beneficial in revealing and making visible the ecological and ethical layers present in the film.

Figure 1: The metaphor of Noah's Ark without Noah in the movie.

Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4772188/

Analysis of the Film Flow

Narrative Structure, Themes, and the Allegory of the Anthropocene

While the story of *Flow* may seem like a simple survival adventure on the surface, it has an allegorical structure with deeply layered themes. Since the film contains no dialogue, the narrative progresses entirely through visual elements and plot. This dialogue-free choice is actually a tool that universalizes the film's theme: the absence of spoken language removes the story from being specific to a particular culture or nation, making it resonate globally. This matters for the film's central concern because the climate crisis is a planetary condition that exceeds national borders and languages, and the absence of dialogue reinforces the story's emphasis on shared vulnerability and interdependence. Zilbalodis has explained that the absence of dialogue gives him more freedom to communicate through sound, music, camera movement, and lighting, making the film more emotionally engaging and internationally accessible (Reed, 2025). The film compensates for the lack of dialogue with strong visual storytelling and music (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010); thus, audiences from every corner of the world can engage with and identify with the story without any language barrier.

The story begins with a calm atmosphere that gives the audience no indication of an impending disaster. A significant portion of the opening sequence follows the daily routine of a black cat. The cat's story, which begins in a wooded area, is shown through long, slow-motion sequences of natural behaviors, such as the cat loitering around, playing with puddles, and entertaining themselves. This opening sequence conveys a sense of tranquility and familiarity, allowing the audience to attune to the cat's everyday environment and sensory rhythms. However, this peaceful *flow* is suddenly disrupted: The waters slowly begin to rise and engulf the surroundings. Unexpectedly, a struggle for survival begins for the cat and their world. Zilbalodis gradually escalates the disaster's progression; we first see the house where the cat lives being submerged

in water, with memories and the old world being erased. The paintings, sculptures, and even a giant cat statue (likely built by people) on the walls of the house are destroyed by the rising water (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A Civilization Under Water - The moment the giant cat statue, where the cat took refuge, was surrounded by floodwaters.
Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4772188/mediaindex/?ref_=mv_close

These scenes dramatically show that nothing (including the values and symbols that humans hold dear) is safe in the face of a natural disaster (Doyle, 2011). As highlighted in a critique (Coyle, 2025), the rising waters swallowing everything "are a mirror of the equalizing power of natural disasters"; even "the idols we worship are not safe" in the face of catastrophe. In the film, while the cat has lost their shelter and familiar surroundings, they try to survive by clinging to the giant cat idol caught in the pull of the water. This moment is reminiscent of the biblical flood narrative's theme of seeking refuge on a mountain peak as the waters rise. Just as the waters were about to engulf that peak as well, a small sailboat appeared on the horizon. There is a capybara in this old and damaged boat. The cat is saved by jumping onto the boat at the last minute, and the duo's journey begins. Other animals soon join the boat: first, a ring-tailed lemur drawn to shiny objects, then a secretary bird whose movements repeatedly orient the group's direction, and finally, a Labrador dog joins the group. Thus, a small group of diverse species begins to journey together across the endless expanse of water.

Throughout the narrative, these animals encounter various obstacles and experience tensions among themselves. One of the film's central themes is woven around the dilemma of loneliness and solidarity. Initially alone, the cat is forced to move in groups to survive. However, each animal has different instincts and characters, which makes conflict inevitable. The cat is timid and cautious (e.g., has a fear of water), the lemur is careless and playful (distracted by the mirror in their hand), the secretary bird is disciplined and has a leader's spirit (navigates the boat skillfully), and the Labrador is warm and loyal. These different personalities, who initially worked in harmony, fall into conflict when resource sharing and trust issues arise. For example, the cat overcomes their fear of water and manages to catch fish for the group; however, later, one of the dogs taken onto the boat (a street dog from the Labrador's pack) depletes the shared

resources by consuming most of the caught fish alone, disrupting the group's fragile coordination. This event highlights the importance of cooperation for survival while also illustrating the consequences of betraying trust. It is evident that at this point, the director avoids reducing the story to a fixed moral. As Zilbalodis notes, he does not start with a predetermined "message" because it can easily become "didactic or simplistic" (Sanders, 2024). *Flow* doesn't paint a completely hopeful tale of solidarity, nor does it present an entirely pessimistic picture of chaos; it attempts to capture the delicate balance between the two.

The relationships between the animal characters in the film are actually like a universal metaphor for what happens in human societies during times of crisis. Historically, it has been observed many times that after natural disasters or catastrophes, communities either come together and show solidarity or panic and selfishness prevail, leading to chaos. This framing is often reinforced or distorted by media narratives, as Solnit (2010) argues. *Flow* tells this dilemma on a universal level through animal characters. There have even been interpretations that the animals in the film symbolize different countries or social groups. In a review, Aydın (2025) states that *Flow*, in its depiction of the crisis caused by rising waters, strongly references the migrant crisis in Europe; he says that the animals crammed onto the boat are like symbols of different countries, and the efforts to live together on the boat reflect the need for international solidarity. From this perspective, one of the film's thematic layers is the issue of forced migration and refugees. Indeed, today the climate crisis is forcing millions of people to migrate, increasing the phenomenon of "climate refugees" (Biermann & Boas, 2010); *Flow* conveys this reality through animal characters in an allegorical language. The group on the boat initially demonstrates interspecies assistance by taking in dogs in need; however, when one of the rescued dogs competes for resources by consuming a disproportionate share of the food, the group's stability is compromised, and the journey becomes riskier (the boat goes out of control and sinks). This sequence of events serves as an artistic response to the frequently asked question in real life: "Does cooperation or selfishness prevail in times of crisis?" (Solnit, 2010). *Flow* does not provide a clear answer to this question, but it encourages the audience to think by presenting examples of both cooperation and conflict side by side. The director's intention to avoid didacticism is once again evident here: neither a utopian picture of solidarity is drawn, nor is an overly pessimistic message given that everyone is selfish. Instead, the film foregrounds how social coordination and conflict can emerge under pressure: individuals with no prior affiliation may coordinate in moments of shared risk (for example, the repeated alignment between the cat and the bird), while conflict can also arise within familiar groups (for example, tension within the dogs' pack that leaves the Labrador isolated).

At the film's climax, the boat carrying the animals is shaken by a massive, vortex-like event. The group goes through a final test; ultimately, the boat capsizes and disappears from view. However, after this disaster, an unexpected development occurs: the waters miraculously begin to recede. A process that normally takes years is condensed into a few days in the film; massive floods disappear, and a lush green landmass

emerges. The animals find themselves back in a wooded area. The world is almost back to normal; the disaster is over. This is a moment of relief and hope in the story: the flood is over, and a new beginning has emerged. However, right at this point, Zilbalodis adds a scene in the film's final moments that questions this relief. A colossal whale-like sea creature, implied to have been watching the boat from a distance throughout the journey, is writhing on the shore after the waters recede (Figure 3).

Figure 3: The death of a whale-like creature.

Source: https://www.imdb.com/news/ni65183155/

The group watches as the giant creature struggles desperately; notably, it does not behave toward them as prey or a threat, and its suffering is presented without a consoling resolution. The creature struggles to breathe; it cannot move on land. The film ends here. This ending leaves the audience with mixed emotions: on the one hand, our heroes have survived, and the world has returned to normal (hope); on the other hand, an innocent creature is about to die due to the lasting damage of the disaster (sadness). Mulkey (2025) dramatically interprets this final as "a reminder of how much there is to mourn, even with the best climate outcome." This is a point frequently emphasized in discussions about the climate crisis: Even if we stopped global warming today, extinct species, melting glaciers, and submerged islands would not return; in other words, "even in the best-case scenario, much will be lost" (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). *Flow* skillfully addresses this bitter truth in its finale: ecological grief.

To summarize the narrative structure, although *Flow* appears to be a linear adventure following a cycle of disaster and salvation, it contains ecological and ethical messages at every turn. The transformation of the

flood motif into an allegory of modern climate disaster, the inversion of the Noah's Ark theme and its presentation through the unity of animals, and the representation of climate refugeeism through the experiences of animal characters are the fundamental components of the film's narrative. Building on the film's dialogue-free form already discussed above, I focus here on how its audiovisual design organizes meaning. By conveying emotional intensity through music and visual metaphors, *Flow* enables the viewer to fill narrative gaps with their own experiences (Iser, 1974), thereby strengthening the film's allegorical layers.

Visual Style and Atmosphere

One of the most distinctive aspects of the film *Flow* is the extraordinary meticulousness with which its visual style and atmosphere are designed. Zilbalodis employed a more minimalist and stylized 3D animation technique, rather than the smooth and detailed 3D modeling typically seen in big-budget animated films. The film was created with open-source Blender software on a limited budget. In one review, the film's visual style was described as "creating a feeling reminiscent of a video game cutscene," generating an expectation in the viewer as if they could intervene in the story (Newman, 2013), but this was immediately contradicted by the sense of despair brought about by the disaster. This contradiction (the back-and-forth between the urge to control and the reality of lack of control) can be read as resonating with contemporary climate anxiety: viewers may oscillate between confidence in technological management and feelings of helplessness in the face of climate disasters. *Flow*'s visual language conveys this emotional state to the audience on an aesthetic level.

The film's color palette and use of lighting also play a significant role in creating the atmosphere. While warm and natural colors dominate the pre-flood scenes, the environment is enveloped by cool blue-gray tones and dim lighting when the disaster strikes. When the waters recede and life begins to sprout again, soft green and yellow tones return (Figure 4). These color transitions support the emotional cycle of the story (Block, 2008): a normal state (peace), a moment of disaster (horror), and subsequent melancholic relief. Especially in underwater and above-water scenes, elements such as light refraction, fog, and reflections are masterfully used. Zilbalodis has fully utilized the flexible "virtual camera" capabilities provided by the Blender software; scenes are often conveyed in long plan sequences with continuous camera movement. Instead of the fixed frames that traditional animations adhere to, *Flow*'s virtual camera moves freely through the virtual world, much like a real documentary cameraman (Manovich, 2001). In this way, the film gives the viewer the feeling of gliding over those vast waters. In some scenes, the camera gets very close to the characters' point of view, showing the world from their eye level; in other scenes, it uses wide-angle bird's-eye shots to emphasize the characters' smallness and the grandeur of nature. These technical choices do not function only as stylistic flair; they reinforce the film's posthumanist orientation by destabilizing a fixed, human-centered vantage point. The alternation between eye-level proximity and aerial

distance stages both embodied species-level perception and a planetary sense of scale, making vulnerability and exposure legible within the flooded landscape.

Figure 4: Colors of Disaster - The color palette of the pre- and post-disaster atmosphere in the film *Flow*.
Source: https://thedirect.com/article/*flow*-movie-bird-what-happened-ascension-meaning

Another important stylistic choice in the animation is the low level of anthropomorphism[6]. In many popular animated films, animals exhibit human-like behaviors, speak, or establish entirely human-like societies (as in the movie *Zootopia*). *Flow*, on the other hand, aims to depict the animals in ways that remain broadly faithful to expected species-specific behaviors and movement patterns, while still allowing for individual variation. The characters do not speak; they communicate by making sounds specific to their species (meowing, barking, chirping, etc.). Their movements are also realistically animated to suit their species: the cat has the agility and restlessness of a real cat; the capybara is slow and calm; the secretary bird takes balanced steps with their long legs; the lemur jumps and is playful; the dog uses their paws while swimming. These details highlight the animals' biological instincts and differences. The audience essentially understands the characters' emotions through body language and facial expressions. However, the absence of dialogue does not eliminate anthropomorphic projection; viewers may still read humanlike intentions into gestures, editing rhythms, or camera alignment (Epley et al., 2007). Especially the cat's huge yellow eyes effectively reflect emotions such as fear, curiosity, or trust. Unlike typical animated characters, the animals in *Flow* exhibit authentic animal behaviors, making the film a "poetic ecological allegory in harmony with the natural world." For example, the lemur character is depicted in a manner that is quite similar to the movements and sounds of a real lemur, rather than as an overly anthropomorphic, comedic caricature typical of mainstream animation. Although the secretary bird is given a limited, narratively functional, non-naturalistic capability (such as maneuvering the boat), the overall depiction remains broadly consistent with expected species-specific movement and behavioral cues. This preference is also consistent with the film's ecological message: to value nature within its own context and to tell the animals'

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[6] Anthropomorphism refers to attributing humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions to nonhuman agents (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007).

stories without anthropomorphizing them (Wolfe, 2010).[7] Thus, throughout the film, the audience projects emotions onto the animals and empathizes with them as if watching a documentary, while also recognizing that the animals are not rendered as human stand-ins. *Flow* offers a balanced representation that acknowledges animal subjectivity without overly idealizing it. This approach indicates that the anthropocentric view in the ecocritical perspective is overcome (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

The film's atmosphere design is not only visually but also audibly impressive. The elements that fill the void created by the absence of dialogue are music and sound effects. Since Zilbalodis also composed the film's music, the visual and musical atmosphere exhibits an extremely harmonious unity. Before the flood disaster, calm and monotonous ambient sounds (wind, raindrops, bird chirping) can be heard, while during the disaster, deep and vibrating music that increases tension comes into play. During the journey, the music is occasionally interrupted by natural sounds, such as the murmur of water, animal noises, or the howling of the wind. The use of silence and natural sounds encourages a contemplative mode of viewing while also strengthening environmental realism, reinforcing the film's meditative atmosphere (Chion, 1994). In one review (Coyle, 2025), *Flow* was described as "breathtakingly serene, a contemplative film" and was hailed as one of the most poetic ecological fables of recent times. Instead of the fast-paced action one might expect from an animated adventure, the film opted for a slow-paced, thoughtful rhythm. In this respect, the atmosphere sets it apart from other disaster films: despite depicting a dystopian world, *Flow* strangely conveys a sense of calm to the audience. The biggest contribution to this feeling of peace comes from the film's portrayal of nature and its portrayal of an attitude that maintains a balance between despair and hope. The underwater cityscapes, building rooftops visible from the water's surface, and mountain peaks transformed into islands that we see throughout the film are both terrifying and captivating (Figure 5).

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[7] This choice also speaks to critiques of anthropocentrism in the visual representation of animals in cinema (Creed & Reesink, 2015)

Figure 5: Nature's Return - A scene showing the transformation of a flooded cityscape into ruins covered in greenery after a flood.

Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4772188/mediaindex/?ref_=mv_close

These scenes evoke a feeling we might call "ruin aesthetics"; we witness the grandeur of nature reclaiming human creations (Hell & Schönle, 2010). In this respect, *Flow* also touches upon a theme that frequently appears in post-apocalyptic cinema: the resurgence of nature. Without humanity, cities become forests, highways become rivers; artificial and natural boundaries disappear. The film depicts the post-apocalyptic landscape as "strange, green-covered ruins," which is akin to the animated screen equivalent of the thesis in Alan Weisman's book *The World Without Us* (Weisman, 2007); without humans, nature quickly heals its wounds and takes over.

A final contribution to the atmosphere of *Flow* is the mythological and fairy-tale-like undertone that pervades the narrative. With its lack of dialogue and allegorical structure, the entire film resembles a modern fable. The motif of teaching humanity through animals, a classic fable tradition (Pick, 2011), can be said to have been updated in *Flow* within the context of the climate crisis. The echoes of the Noah's Ark legend add an epic dimension to the film's story. The boat is a refuge for all animals. However, the absence of "Noah" (i.e., a human guide) is an omen that we are left without guidance in the current era: Instead of waiting for a savior leader in the face of the climate crisis, we need the cooperation of different species (or different nations). The film can also be interpreted as "Noah's Ark without Noah." This statement beautifully summarizes the essence of the film: without human guidance or control, nature's creatures must chart their own destinies. In this case, the key to salvation is unconditional cooperation and natural harmony. At the end of the film, the whale-like creature's sacrifice adds a divine touch to the narrative; it's as if nature has

given the animals a second chance, but has made them pay a price for it. This mythological atmosphere elevates the film beyond a simple environmental story, transforming it into a universal narrative.

Character Representations and Ethical-Political Allegories

The character representations in *Flow* form both the narrative and thematic backbone of the film. Although the film features no human characters, it makes numerous references to the human condition through the symbolic meanings conveyed by the animal characters. Each animal species and its role in the story evokes different ecological and social connotations. First, the animals in the film are species from different geographical regions in the real world: the capybara is a rodent native to South America; the ring-tailed lemur is a primate native to Madagascar; the secretary bird is a predatory bird that lives in African savannas; the Labrador retriever is a domestic breed of Western origin (but is known as a universal companion animal); and the cat, although domesticated, is a species seen everyplace and has a unique place in mythology. This diversity seems like a conscious choice; it creates the impression that creatures from all over the post-disaster world have come together. This situation highlights the global climate crisis, which can impact any location, regardless of its geographical location. The film's depiction of humanity's demise evokes discussions of a sixth mass extinction; scientists have noted that many species on Earth are facing extinction due to human activities, and that humans could ultimately bring about their own downfall (Ceballos, Ehrlich, & Dirzo, 2017). Perhaps in the world of *Flow*, humans perished in the flood disaster they caused, leaving these animals behind (although the film doesn't explicitly state the cause of the disaster, it does make the audience ask, "How did we get to this point?" and the likely answer is the current climate crisis). The film's depiction of people completely disappearing raises the question in the audience, "What was our role in this flood?" and makes us consider the world's legacy being left to the animals. Thus, by depicting a world without humans, the film actually makes human responsibility more visible: when humans are removed from the scene, all traces of civilization are erased by nature (Weisman, 2007), leaving only animals and ruins.

While symbolic meanings are attributed to animal characters, the film also avoids clichés. For example, in popular culture, cats are often associated with selfishness or independence; the cat in *Flow* is initially a solitary and aloof creature. However, over time, the cat takes a costly risk for the group (diving into the water and catching fish despite hating water). Dogs are known for their loyalty and cooperation; the Labrador in the film joins the group in a friendly manner, but the other pack of dogs that joins the team later behaves treacherously. The message is: "There can be good and bad in every group"; no species or community is entirely good or entirely evil. The lemur character adds an element of joy to the film; perhaps his fascination with collecting shiny objects represents humanity's tendency to succumb to material desires. The secretary bird stands out for its leadership qualities; perhaps it symbolizes scientists or

guiding authorities, ultimately steering the ship. However, the bird also loses control due to the stray dogs that later join the boat. This also implies that even the best leadership can struggle in the face of chaos.

A significant aspect of the film's conflict is the tension between the newcomers and the established group. The cat, capybara, bird, and lemur initially find harmony, but the addition of a stray dog pack (including Labradors and street dogs) they later take on disrupts this balance. This situation can be linked to refugee crises or the integration of immigrants (Biermann & Boas, 2010). Initially, the group shows an example of humanitarian (animal) solidarity by rescuing distressed dogs; however, one of the individuals they rescue displays bad intentions and depletes the group's resources. Ultimately, the group is endangered (the boat goes out of control and sinks). Across these sequences, the film stages Solnit's (2010) question about crisis behavior without turning it into a slogan. The director's desire to avoid didacticism is evident here once again: neither an entirely hopeful utopian picture of solidarity is drawn, nor is a pessimistic portrayal presented where everyone looks out for themselves. Instead, the film frames coordination as contingent and fragile: under scarcity and spatial constraint, alignment can emerge across species through repeated mutual adjustment (for example, the cat and the bird), while conflict can intensify within familiar group formations when resources become contested (for example, tensions within the dogs' pack).

Perhaps the most important character in the film is the one seen least on screen: the giant creature in the ocean. This sea creature, which is the size of a whale, is not shown directly throughout the film; its presence is more felt underwater. It is implied that it swam friendly behind the boat, even pushing the boat forward with its waves. When the waters recede, we see it washed ashore. At first glance, this creature might be perceived as a Moby Dick-style sea monster; however, the film presents it as an innocent victim in the finale (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Many questions remain about this mysterious creature: Where does the creature come from, and what explains its repeated proximity to the boat? Now that the creature is stranded, the crisis is not fully resolved; will the others be able to respond in any way? By leaving these questions unanswered, the film leaves us alone with unresolved questions about life and the climate crisis. If we read this giant creature as a metaphor, it could represent the spirit of nature or the planet itself (Gaia) (Latour, 2017). He protected the animals during the disaster, but he ended up getting hurt himself. Even if humanity escapes disaster, it will take time for the Earth to heal its wounds, just like this giant creature thrashing on land. This poetic reference enriches the character representations in *Flow* and adds philosophical depth to the film.

In light of all these characters and levels of representation, we can summarize *Flow*'s commentary on current climate crisis discussions: The film reminds us that climate-related disasters will lead to forced migrations on a global scale, and that different groups will face the challenge of coexisting in this process. As the climate crisis intensifies, millions of people are being displaced today due to floods, droughts, and

hurricanes; in 2022, climate events displaced 32 million people (UNHCR, 2023). The story of *Flow* can be interpreted as a cautionary allegory about a possible future. The film also conveys a message of global cooperation: that creatures of different kinds (nations) must travel on the same ship (planet); otherwise, none of them will find salvation. This is a truth often emphasized in the fight against climate change: the crisis cannot be overcome without international solidarity and joint action. *Flow* doesn't deliver this message in a slogan-like manner; instead, it emphasizes the fragile nature of cooperation and the importance of trust. These episodes foreground how resource competition can destabilize a fragile coalition (for example, one dog consuming most of the fish and accelerating breakdown), while high-risk actions can also emerge under pressure (for example, the cat entering the water, the bird attempting to stabilize the boat, and the whale-like creature's recurring presence alongside the journey).

Flow is an animated film that stands out in the era of the climate crisis, thanks to its aesthetic innovations and rich narrative layers. The narrative structure, visual language, character representations, and allegorical dimensions detailed above come together to make the film a unique work. At this point, it is possible to make a general assessment of *Flow*'s relationship with Anthropocene-themed discussions and the potential of art to create ecological awareness.

Discussion

Flow is an animated film that stands out for its aesthetic innovation and deep narrative layers in the age of the climate crisis. In this article, the film has been subjected to a critical ecocritical analysis within the context of climate change and the post-apocalyptic world, examining its narrative structure, visual language, character representations, and atmospheric design (Garrard, 2012; Rust & Monani, 2013). *Flow* tells the story of animals escaping a major flood on the one hand, while also presenting the audience with numerous images and messages about the climate crisis on the other. The film, which centers on a great flood disaster reminiscent of the Noah's Ark legend, vividly portrays in our imagination the devastation that climate change could cause (Trexler, 2015). However, it does this without resorting to cheap disaster clichés, with a poetic, quiet, and contemplative atmosphere. It captures a universal language by compensating for the lack of dialogue with strong visual storytelling. Thus, viewers from every corner of the world can engage with and identify with the story, regardless of cultural barriers (Iser, 1974).

From an ecocritical perspective, *Flow* has a structure that shakes the anthropocentric viewpoint. The complete exclusion of human characters and the placement of animals in the position of subjects elevates the film beyond a typical environmental work, transforming it into a posthumanist narrative (Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010). Recent Turkish film scholarship similarly notes a shift in independent cinema toward positioning animals as subjects rather than purely instrumental figures (Kozan, 2025). The care and

behavioral realism shown in the representations of animals are the product of an effort to understand and depict nature on its own terms (Kautz, 2024). This aligns with one of the main goals of the ecocritical approach: to see nature not just as a backdrop, but as an active element (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). *Flow* doesn't just use nature as a backdrop; nature is both the source of disaster (rising waters) and a saving force (receding waters, a whale-like sea creature), as well as the characters' home, acting as an actor in its own right (Latour, 2017). Throughout the film, the setting is almost like a character itself; it drives the story with its changes and reactions.

From the perspective of the climate crisis and global warming, *Flow* exhibits an attitude that intertwines pessimism and hope. While the film reveals the magnitude and heartbreaking nature of the disaster (destruction of nests, risk of animal deaths, uncertainty), it also offers hope that creatures working together can survive. Ultimately, all animals except the whale survive, and the world is renewed; however, a price has been paid. This situation brings to mind the concept of climate justice: those least responsible for the climate crisis (such as animals or poor communities) pay the heaviest price (Schlosberg, 2013). In the film, it is as if nonhuman animals bear the immediate consequences of human-caused collapse, even as the vanished human population remains an off-screen loss implied by the flood. The whale in the final scene leaves a bitter memory, an ecological grief, as a symbol of what we have lost in the climate crisis (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). However, the film is not entirely pessimistic; on the contrary, it leaves open the possibility of a "new beginning." The waters have receded, and the traces of life have returned. This sends a powerful message to the audience: stopping the disaster may be in our hands, but we must act now and move together. Otherwise, only statues and memories will remain.

Flow challenges a longstanding tendency to frame animation primarily as children's entertainment (Wells, 1998), demonstrating instead that the medium can address serious and universal issues. The film reached mainstream audiences, allowing Latvia to have its voice heard in global climate discussions[8]. The film's success demonstrates that challenging topics, such as the climate crisis, can reach a wide audience through innovative storytelling methods. Today, in order for societies to take action on climate change, there is a need for stories that convey this reality in its emotional and ethical dimensions, in addition to scientific reports (Ghosh, 2016). *Flow* is an artwork that fulfills exactly this function. From an ecocritical perspective, what *Flow* tells us is this: Humanity will prepare its own end if it doesn't set aside its arrogance in relation to nature; however, if it shows humility and learns to live in harmony with other living beings, perhaps we still have a chance. This inference suggests that the film successfully combines the aesthetic power of cinema with the warnings of environmental studies and could serve as an inspiration for future works that explore similar themes.

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[8] *Flow* won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature at the 97th Academy Awards.

Conclusion

Gints Zilbalodis's film, *Flow*, innovatively tackles an Anthropocene-themed narrative, offering both a visual feast and conveying profound ecological messages. As examined throughout the article, the film depicts the struggle for survival of animals in a world after a great flood, while presenting concepts such as climate crisis, criticism of anthropocentrism, interspecies solidarity, and climate justice as a multi-layered allegory in the background. The narrative journey from the calm atmosphere established at the beginning of the film to the horror of the disaster, and then to post-apocalyptic melancholy, evokes strong emotional responses in the viewer. The ability to tell a universal story using only images, sound, and music, without any dialogue, is one of the features that make *Flow* unique. This preference underscores the fact that the Anthropocene is a planetary condition that concerns multispecies life, regardless of language, culture, or species membership.

Flow, with a posthumanist vision, has removed humans from the center of the narrative and placed animals in the position of active subjects. In this way, the film shatters the human species' illusion of being the master of the world, inviting the audience to view the world through the eyes of a cat, a bird, or a capybara. Posthumanist thought and animal studies, which emerged as a response to the multiple crises of the Anthropocene (climate, ecological, social), find a concrete expression in *Flow*. In this film, non-human creatures are not just symbolic figures; they are real characters who drive the story and have emotions and relationships. Their representation also reveals a great deal about humanity: as we observe the oscillations between fear and hope, selfishness and selflessness, chaos and order in times of crisis, we are actually witnessing our own nature. Rather than offering a simple moral lesson, the film frames fear, risk-taking, and coordination as situational responses shaped by vulnerability and shared exposure within the flooded environment.

Flow, with its visual aesthetics, also reflects the spirit of the Anthropocene era. Underwater cityscapes, ruins buried in lush greenery, and colossal "drowning" sculptures are etched into our memories as images that remind us of humanity's fragility and transience in the face of nature's power. In this respect, the film serves as both a lament for the world after a disaster and a tribute to the rebirth of nature. It showcases both the destructive and healing powers of nature: water washes everything away, but then recedes, allowing for a new beginning. However, this new beginning is not without loss; the film drives this reality home with the beached whale in the finale. This scene underscores that even under a "best-case scenario," the climate crisis entails irreversible losses, including the implied disappearance of humans and the visible suffering of nonhuman life.

Flow is a work that pushes the boundaries of animation art and successfully addresses the ethical and political issues of the Anthropocene era. This film demonstrates that to tell a massive story like the climate

crisis, we need not only documentaries or fictional dramas, but also creative forms like animation. As Zilbalodis has proven, animation can both deeply impact the audience by utilizing the boundless nature of imagination and convey universal messages. Although an independent creative team produced *Flow*, it has the potential to raise awareness about climate change as a global problem. The film, which critiques humanity's arrogant and indifferent attitude toward nature, instead proposes humility, cooperation, and multifaceted empathy. It also serves as an example of how cultural production should evolve in the Anthropocene era.

As emphasized at the beginning of the article, the Anthropocene is used here less as a formally ratified geological label and more as a cultural-critical concept, a test of culture and humanity. *Flow* reveals the role of art in this trial: by telling us stories, it helps us confront our mistakes, grieve for what we have lost, and yet not lose hope. If humanity can set aside its claim to dominate nature and find ways to coexist with other living beings, perhaps the green landmass that *Flow* shows on the horizon can become a genuine hope for us. Therefore, *Flow* is an inspiring work both in terms of cinematic art and ecological awareness, and it will also serve as a guide for future studies on the Anthropocene theme.

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