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Flow

LE CHAT QUI N'AVAIT PLUS PEUR DE L'EAU

un film de Gints Zilbalodis

RÉALISÉ PAR GINTS ZILBALODIS PRODUIT PAR MATISS KAZA, GINTS ZILBALODIS, RON DYENS, GREGORY ZALOMAN SCÉNARIO GINTS ZILBALODIS, MATISS KAZA MUSIQUE GINTS ZILBALODIS, RIHARDS ZALUPE
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Au festival d'Annecy, le choc visuel du fabuleux "Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau"

Le Letton Gints Zilbalodis réalise une odyssée silencieuse palpitante, portée par un chat explorant un monde post-apocalyptique et englouti par la montée des eaux. Cette ode à la nature mérite tout à fait le Cristal du long métrage.



« Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau », de Gints Zilbalodis. Dream Well Studio/Sacrebleu Productions/Take Five Productions

Par Cécile Mury

On ne sait évidemment pas encore si cette captivante expérience de cinéma va remporter, samedi 15 juin, le précieux Cristal du meilleur long métrage, mais elle a d'ores et déjà ravi le cœur des festivaliers : déferlement d'émotion et d'applaudissements à la présentation officielle du film en compétition, enthousiasme débordant dans les rues et les soirées d'Annecy.

Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau, de Gints Zilbalodis, jeune réalisateur letton d'à peine 30 ans, est un choc esthétique, un rêve monumental, un voyage à 1 000 kilomètres de toutes les terres habitées de l'animation. Depuis 2020 et le fascinant *Ailleurs*, créé en solitaire devant un simple ordinateur, on connaissait déjà la singularité de cet artiste balte, sa passion pour les univers oniriques somptueusement inquiétants. Le voici de retour avec une odyssée post-apocalyptique – du moins le suppose-t-on –, dans un monde peu à peu englouti par la montée des eaux, où il ne reste de l'existence humaine que quelques grandioses ruines immergées et autres artefacts flottants. La fin de tout ? Certainement pas.

Au commencement, il y a un chat. Non pas l'une de ces créatures bavardes et anthropomorphiques que les dessins animés ordinaires débitent à la chaîne. Un vrai chat, tout noir, attendrissant, gracieux et futé, qui ne sait que miauler, mais excelle dans un périlleux périple de survie, qui le mènera au fil de l'eau à surmonter sa peur et sa méfiance, vers une touchante et spectaculaire histoire d'amitié et de solidarité inter-espèces. Un capybara, un lémurien, des chiens, un drôle d'oiseau, et même une espèce de baleine à crêtes de proportions fantastiques : jamais une histoire sans paroles n'a été aussi expressive, aussi palpitante, avec des décors fabuleux, une ode hypnotique à la nature, dans sa toute-puissance ambiguë,

13/06/2024 11:47

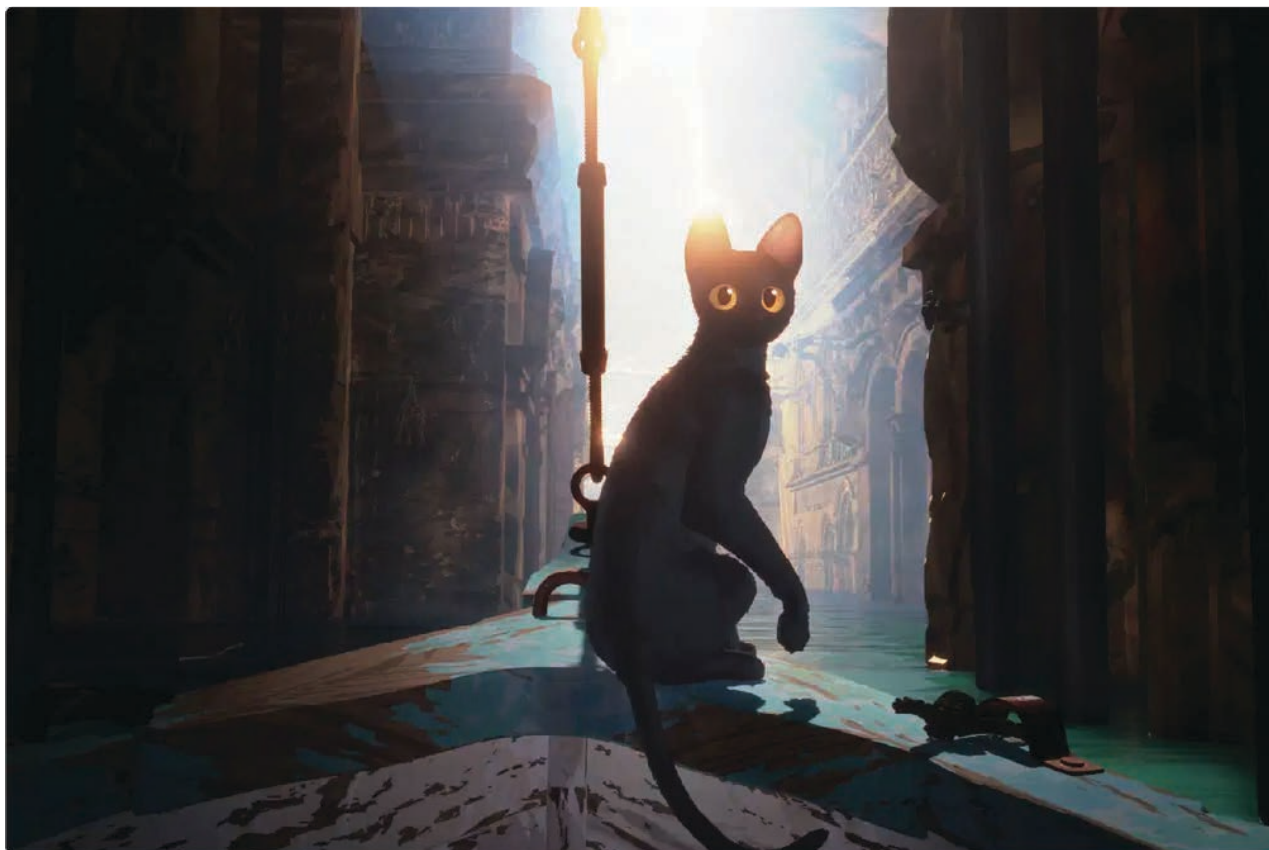
Au festival d'Annecy, le choc visuel du fabuleux "Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau"

Comme dans *Ailleurs*, l'influence visuelle du jeu vidéo apporte une sorte de patine irréaliste aux images, la tremblante rugosité des rêves, qui contraste merveilleusement avec les mouvements fluides et réalistes de ce fragile bestiaire réfugié sur un bateau perdu, insolite arche sans Noé, qui voguera longtemps dans nos mémoires de cinéphiles. On ne sait pas si *Flow...*, qui sortira en salles le 30 octobre, remportera le Cristal, mais pour nous, il a déjà gagné.

Festival international du film d'animation d'Annecy, jusqu'au 15 juin.

Cannes : le film d'animation "Flow" nous emporte comme une vague

UN CERTAIN REGARD – Le "survival" animalier et sans parole du réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis est un enchantement visuel, grâce à une mise en scène d'une grande vivacité.



Le chat noir de « Flow », héros principal de cette arche de Noé recomposée ultra réaliste, loin de l'antropomorphisme des animaux Disney. Dream Well Studio/Sacrebleu Productions/Take Five Productions



L'animation est souvent le parent pauvre de Cannes. Comme le petit cousin qu'on apprécie, mais qu'on ne met pas à la table des grands. Pour sa 77^e édition, le festival a enfin largement mis le genre en avant. Le Studio Ghibli a ainsi reçu une Palme d'or d'honneur et, pour la deuxième fois depuis la création de la manifestation, après *Valse avec Bachir* en 2008, un film d'animation concourt pour la Palme d'or : *La Plus Précieuse des marchandises*, de Michel Hazanavicius, présenté ce vendredi sur la Croisette. La Quinzaine des cinéastes a également accueilli le japonais *Anzu, chat-fantôme*.

Un autre film a, lui, époustouflé la section Un certain regard : *Flow*, de Gints Zilbalodis, est un enchantement. Après *Ailleurs* (2020), le cinéaste letton réalise de nouveau une œuvre sans parole. De fait, ses personnages sont tous des animaux et son héros principal, un chat noir aux immenses yeux jaunes. Le chat vit sa vie de chat, entre toilette, chasse aux mouches et siestes dans une maison abandonnée, entourée de spectaculaires statues de bois en forme de... chats. Mais très vite, quelque chose cloche. Aucun humain à la ronde, des ruines recouvertes de végétation, et l'eau qui monte, qui monte inexorablement, jusqu'à tout engloutir.

Capybara paresseux et lémurien cleptomane

Flow (« couler », « circuler », « s'écouler » en anglais) est une extraordinaire réussite narrative et formelle. La mise en scène impressionne particulièrement avec ces caméras qui virevoltent dans de somptueux décors, entre forêt tropicale et marais du Mississippi. Elles suivent de près les animaux, grâce à des plans à hauteur de pattes, alors que se multiplient les scènes spectaculaires sous l'eau, sur terre, dans le ciel. Dès l'ouverture, une course-poursuite palpitante entre le chat et une bande de chiens, d'une sidérante fluidité, nous scotche littéralement.

Dans cette sorte de *survival* animalier, l'humour détonne, par petites touches surprenantes. Notre chat solitaire se retrouve contraint de cohabiter avec d'autres animaux. Si rétif à l'eau, il réchappe miraculeusement de la noyade grâce à une embarcation abandonnée qui passe à son niveau. À son bord, un capybara paresseux roupille, insouciant. Ils seront bientôt rejoints par un lémurien cleptomane, un labrador un peu trop joyeux et un héron blessé. Et autant de critères de sociabilité opposés... Mais on est loin de l'anthropomorphisme des animaux Disney. Cette arche de Noé recomposée est ultra réaliste. Les mouvements des bêtes, les progrès époustouflants du chat en matière de pêche, ses pupilles qui noircissent de peur, la queue du chien qui frétille de joie à la vue d'une balle, le regard dédaigneux de l'oiseau sont parfaitement réalisés. Surtout, on admire et l'on s'émeut devant la solidarité et la bienveillance qui circulent entre ces espèces. Une belle leçon d'animalité.

Selon Guillermo del Toro, ce film représente le futur de l'animation

le 28/05/2024 à 16:43 par Chloé Delos-Eray (/redacteur/Chloe-Delos-Eray)



Flow a été présenté à Un Certain Regard, cette année à Cannes, et sera aussi à découvrir à Annecy en juin.

Alors que les festivités cannoises ont pris fin ce dimanche, avec la consécration d'*Anora* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/Anora>) de **Sean Baker** (<https://www.premiere.fr/Star/Sean-Baker>), l'heure est au bilan de cette 77ème édition du Festival de Cannes. Evidemment, ce sont les films de la compétition officielle qui font couler le plus d'encre : *Megalopolis* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/Megalopolis>), *L'Amour ouf* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/L-Amour-ouf>), *Emilia Pérez* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/Emilia-Perez>), *The Substance* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/The-Substance>), *Kinds of Kindness* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/Kinds-of-Kindness>), *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/The-Seed-of-the-Sacred-Fig>)...

Pourtant, des concurrents des sélections parallèles ont également réussi à attirer l'attention. C'est le cas de **Guillermo del Toro** (<https://www.premiere.fr/Star/Guillermo-del-Toro>), qui s'est saisi de son compte Twitter pour applaudir le travail d'animation fait sur *Flow* (<https://www.premiere.fr/film/Flow-0>), présenté cette année sous la bannière Un Certain Regard.

"Si je pouvais faire un vœu pour l'avenir de l'animation, ces images en seraient l'amorce magnifique et époustouflante," écrit le réalisateur en légende de son repost de la bande-annonce du film, originellement publiée par son réalisateur.

Et effectivement, cette bande-annonce dévoile un film tout en sons, mais sans aucune parole, où le travail de l'image ressort grandi.

Guillermo del Toro

@RealGDT · Suivre



If I could wish for the future of animation, these images would be its magnificent, breathtaking start.

Gints Zilbalodis @gintszilbalodis

Flow - an animated feature film directed by Gints Zilbalodis which premiered in Cannes Un Certain Regard 2024. vimeo.com/946861149



Dernière modification : 12:42 AM - 28 mai 2024



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Répondre



Partager

Lire 75 réponses

Réalisé par Gints Zilbalodis, *Flow* est une coproduction entre la Lettonie, la France et la Belgique, qui raconte les aventures d'un *"chat [qui] se réveille dans un univers envahi par l'eau où toute vie humaine semble avoir disparu. Il trouve refuge sur un bateau avec un groupe d'autres animaux. Mais s'entendre avec eux s'avère un défi encore plus grand que de surmonter sa peur de l'eau ! Tous devront désormais apprendre à surmonter leur différences et à s'adapter au nouveau monde qui s'impose à eux."* Le mythe génésiaque de l'arche de Noé, mais vu à hauteur d'animaux, en somme.

Flow, le regard de Gints Zilbalodis

SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE publié le 22.05.2024

PARTAGE



FLOW © Dreamwell Sacrebleu take 5

Projeté au Certain Regard, *Flow*, le deuxième long métrage d'animation de *Gints Zilbalodis*, a pour héros un chat forcé de partager un petit bateau avec d'autres animaux à la suite d'une terrible inondation. Une histoire qui fait écho au choix du jeune cinéaste letton, habitué au travail en solitaire, de s'entourer pour la première fois d'une équipe technique.

Quel est le point de départ de ce film ?

Avant *Flow*, j'ai réalisé un long métrage d'animation intitulé *Away* pour lequel j'ai tout effectué moi-même. Le film évoque un personnage seul sur une île qui cherche à se reconnecter aux autres. L'histoire et le processus de réalisation du film comportaient donc de grandes similitudes. C'est un peu la même chose avec *Flow* : le film narre la trajectoire d'un personnage indépendant et autosuffisant qui doit apprendre à travailler en équipe, ce qui a été mon cas sur ce film. Une fois de plus, j'explore mon expérience de la réalisation au travers de ce long métrage.

Quelle a été votre méthode de travail ?

Contrairement à la plupart des films d'animation, nous n'avons pas utilisé de story-board. Au lieu de cela, j'ai créé un environnement en 3D et j'y ai placé les personnages pour explorer les possibilités de mise en scène. C'était nécessaire car dans *Flow*, il y a beaucoup de séquences très longues et compliquées, impossibles à dessiner dans un storyboard, dans lesquels la caméra se déplace dans l'espace. Ce processus d'animation un peu brut m'a permis d'explorer de nombreuses idées. Il m'a aidé à me rendre compte si la narration fonctionnait ou non. C'était aussi la première fois que je travaillais avec une équipe. J'ai donc dû acquérir de nouvelles compétences. Avant, lorsque j'avais une idée, je devais trouver comment la réaliser moi-même. Cette fois, il m'a fallu présenter chaque trouvaille. C'était parfois compliqué, mais aussi très gratifiant lorsqu'elles évoluaient grâce à la collaboration de chacun. La plupart de mes collaborateurs étaient jeunes, passionnés et désireux de faire leurs preuves.

Qu'avez-vous appris au cours de la réalisation de ce film ?

Que tout prend plus de temps qu'on ne le pense au départ ! J'ai beaucoup appris sur la gestion des collaborateurs et sur la délégation du travail. Comme le chat dans le film, c'est quelque chose qui ne me vient pas naturellement. *Flow* est mon deuxième long métrage, mais c'est peut-être le premier que j'ai réellement dirigé car auparavant, je travaillais complètement seul. C'était donc un vrai défi pour moi, surtout au début. J'ai dû apprendre les bases très rapidement, mais peut-être que le fait d'être novice au travail en équipe a finalement nourri le film.

Qu'aimeriez-vous que les gens retiennent de *Flow* ?

J'ai tendance à oublier l'intrigue des films, mais je me souviens toujours des sentiments, des émotions ressenties. J'espère donc que de ce point de vue, *Flow* créera une expérience suffisamment forte pour que les gens s'en souviennent.

Pouvez-vous nous parler de votre prochain projet ?

Les cinq dernières années passées à travailler sur ce film ont été très intenses pour moi et nous venons juste de le terminer, alors j'ai hâte de me reposer un peu ! Mais j'ai déjà une idée pour mon prochain film : il s'agira d'un film d'animation dans lequel je souhaite explorer les thèmes et les techniques de *Flow* de manière plus approfondie. J'aimerais utiliser la caméra de manière encore plus active pour raconter l'histoire. Qu'elle devienne presque un personnage indépendant doté d'un esprit propre.

CANNES

'Flow' Review: A Cute Kitty Centers One of the Most Groundbreaking Animated Films About Nature Since 'Bambi'

Cannes: It's rare you feel like you're watching something entirely new. Latvia's Gints Zilbalodis accomplishes just that.

BY CHRISTIAN BLAUVELT

MAY 24, 2024 10:00 AM



'Flow' by Gints Zilbalodis @Dreamwell/Sacreblue/Take 5



There's a moment near the end of Latvian **animation director** Gints Zilbalodis' "**Flow**" that powerfully tugs at the heartstrings. It's when the **film**'s central character, a black cat who you've come to have a profound emotional connection with, rediscovers a lost ball that he and his animal friends (especially a lemur) had been playing with earlier in the movie. He thought he'd never see it again. And suddenly he does.

Sometimes, lost things can be found again.

If you thought that emotion elicited without cloying manipulation was something lost in animation, it is found again in "Flow" as well. A movie brimming with sentiment but not sentimentality, this is one of the most moving animated films in recent memory, and, beyond that, groundbreaking too. The anthropomorphic animal characters of 21st century U.S. animated features have nothing on the animal stars of "Flow," who never utter a word and act as nothing more than animals. That's enough.

Building on the extraordinary naturalism that Disney pioneered for its animal characters in the early 1940s, particularly with Figaro the cat in "Pinocchio," as well as "Bambi" — built out of the closest study, rather than outright rotoscoping — Zilbalodis lets his animals be animals. The cat, who's the lead character in "Flow," conveys the world through the way he arches his back, crouches to the ground, perks up or flattens his ears, and widens his eyes in this completely dialogue-free movie about the wonder of perception and the underappreciated latent intelligence of animals.

When the film opens, the cat is living in a house where there are no humans present, though there are signs that human life was very recently there. There's an artist's desk in the loft where the kitty likes to curl up, and a sketch of him that someone's made. And around the house, located in a beautiful forest, are statues of the cat — one that's incredibly giant-sized among them. This cat was clearly loved. But now he's alone.

What caused the disappearance of humanity in "Flow" is never explained, and not even human remains are seen (which makes sense for a movie that, in every respect, can and should be enjoyed by kids the world over). It's like this extinction event was a vanishing, and to be fair, one animal later in the movie almost does seem to be raptured, pulled up into the heavens in one of the movie's most transcendent moments.

Maybe the animals have inherited the earth. But first, and just as Biblical, there's another great flood that spreads over everything. Even the giant cat statue is completely covered by the waves, except for the tiniest tip of one of its ears that our cat hero stands atop until a boat drifts past. On that boat is a capybara, who he bonds with. And later a lemur, a stork, and a golden retriever.

Well, "bonds with" may be a stretch. Zilbalodis, just 29 years old and the director of the acclaimed 2019 animated feature "Away," finds fleeting moments of connection for the cat with his fellow voyagers but also shows him always finding ways to keep his distance. As cute as this cat is, it's not from underscoring his cuddliness. Cat lovers, of course, revere feline expressionlessness, but a wellspring of expression still does manage to come from the cat even without the animators, based in France and Belgium as well as Zilbalodis' native Latvia, drawing human-style emotions on his face.

The boat — the smallest scale ark imaginable, if we really are going Biblical here — drifts through remnants of human civilization peeking through the surface of the water as our animals passively witness it all. They do learn how to steer the rudder on the boat, stretching the plausibility of this scenario a tad, but, really, what follows is just the animals hanging out together in quiet cohabitation until various things happen to them. The cat is knocked into the water several times, but always manages his way back — not before taking in the beauty of the brightly colored fish beneath, who he brings back to create a small pile of good eatin' for himself back onboard.

Walt Disney's "Bambi" is considered by animation buffs to be a high point in the history of the medium: For the depth created by its multi-plane camera, the almost nature-doc-like naturalism of its animal characters' movements, the environmental effects of the rain, snow, forest fire, and leaves blowing throughout that add texture, and its almost plotless "circle of life" theme and structure. "Flow" matches that and ups the ante — these animals don't even talk! The environments are CGI and the "camera" moves through them with a handheld-like jerkiness and momentum that puts to shame Jon Favreau's idea of simulating "filming" an animated movie in his "Lion King" remake. You really feel like you're watching a lived-in environment here, with the frame that's limiting what you're seeing capable of going in any number of directions.

But for the animals in "Flow" themselves, Zilbalodis made a powerful choice: They're obviously built around CGI wireframe models, but their surface texture — their fur — is abstracted to look like hand-drawn animation. It distances the cat and all the other members of the menagerie from anything resembling photorealism, instead having them bear the human-made warmth that hand-drawn conveys like nothing else. Maybe it's just because Zilbalodis and his teams didn't have the budget to animate rippling follicles of fur. But if so, it's an example of a limitation inspiring an even greater artistic choice. The surface may not be entirely real, but the movements modeled underneath are so lifelike you feel like you're glimpsing Plato's eternal forms: The everlasting underneath a transitory surface.

The closest thing to "Flow" in recent memory is 2002's "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron," which also opted not to anthropomorphize its animal characters and could have been, for all intents and purposes, a "silent" film as well if not for the choice to have Matt Damon represent the title character as the film's narrator. Or maybe Suzie Templeton's stop-motion "Peter and the Wolf" short from 2006. Which is all to note what a rarity and a wonder "Flow" really is. It's not just a supreme example of a movie kids will love that adults will too. With its wordlessness, this is a film that could play in any country of the world, its capacity to reach literally everyone limitless. And yet it's radical while being as accessible as any animated film could ever be. By any standard, "Flow" should be a triumph of commerce as well as art.

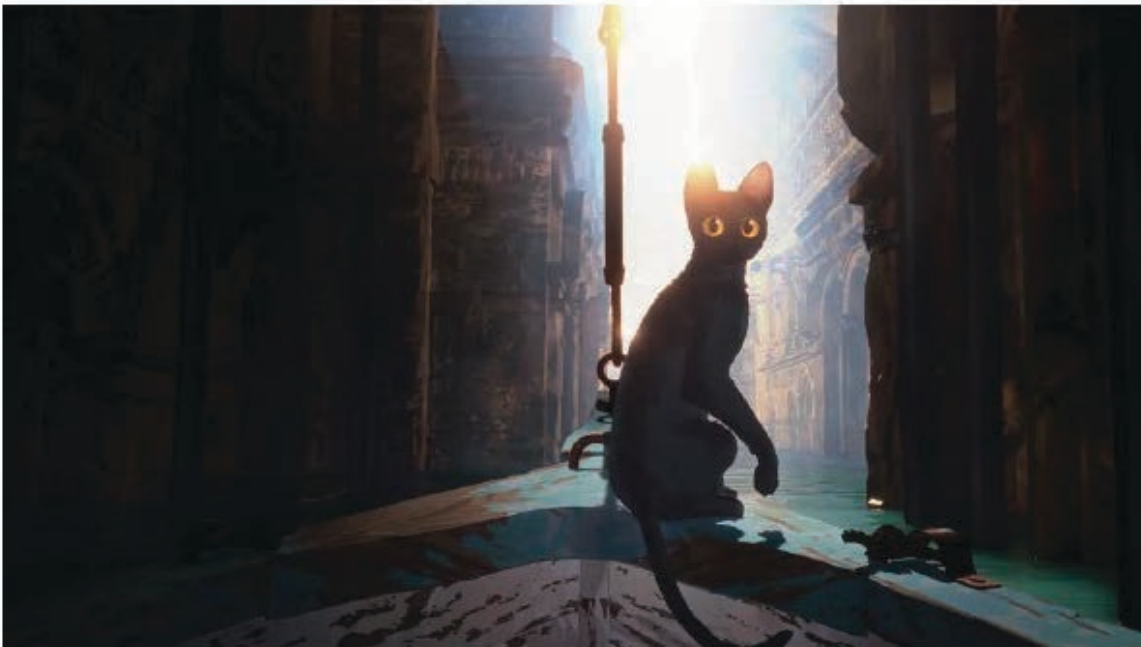
Will that happen? In any world that made sense, sure. But our reality is a different thing. If somehow it is a smash, then the film's own touching moment of rediscovery will be echoed in real life: Lost things really can be found again.

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'Flow' Review: An Enchanting Eco-Fable About Community That Makes Artisanal Magic Out of 3D Animation

Latvian director Gints Zilbalodis' second feature tails a cat that bands together with other animals on a survival journey following a cataclysmic flood.

BY DAVID ROONEY MAY 24, 2024 12:16PM



'Flow' CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, there's something about the purity of great animated storytelling that can shatter your heart and then make it whole again. (Think *Toy Story 3*.) Latvian director Gints Zilbalodis' captivating second feature, *Flow*, is that kind of marvel, a vividly experiential white-knuckle survival adventure that takes place in a world on the brink of ruin. Told entirely without dialogue, this tale of a cat that evolves from self-preservation to solidarity with a motley crew of other species is something quite special.

Acquired out of Cannes for North America by Sideshow and Janus Films, *Flow* is of a piece with Zilbalodis' lauded 2019 debut *Away*; both are essentially silent movies and both owe a debt to the painterly canvases of animation master Hayao Miyazaki. The new work drops characters designed in classic cartoon style into ravishing photo-realistic environments, at times recalling the woodsy landscapes of Danish artist Peder Mørk Mønsted. Images of nature shimmer with light and color, though a shadow of danger is never far away.

The cat at the center of the story is a skinny gray feline of indeterminate gender that looks to be somewhere between kittenhood and full maturity. It's clever and resilient but also skittish, a small creature in a big scary forest, bizarrely dotted with large-scale cat sculptures, including one giant kitty that towers above the treetops. Scaffolding indicates that it's a work left unfinished, one of many signs throughout the film that human life has perished.

After outwitting five dogs in hot pursuit during a suspenseful chase, the cat discovers the origin of those artworks in an isolated cottage with a wood carver's workshop. The animal's expressive saucer eyes widen with each new encounter — a capybara that barks once and then plops itself down to sleep, posing no threat; an acquisitive lemur busily collecting an array of shiny objects in a basket it guards irritably; a sweet, not too bright labrador separated from the hound pack; and a secretary bird that initially seems a menace but soon settles on the prow of the boat, mostly minding its own business.

As woodlands make way for more tropical vegetation, the animals pass ruins of what appears to be a grand ancient city with a massive amphitheater that's home to a colony of lemurs, each of them sporting its own found treasures as accessories.

All the animals on the boat are changed by their experiences, with the exception of the capybara, who remains pretty much the same big easygoing lug throughout. Even the labrador, shrugging off the pack mentality of the other dogs, becomes smarter, more alert to the safety of its fellow travelers.

None changes more perceptibly than the cat, its brushes with death likely outnumbering the standard nine lives and its cohabitation with the other species fostering a communal spirit unlike its more aloof, circumspect behavior earlier in the story.

This is a wonderful film for children, its example of the give and take of friendship and the importance of mutual trust embedded organically in the narrative with clarity but without over-emphasis. It's no less a film for adults, with its beguiling visuals and characters loaded with charm and individuality. There's a lovely understated spiritual element, a soulfulness that resonates profoundly with the fate of a gigantic sea creature, or the celestial exit of a member of the boat party.

Zilbalodis and director of animation Léo Silly-Pélissier conjure a picture-book world all but wiped out by natural disaster and shadowed by the specter of death but still abounding in sights of breathtaking beauty. The 3D animation renders the forest backgrounds with incredibly vibrant textures and the underwater scenes are enchanting, even when you fear for the life of the cat, an aquatic newbie. The visual aesthetic is polished, but the film still somehow manages to seem both technically accomplished and hand-crafted.

The attention to movement is extraordinary, captured in graceful, controlled camerawork or careening along as the cat darts through the forest at high speed. The character detail is clearly the result of extensive study of each animal's behavior and physicality; it seems especially safe to assume the creative team logged countless hours watching cat videos, inarguably the greatest gift of the online age.

The score by Zilbalodis and Rihards Zal shifts from gorgeous passages of percussive melody to flights of stirring strings, just as the narrative weaves humorous observations together with moments of high anxiety or tragedy. *Flow* is a joy to experience but also a deeply affecting story, the work of a unique talent who deserves to be ranked among the world's great animation artists.

Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard)

Production companies: Sacrebleu Productions, Take Five, Dream Well

Distribution: Sideshow, Janus Films

Director: Gints Zilbalodis

Screenwriters: Gints Zilbalodis, Matiss Kaža

'Flow': Cannes Review

BY **ALLAN HUNTER** | 25 MAY 2024

Tour-de-force animation about a cat and his fellow tsunami survivors is an Un Certain Regard standout



SOURCE: CANNES FILM FESTIVAL
'FLOW'

Dir: Gints Zilbalodis. Belgium/Latvia/France. 2024. 85 mins

Flow is as hard to resist as a pair of plaintive, saucer-shaped eyes peering out from a bundle of fur. Gints Zilbalodis's second feature is a rousing animated adventure in which a devastating flood obliges an independent cat to seek allies among the animal kingdom. Technical virtuosity is matched by storytelling vigour and dramatic heft in a film with a ready appeal to ailurophiles and animal lovers of all ages. A Cannes world premiere in Un Certain Regard is followed by an Annecy screening and what should be wide global interest. Sideshow and Janus have acquired North American rights.

The emotional spell it casts is captivating

Returning to the themes of friendship and incredible journeys from his debut *Away* (2019), which was a Contrechamp award winner at Annecy, Zibalodis sets *Flow* in a verdant forest where Cat roams at will. A selection of cat sculptures large and small suggest there was once a human resident in the cabin where the cat sleeps. Every aspect of the animal's behaviour is convincingly depicted from a paw suspended in mid-air when it hesitates to an arched back at the first sign of danger, the twitching flick of a tale, the serious business of personal grooming and the pleasure of a satisfying stretch. A soundtrack of squeals, mews, growls and purring makes it easy to forget that the cat is not real.

When disaster strikes, it has the impact of J.A. Bayona's *The Impossible* (2012). A herd of deer stampedes towards salvation and startled birds take to the skies as a tsunami hits, waters rise at an alarming rate and much of the earth disappears beneath the sea. The cat struggles to stay afloat and eventually finds shelter on a drifting sailboat occupied by a sleepy capybara. Other animals jump on board as their adventure continues, including a lemur and a golden labrador.

Zibalodis manages to invest each creature with a terrific amount of character and individuality. The labrador is a typically friendly, wagged-tail mutt full of energy and friendly overtures. The lemur is constantly beguiled by shiny objects and the detritus from sites that have been abandoned by humans. A wise bird becomes a protector and saviour in many a tight corner.

Flow has echoes of *The Life Of Pi* (2012) and other seafaring yarns and seems to be lightly sprinkled with movie references. When the cat climbs a boat's mast and uses its claws to glide down a sail there is all the bravado of Douglas Fairbanks Sr's famous stunt in *The Black Pirate* (1926).

Zibalodis ensures that the pace rarely falters as the story sweeps the viewer along through treacherous seas, mysterious ruins, death-defying escapes, poetic night skies that are as blowsy and threatening as a Turner painting and glimmers of hope in the dawning of sunlight. Zibalodis is almost a one-man band when it comes to the creation of the film but credit too to Leo Silly-Pelissier who serves as the director of the 3-D animation.

The breathless adventure is also underpinned by an unexpected emotional response to the story of the bonds forged by the cat and the other animals as they must work in harmony for the sake of survival. A telling moment comes when the once self-sufficient moggy shares his catch of fish with the other inhabitants of the boat.

There is a slight repetitiveness in the film's closing stages but that is a small flaw in an otherwise enthralling production. There are no human characters in *Flow* and no dialogue beyond barks and squawks but the sense of peril is compelling, the visuals are impressive and the emotional spell it casts is captivating.

Cannes 2024 : FLOW

23/05/2024 - Par Perrine Quennesson

Après son long métrage AILLEURS en 2020, réalisé en solo, le cinéaste letton Gints Zilbalodis revient avec une ambition décuplée.

Si son premier long métrage d'animation, AILLEURS, qu'il a réalisé entièrement tout seul (!), était, en quelque sorte, une version longue de son court métrage OASIS, FLOW est, lui, le prolongement de son tout premier AQUA. Mais surtout, il est la retranscription du parcours personnel de son réalisateur Gints Zilbalodis. FLOW suit l'histoire d'un (a-do-ra-ble) petit chat noir solitaire surpris par une soudaine montée des eaux. Dans un lieu imaginaire, dont l'humain est absent mais où il a laissé son empreinte par l'architecture, les moyens de locomotion et l'art, le chaton tente de survivre. Bien malgré lui, il se retrouve embarqué dans un bateau aux côtés d'autres bêtes perdues comme lui : un chien, un oiseau, un capybara et un lémurien. Le félin anachorète doit apprendre à faire équipe. Vous l'aurez compris : le petit chat, c'est Gints. Habitué à travailler seul, un peu fermé au monde qui l'entoure, le réalisateur letton a dû, au moment de la sortie de son premier film, apprendre à communiquer, à se tourner vers les autres. Ce chemin d'ouverture s'est intensifié lorsqu'il a réalisé FLOW avec, cette fois-ci, toute une équipe à diriger. Et ce parcours, il le retranscrit avec une délicatesse certaine dans ce film en 3D entièrement muet. Ses héros poilus, animés avec fluidité et la précision d'un éthologue fasciné par le langage animal, semblent plus vrais que nature et imposent le regard attentif et émotionnel du spectateur. Même si Gints Zilbalodis évite les tentations anthropomorphiques, on ne peut s'empêcher de projeter sur ces petites bêtes, toute une série d'émois qui nous traverse. Le cinéaste

letton déploie une animation qui déplace l'attention des dialogues ou de la narration, vers l'abstraction, le ressenti ; vers ce qui reste quand les mots ne sont plus suffisants. La musique (qu'il a co-composée) y est pour quelque chose : avec ses nappes flottantes, sans orchestre, presque vrombissantes, elle est le pendant parfait des mouvements d'une caméra hyper fluide et active, inspirée autant du jeu vidéo que de l'animation japonaise. Un deuxième film sensoriel et poignant sur l'apprentissage du collectif.

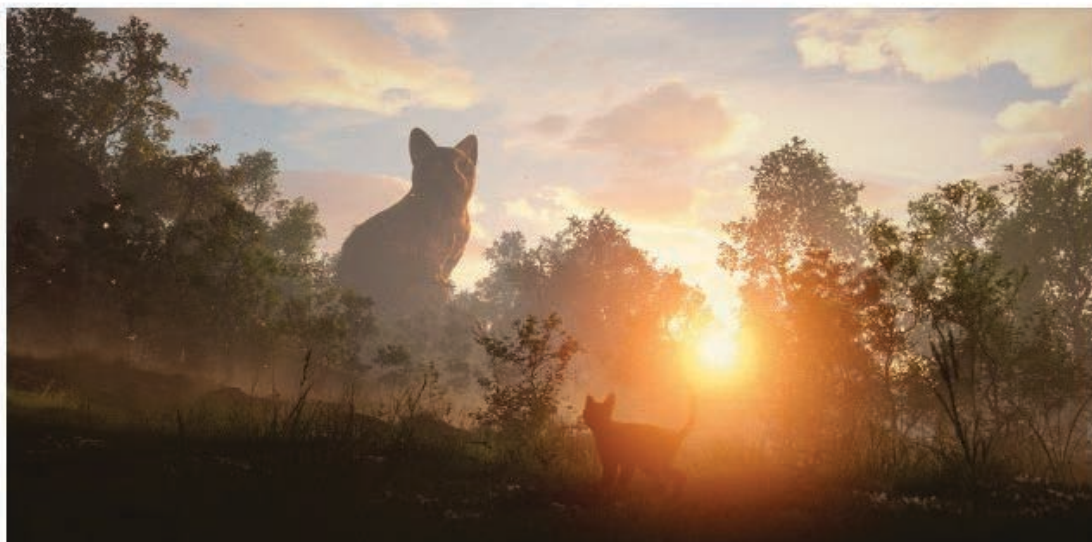
FLOW

Un film de Gints Zilbalodis



De la peur à l'entraide

Synopsis : Un chat noir se promène en pleine forêt. Échappant à une meute de chiens, il se retrouve soudain emporté par une vague. Se réfugiant sur une statue féline géante, les eaux montant de plus en plus, il trouve refuge sur un voilier à la dérive, dans lequel est déjà installé un ragondin...



© Dreamwell - Sacrebleu - Take 5, Fourni par le Festival de Cannes

Critique : Gints Zilbalodis est un réalisateur letton dont le premier long métrage, *'Ailleurs'* (<https://www.abusdecine.com/critique/ailleurs/>), aussi hypnotique que poétique, avait créé la sensation au Festival d'Annecy en 2019, remportant haut la main le Prix du meilleur film Contrechamp. Un film sans paroles où un homme s'étant crashé sur une île, tentait en moto d'atteindre le bout d'un chemin, en échappant à d'étranges géants, et croisant au passage un oiseau et... déjà un chat noir. Reprenant un principe assez proche, ce second long métrage, passé par la section Un Certain regard du Festival de Cannes 2024, et également présenté en compétition à Annecy, met en scène un chat noir, mis en danger par la rapide submersion de la forêt et la maison où il s'abritait, se voyant contraint de se réfugier sur un voilier décrépi, habité par un ragondin. Une sorte d'arche de Noé, dans laquelle vont les rejoindre progressivement d'autres animaux : chien, lémurien (un maki catta), et un échassier blanc.

Construit également comme un périple dépaysant, cette fois-ci plus aléatoire et porté par la notion d'entraide, le récit nous permet de suivre le navire au fil de décors mystérieux et évocateurs d'un monde où l'homme aurait totalement disparu. Les premières scènes dans la forêt, nous introduisent à l'habitat de cet animal peureux, dont la silhouette semble avoir été sculptée de multiples fois par un artiste qui n'est plus là, tentant d'échapper à une meute de chiens ou d'éviter d'être piétiné par des cerfs. La fluidité des mouvements et leur naturel sont assez confondants, prêtant moins aux animaux des intentions humaines que des mimiques ou mouvements qu'on leur connaît déjà. Quant au graphisme, il ne recherche pas un réalisme absolu, en évitant la description du moindre poil de pelage au profit de dégradés de couleur pour les chiens ou le ragondin, ou de gris pour le chat.


On admirera aussi le niveau de détail avec lequel sont représentés les feuillages ou les prairies fleuries, chaque brise de vent permettant le mouvement de secteurs entiers, et parvenant jusqu'à un spectateur envoûté. Réalisé cette fois-ci en équipe, l'homme ayant réalisé son premier film seul (il avait même composé la musique), *'Flow'* met du coup en avant cette notion d'entraide entre les animaux (un peu comme l'équipe a dû collaborer pour réaliser le film), qu'il s'agisse de s'abriter de la pluie, d'éviter de devenir une proie, de se nourrir, d'être sauvé de la noyade... obligeant ses personnages à quelques interactions « sociales ». Avec toujours une belle part d'inconnu et de mystère, les décors comme l'intrigue, dotée de quelques pointes d'humour, nous entraînent avec poésie vers une fin aussi touchante que déroutante. Comme si dans chaque milieu naturel, il devait toujours y avoir des perdants, malgré toute l'énergie de survie que l'on pourra mettre collectivement.


Olivier Bachelard (<https://www.abusdecine.com/author/olivier-bachelard-3/>)

Envoyer un message au rédacteur (https://www.abusdecine.com/author/olivier-bachelard-3/?post_concerne=flow#contact)

Annecy 2024 : « Flow », un merveilleux manifeste en faveur de la tolérance en temps de cataclysme


Stupéfiant film d'animation, « Flow » est bien plus qu'une formelle leçon d'anthropologie. Dans un monde sans humain, les animaux doivent affronter un déluge et apprendre à suivre le courant.

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Les animaux sublimes de 'Flow'. (UFO Distribution)

Par **Léa Colombo**

Publié le 13 juin 2024 à 11:36

Mis à jour le 13 juin 2024 à 16:46

A la croisée entre le film de fiction et le documentaire animalier, « Flow », du réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis, est avant tout une pépite d'animation rendant hommage à la fluidité du mouvement qu'il soit organique comme celui d'un chat à la dérive ou naturel comme l'eau, **décidément très présente au Festival d'Annecy**, tantôt impétueuse tantôt calme, qui ne cesse de monter.



Sur une heure et demie, le film complètement muet, à l'exception des bruits des animaux, nous immerge dans un monde foisonnant de végétation où l'homme a mystérieusement disparu. Vivace et tangible, cet univers se dévoile à hauteur de bêtes, dans des scènes de courses-poursuites qui font monter l'adrénaline ou des séquences paisibles d'observation du vivant. Dans ce cadre inattendu et pourtant pas si difficile à imaginer, un chat têtu et craintif, se prélassant dans une maison abandonnée, s'arme de courage pour survivre alors que progressivement l'eau remplace sa terre promise.

En compagnie d'autres animaux dont une grue, un lémurien, un chien et un capybara, il forme une étrange arche de Noé et progressivement une famille. Enchanteur de par ses qualités visuelles indéniables qui confèrent au long-métrage un équilibre parfait entre réalisme et animation pure, le film surprend par sa capacité à traduire la communication entre les espèces par le geste. Sans désir d'anthropomorphisme, le réalisateur nous permet de voir la vie des animaux tels qu'ils sont réellement : primaire, joueur, empathique et bien plus encore.

A l'écran, les pupilles du chat se contractent et se dilatent au rythme de ses émotions, le lémurien un brin kleptomane, ne cesse de lutter pour garder ses biens, oscillant entre une moue dédaigneuse parfaitement typique de l'animal et une douceur nouvellement acquise. Et curieusement, malgré une intrigue contemplative et poétique, le film parvient à établir de véritables moments de tension rappelant également la cruauté du règne animal.

Déjà présenté à Cannes dans la sélection « Un certain regard », « Flow » poursuit son chemin telle une invitation à se laisser porter par le courant. Aussi brillant narrativement que dans sa mise en scène, le long-métrage témoigne de l'importance cruciale de la solidarité et de la tolérance. Et ce, sans voix off ni humain. Par les temps qui courent, voilà une dernière raison pour courir le voir en salles lors de sa sortie nationale, le 30 octobre 2024.

Léa Colombo

Cannes 2024 : on a vu Flow et son adorable chat en pleine apocalypse (et on a parlé au réalisateur)

Antoine Desrues | 24 mai 2024

Drame Animation



Ecran Large est de retour sur la Croisette pour l'édition 2024 du Festival de Cannes, en partenariat avec Métal Hurlant. Et c'est l'heure de revenir sur *Flow*, film d'animation letton où un chat tente de survivre à une catastrophe écologique.

Métal Hurlant nous accompagne à Cannes cette année, dans notre exploration des sélections hétéroclites du festival. Au travers de récits de bande dessinée et d'articles sur l'actualité culturelle, Métal Hurlant développe avec éclectisme, dans quatre numéros par an, un imaginaire sans aucune limite. Une ligne éditoriale totalement en accord avec la soif d'expérimentations et de découvertes du Festival de Cannes.

Au même titre que le documentaire, l'animation est souvent peu présente pendant le Festival de Cannes. Dès lors, on a tendance à se jeter sur la moindre proposition, surtout lorsqu'elle est issue d'Un Certain Regard (en 2016, *La Tortue rouge* y avait brillé). Ça tombe bien, *Flow* débarque avec une ambition proche du film de Michael Dudok de Wit : **une fable sans dialogues sur la (sur)vie**. Et cette fois, c'est avec un petit chat. KO par forfait.

UN FILM QUI A DU FLOW

De quoi ça parle ? Alors qu'un déluge s'abat sur son monde, un chat trouve refuge sur un bateau en compagnie d'autres animaux. Solitaire et méfiant, le félin va devoir apprendre la vie en communauté.

C'était comment ? On avait repéré le réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis avec *Ailleurs*, film sur la profonde solitude d'un humain abandonné sur une île. Le cinéaste avait réalisé cet exploit seul (ou presque), au point de connecter son expérience avec celle de son personnage.

Avec *Flow*, le réalisateur a désormais les moyens de ses ambitions, et avec lui, une équipe. Il est le premier à faire le lien entre son parcours et celui de ce petit chat contraint de faire confiance aux autres. Cela explique peut-être **l'évidence instinctive et viscérale de ce récit sans dialogues**. D'un côté, le long-métrage est d'une limpidité thématique et structurelle impressionnante d'universalité. De l'autre, sa mise en scène ne cesse de façonner un voile de mystère qui fait toute sa singularité.

Alors qu'on démarre dans une maison remplie de statues de chats, *Flow se laisse aller à l'ambiguïté de son hors-champ*. Dans ce monde en apparence post-apocalyptique, les humains semblent avoir disparu. Derrière l'étonnante tranquillité qui se dégage de cette absence, ce sont les animaux qui payent les pots cassés. La catastrophe écologique prend ici la forme d'un déluge (impressionnante imagerie, portée par un rendu de l'eau très réussi), qui engloutit le passé autant qu'il impose une mutation de notre planète.

Embarqué malgré lui dans un périple aux accents mythologiques campbelliens, notre ami félin est bien contraint, comme les autres, de s'adapter. L'environnement a l'ascendant, et c'est d'ailleurs lui qui conduit la direction de la narration. **On sent le film nourri par le jeu vidéo**, avec sa caméra qui tournoie autour des corps et pénètre l'espace dans des travellings saisissants. Avec un sens de l'échelle aussi poétique que spectaculaire, Zilbalodis nous parle d'une nature qui panse ses plaies, se reboote avec toute la violence que cela suppose.

C'est aussi pour cette raison que *Flow n'hésite pas à convoquer une certaine noirceur*, une sensation d'abandon cosmique où cette troupe d'animaux n'a plus qu'elle-même pour se protéger. Face à une telle réussite, on avait forcément envie d'en parler avec son réalisateur.

ENTRETIEN AVEC GINTS ZILBALODIS

Ailleurs était déjà un film quasi-silencieux. Qu'est-ce qui vous a amené à faire de nouveau un film sans dialogues ?

Gints Zilbalodis : Dès mes courts-métrages, j'ai évité les dialogues, donc ça a toujours été plus simple pour moi comme ça. Je me sens plus à l'aise en racontant des histoires visuellement. Ça laisse plus d'espace pour la caméra, le son et la musique. Je le vois aussi comme un challenge. Je ne peux pas me contenter d'expliquer un élément du scénario par la voix. Ça contraint à la créativité.

Le principal outil de narration à votre disposition, c'est la physicalité de ce chat, son langage corporel. Comment vous l'avez approché ?

G.Z. : Mes animateurs ont fait un gros travail de référence pour reproduire au mieux les mouvements d'un chat. Ils ont passé beaucoup de temps sur Youtube, et même à filmer leurs propres animaux de compagnie. C'est très dur d'animer des créatures à quatre pattes. Ce n'est pas seulement deux fois plus dur que pour les bipèdes. Ça demande un temps fou. Donc je suis heureux d'avoir eu une équipe d'animateurs pour le faire à ma place (*rires*). En tout cas, malgré le défi, on est contents du résultat, parce que la physicalité acrobatique d'un chat est parfaitement adaptée pour de l'animation.

Vos mondes sont dépeuplés et solitaires, et en même temps, il y a une forme de sérénité dans cette absence d'êtres humains. C'est pour dire que cette Terre serait mieux sans nous ?

G.Z. : Non, pas vraiment. Quand la catastrophe arrive, on n'en connaît ni les origines, ni la réaction des humains. Je suppose que certains ont pu s'en sortir, mais je me concentre sur les animaux parce que ce sont eux qui doivent faire face aux conséquences directes du déluge. J'ai choisi l'eau parce que ça représente plusieurs choses. Elle est effrayante au début, mais elle apporte aussi, comme vous dites, une sérénité, voire même une certaine beauté dans cette façon de tout reprendre à zéro. C'était un défi parce qu'il n'y a rien de plus dur en animation que la simulation d'eau. Sa manière de réagir aux éléments ne peut pas se résumer à un seul système, et quasiment chaque plan a demandé des outils particuliers.

Justement, l'eau et les environnements sont photoréalistes, tandis que les personnages sont moins détaillés, avec un look plus proche du cel-shading. Pourquoi cette distinction ?

G.Z. : Le but était de styliser les personnages par leur simplification, notamment pour que les décors ressortent encore plus d'un point de vue de l'immersion. Je trouve aussi qu'en épurant les animaux, c'est plus simple de projeter des émotions sur eux. C'est comme si on remplissait nous-mêmes les zones en manque de détails. C'est une technique qu'on retrouve dès l'animation 2D, où le personnage est plus "plat" que le décor pour des questions de contraste. C'était important pour assurer l'investissement du spectateur dans l'échelle imposante des décors. La caméra se veut très immersive, à rester au plus près des corps des personnages et de leurs sensations.

En parlant de caméra, il y a un feeling très proche du jeu vidéo, dans *Ailleurs* comme dans *Flow*. L'objectif gravite autour des corps comme dans un third-person shooter, parfois en faisant des mouvements assez spectaculaires. Comment vous intégrez ce langage dans un autre médium ?

G.Z. : Je dirai que l'influence du jeu vidéo est surtout présente dans la narration environnementale, dans la manière qu'a l'histoire de s'écrire par le décor. On ne comprend pas tout de leur sens ou de leur origine, mais ils donnent des indices au spectateur sur l'état de ce monde. Pour la caméra, l'inspiration vient moins du jeu vidéo que des longues prises cherchées par certains cinéastes. J'aime ces chorégraphies très complexes, où la caméra est comme emportée dans une danse. Elle doit réagir aux événements, ce qui donne un aspect presque spontané et improvisé.

Là où le jeu vidéo peut se ressentir, c'est que pour obtenir ces plans, on a choisi une esthétique 3D qui s'en rapproche, avec moins de détails que dans d'autres films du genre. Ça nous permettait de pouvoir explorer plus librement les environnements 3D dans des versions préliminaires, et avoir des rendus beaucoup plus rapides. Pour moi, c'est essentiel, parce que j'ai besoin d'expérimenter, de tester plusieurs directions pour des plans, voire des séquences entières. Il y a des réalisateurs comme les frères Coen qui savent exactement ce qu'ils veulent. Ils ont tout le film dans leur tête. Ce n'est pas mon cas. Sur *Flow*, il n'y a pas eu de story-board, ce qui est assez inhabituel pour un film d'animation. D'une certaine façon, on était proche d'une démarche de live-action. Je visitais le décor virtuel le matin, et je pouvais décider à quel endroit placer la caméra, pour capter le ressenti que je souhaitais.

***Ailleurs* est un film sur la solitude que vous avez fait pratiquement tout seul. *Flow* est un film sur un personnage qui apprend à faire confiance aux autres. Votre approche de l'animation a-t-elle évolué maintenant que vous avez, vous aussi, une équipe ?**

G.Z. : Quand je faisais mes films auparavant, il suffisait que j'aie une idée pour la tester. La plus grande différence maintenant, c'est d'articuler mes idées, de les expliquer aux autres. Et comme j'aime expérimenter, c'était parfois difficile d'exprimer ce que je désire. Mais je pense qu'on a trouvé le bon équilibre pour que ce va-et-vient avec les animateurs fonctionne. Le bénéfice, c'est que tout est plus précis, parce qu'il faut savoir tout expliquer et justifier. J'apprécie les moments plus abstraits et ésotériques, mais il faut qu'ils aient un sens. Parfois, l'équipe a dû faire confiance à mon instinct, mais j'avais une meilleure vision du résultat final.

Ce parallèle a eu un impact sur l'écriture du film ?

G.Z. : Oui. On a eu plusieurs versions de scénario, qui ont beaucoup évolué. Mais une fois que le scénario était terminé, je ne l'ai plus jamais relu. J'ai basé les animatics (versions grossières des scènes animées, *ndlr*) sur ma mémoire. Comme ça, j'étais sûr que les scènes essentielles allaient s'imposer d'elles-mêmes, et si j'en oubliais d'autres, c'est peut-être qu'elles n'étaient pas si importantes pour être dans le film. Globalement, je connaissais le scénario par cœur, mais ça m'a permis de prendre quelques détours après la pré-production. Il y a notamment une scène onirique importante au sommet d'une "montagne". Je savais ce que devait être la conclusion de ce passage, mais sans pouvoir l'expliquer. Ce n'est que bien plus tard, quand le compositeur du film m'a demandé de lui donner une intention pour sa partition que j'ai été obligé de comprendre ce que je voulais exprimer. Je trouve que cette séquence résume bien le voyage de cinq ans qu'on a eu avec ce projet.

Cannes 2024 | Flow de Gints Zilbalodis, épopée spectaculaire et métaphysique

21 mai 2024 · 6 min read · MPM



On avait tant aimé son premier long métrage *Ailleurs*, réalisé quasiment en solo et en autoproduction en 2019, que l'on se demandait avec appréhension si Gints Zilbalodis parviendrait à réitérer l'exploit : proposer un film sensoriel, minimaliste et hypnotique qui impose son propre rythme et déploie un univers éminemment singulier. À la vision de *Flow*, plus aucun doute ne subsiste sur la cohérence de sa démarche artistique, ni sur sa capacité à se renouveler sans rien perdre de son ambition formelle et philosophique.

Avec cette histoire d'un chat contraint de cohabiter avec d'autres animaux réfugiés sur un bateau à voile pour échapper à une brutale montée des eaux, il propose en effet une épopée à la fois spectaculaire et intime qui offre plusieurs niveaux de lecture distincts. Le plus évident est celui du plaisir de l'aventure, sublimée par une mise en scène aérienne et ample qui adopte les codes de la caméra portée. Comme *Ailleurs*, le film fait la part belle aux paysages et aux lieux traversés, mélangeant savamment une narration plutôt contemplative et dénuée de dialogues – mais sublimée par les variations d'un thème musical particulièrement intense – à une succession de rencontres et de situations qui, sans jouer la carte des rebondissements incessants, viennent intelligemment rythmer le récit. Tout au long du film, les enjeux se situent donc à deux niveaux : celui, collectif, de la catastrophe naturelle en cours et de ses conséquences, et celui plus individuel du chemin psychologique parcouru par le chat pour réussir à cohabiter avec les autres animaux, et à fonctionner avec eux.

Voyages



L'arrivée des eaux est bien entendu l'occasion de séquences impressionnantes visuellement, comme lorsque la première vague recouvre les terres et submerge tout sur son passage. Tout au long du film, l'élément liquide reste au centre du récit mais aussi de l'esthétique, tout à tour surface mouvante qui reflète la silhouette du chat, substance hostile dans laquelle l'animal manque de se noyer ou au contraire milieu enfin apprivoisé où il est possible de trouver de quoi se nourrir. Le réalisateur joue aussi énormément sur les sons naturels (le flot du courant, la pluie, les clapotis...) pour faire ressentir au spectateur la réalité de ce monde liquide.

Dans ce contexte, les survivants sont contraints à un exil aléatoire sur des embarcations de fortune, doublé d'une cohabitation forcée avec d'autres espèces. Le voyage est donc double : géographique, puisque le bateau des protagonistes dérive vers des lieux lointains et inconnus, et intérieur, puisqu'il les oblige à s'adapter psychologiquement à ces nouvelles conditions d'existence.

C'est sans doute là le plus difficile pour le personnage principal, le chat solitaire et méfiant, qui doit apprendre les vertus de l'entraide et de la solidarité. Bien qu'aucun anthropomorphisme ne soit à l'œuvre, chaque animal est en effet précisément caractérisé, ce qui apporte évidemment une savoureuse dimension sociologique au récit. Il est assez amusant, par exemple, de reconnaître chez le lémurien un comportement violemment matérialiste ou d'observer le fonctionnement de la meute de chiens, frivole et égoïste. De manière générale, le réalisateur s'amuse énormément des différences de comportement entre les différentes espèces, et crée ainsi des situations cocasses, voire franchement drôles, qui viennent étoffer la simplicité apparente de l'intrigue.

Le fonctionnement du groupe est également finement observé, souvent à travers de petits détails comme l'évolution de la place occupée par chacun dans l'embarcation (avec une distance de plus en plus réduite entre les uns et les autres au cours du film), ou la manière de régler leurs désaccords. Bien qu'ils s'expriment uniquement dans leur propre langage (le chat miaule, le capybara grogne, etc.), les animaux sont étonnamment expressifs, ce qui donne lieu à de véritables échanges muets, tout passant par le regard et les gestes. Les problématiques rencontrées sont d'ailleurs proches de celles auxquelles seraient confrontés des êtres humains dans la même situation : trouver à se nourrir, se défendre des agressions extérieures comme intérieures, choisir entre l'action individuelle rassurante ou prendre le risque de l'altruisme, etc.

Ce n'est d'ailleurs pas une coïncidence si l'être humain n'est visible nulle part. Les animaux naviguent sur une embarcation qui a bien été fabriquée par *quelqu'un*, et croisent des traces d'une civilisation que l'on suppose humaine : villes, statues, maisons... Mais on devine que cette histoire se déroule après la disparition définitive de cette humanité. Il y a toujours quelque chose d'émouvant (et d'angoissant à la fois) à imaginer un monde dont nous ne ferions plus partie, et à découvrir comment le vivant reprend alors pleinement ses droits. D'autant plus qu'au fur et à mesure qu'avance le récit, un doute nous étreint : et si c'était ce même phénomène de montée des eaux qui avait eu raison de l'espèce humaine ? Et si c'était son incapacité à s'entendre et à cohabiter avec ses semblables qui lui avait été fatale ?

On touche ici à la dimension la plus profonde de Flow, son aspect de conte mystique, entre apocalypse et nouvelle cosmogonie. Sa construction circulaire (ténue, mais visible à travers un certain nombre d'indices distillés à l'image, comme la similitude entre les plans d'ouverture et de fin, les motifs qui se répètent à l'image de la course annonciatrices des cerfs, la présence ici et là d'embarcations abandonnées...) contribue à cette sensation d'un cycle voué à se reproduire à l'infini. L'un des plus beaux moments du film, qui met en scène l'envol d'un serpentaire, vient lui aussi accréditer cette hypothèse, en évoquant poétiquement le passage vers un ailleurs qui peut tout aussi bien être la mort qu'une nouvelle naissance.

Fin et commencement se confondent ainsi dans une même promesse de renouveau, quelque chose d'insoignable et de réconfortant à la fois qui élève le film du rang de simple récit d'aventures initiatique et spectaculaire, à celui d'expérience mystique à la portée existentielle.



CINÉMA : CANNES — FLOW, LA MAGIE DE L'ANIMATION LETTONE

Victor Toth 23 mai 2024

Dans Un Certain Regard, le deuxième long métrage d'animation de Gints Zilbadolis plébiscité en avant-première cannoise.

En présentant *Flow*, Gints Zilbadolis fait référence à son expérience avec son premier long métrage d'animation, *Away*, qu'il avait entièrement animé, réalisé lui-même, jusqu'à la composition et le montage. Avec *Flow*, une équipe nombreuse est montée sur scène. « Le film précédent parlait de solitude, celui-ci parlait de faire partie d'une équipe » sont les mots de Zilbadolis pour présenter l'œuvre.

L'histoire de *Flow* est simple : lorsqu'une inondation catastrophique arrive, un chat noir doit rejoindre un groupe d'autres animaux pour se sauver. Une simplicité choquante qui pourtant enchante, étonne — et cela sans un seul mot prononcé par les protagonistes — précisément, les animaux. Dans *Flow* se construit un monde fantastique et mystérieux, qui n'a rien à envier au Laputa de Miyazaki de *Castle in the Sky* ou à d'autres œuvres comme *Flow* qui parviennent à suspendre toute logique et toute raison pour les remplacer entièrement par une imagination sans précédent.

La technique d'animation utilise l'infographie (en particulier le programme open source gratuit Blender, dont le film démontre la validité), mais l'utilisation de ses propres textures plutôt que de l'animation bidimensionnelle rend le film esthétiquement unique, avec une exploitation de reflets et de surfaces d'eau uniques. Au niveau de la mise en scène, l'utilisation de l'infographie permet la mise en œuvre de techniques typiques du cinéma "live action", comme les plans séquences, souvent utilisés par le film — qui deviennent vite si engageants que les détails techniques sont à peine perceptibles.

Flow est tout simplement un film touchant, merveilleux, drôle, qui démontre une fois de plus la puissance du cinéma d'animation. *Flow* est du cinéma pur, preuve que le cinéma d'animation n'est pas une forme mineure, une illusion cathartique à l'écran.

Journal dédié à la mémoire de Luca Rastello

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"Its whirlwind adventure and the way it manages to draw an emotional response out of the wordless journey of a cat, however, ensures that this will enrapture an audience of all ages."



Cats and water don't mix, every cat owner knows that. While our felines do not mind staring at it for hours and, contrary to popular belief, can swim just as well as dogs do, cats abhor getting their fur wet, as it both insulates their body heat and is a sensory organ that helps them detect their surroundings. Why this treatise on the world's most willful animal and its relationship to water? Because the unnamed cat that is the protagonist of Latvian filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis' second feature-length animation, *Flow*, is forced to confront his fear and distaste for the stuff for the sake of self-preservation in a wildly imaginative story that leaves plenty of room for thematic interpretation.

Cat (in the absence of an actual name) lives a carefree life: plenty of time during the day to roam the forest, only to return home at night and find a cosy place to sleep. The absence of a human is notable, although Cat's house and its surroundings suggest a human presence in the past; a plethora of cat sculptures in and around the house attest to that. Cat's peace is only threatened by a pack of wild dogs, but an exhilarating chase in the film's opening scene shows that Cat can outsmart them all. What he can't outsmart though is a sudden rising water level, turning Cat's idyllic forest into something more resembling a mangrove swamp. As one of several remnants of human civilization we see throughout the film, a wayward boat is a lifeline for Cat, although he has to share it with a taciturn capybara that is also trying to escape the water. As they traverse a mystical world their vessel turns into a veritable Noah's Ark, as a lemur, a bird (could be a crane, but this reviewer's ornithological knowledge is limited), and one of the dogs Cat outsmarted earlier are picked up along the way. Their rag-tag band of animals will now need to find a way to get along and work together if they are to survive in a hostile world.

Zilbalodis, whose first feature *Away* won Annecy's inaugural Contrechamp award in 2019, deliberately gives very little context for his animal odyssey, as if to say "Heed the title and go with the flow." Neither the demise of civilization nor the cause of the flood (or it subsiding late in the film) is explained, placing the focus firmly on Cat and his frenemies navigating the aquatic world. The various ruins sticking out of the water tell us little about location, as Mayan and Tibetan influences are mixed with abandon. Cat's adventures, though on a whole feeling a tad repetitive, are dictated by the course of the water. Although the animals over time learn to operate the rudder, by and large they go where the water takes them. Go with the flow indeed.

The animal behavior is a mixture of realistic and narrative-driven: at times Cat behaves like an actual cat while in other moments, when the story necessitates it, he displays more human traits. His canine nemesis has the same split personality, while their other companions lean more toward human than furry or feathered; the lemur in particular feels like a voice actor away from his famous animated cousins. Switching back and forth between Cat's feline and human sides occurs when the story asks for it, and a fable about five animals sailing the world in a boat probably requires them to be at least half-human, but Zilbalodis' choice to not commit one way or the other does feel a bit like a cop-out.

Created in Blender, the film's 3D animation flows as freely as its waters, the virtual camera smoothly whirling around Cat like a drone. While the animation of the animals is somewhat crude, in particular Cat's features are instantly endearing: his big eyes and pleading meows are hard to resist. Even if animated, the way he behaves just enough like a true cat is incentive to actually feel deeply for this collection of polygons. Especially because, as simple as the story is, it is hard to predict, and Cat's natural instincts and the dangers he gets into are more heightened than fully 'human' animated creatures ever had to endure.

The imagination at times reaches Miyazaki-esque levels, Cat's first experience with death in particular creating a moment of movie magic. The depth behind that imagination is not quite there, in part because *Flow* explains little of what is happening in a broader sense. Is the flood meant as a warning about global warming, and does Cat and his friends having to work together suggest a message for humanity? Perhaps, but mainly Zilbalodis paints a breezy and at times strikingly emotional story with broad thematic strokes. It reminds one of Michaël Dudok de Wit's *The Red Turtle*, another wordless film that aimed at portraying humanity at its base levels. The menagerie of animals is clearly meant to say something similar about the human experience, but *Flow* isn't quite as touching as Dudok de Wit's masterpiece, perhaps because of this world's ambiguity and mystery. Its whirlwind adventure and the way it manages to draw an emotional response out of the wordless journey of a cat, however, ensures that this will enrapture an audience of all ages.



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FLOW : ENSEMBLE SINON RIEN

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PIERRE LARVOL (HTTPS://MOVIERAMA.FR/AUTHOR/PIERRE-LARVOL/) - 23 MAI 2024

Avec **Flow**, le cinéaste letton Gints Zilbalodis plonge dans l'inconnu : après avoir animé seul le long métrage **Away** en 2019, le réalisateur revient avec une nouvelle production collective cette fois-ci. Au début du film, un chat solitaire observe son reflet dans l'eau, l'heure du changement est proche pour lui aussi : il va devoir s'adapter au nouveau monde qui émerge. Un voyage initiatique au cœur d'une nature en pleine mutation, ensevelissant les normes et les habitudes. Une belle surprise.

Un chat casanier vit dans une maison abandonnée, au beau milieu d'une épaisse forêt. Il n'y a pas l'ombre d'un humain, seulement des vestiges et d'imposantes statues à l'effigie des chats. Un cataclysme va changer la vie du félin et de ses voisins : lorsque l'eau se met subitement à grimper, s'adapter est une question de vie ou de mort.

”

Un joli voyage initiatique, touchant et attachant, au service d'un message d'unité et d'entraide

Variation autour de l'arche de Noé, **Flow** embarque dans son navire une joyeuse troupe d'animaux : un chien joueur, un lémurien légèrement kleptomane, un castor curieux et un valeureux héron. C'est à la faveur de ce bouleversement qu'ils se rencontrent et collaborent. Ensemble, ils vont surmonter des obstacles et apprendre à accepter leurs différences. Le chat, peureux, n'est pas dans son élément et pourtant, il doit affronter ses angoisses pour survivre dans ce monde réinventé. Un univers vert et mystérieux que l'on découvre de manière sensorielle, à hauteur d'animal, sans parole. L'héritage de l'humanité est visiblement matériel : des débris, des outils et surtout, des bateaux. Au fil de l'eau, on navigue entre gravité et légèreté. Tantôt contemplatif, tantôt nerveux, **Flow** nous convie à un beau et surprenant périple émotionnel. Comme son titre le laisse deviner, le film existe avant tout dans le mouvement : plus le film s'agite, plus il éveille nos sens. Singulier, l'aspect visuel impressionne autant par sa fluidité que son sens aigu de la mise en scène, notamment grâce au dynamisme de la caméra. Il faut également souligner la qualité de la bande originale, qui accompagne avec brio le récit. Un joli voyage initiatique, touchant et attachant, au service d'un message d'unité et d'entraide.

3.5
★★★★★



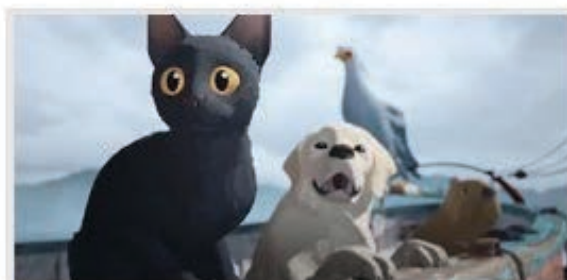
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CANNES 2024 : Gints Zilbalodis' Animated Film 'Flow' Follows a Kitty - 23 Mai 2024

CANNES 2024

Cannes 2024: Gints Zilbalodis' Animated Film 'Flow' Follows a Kitty

by Alex Billington
May 23, 2024



The story of a cat and his friends. *Flow* is an animated film made by the Latvian filmmaker named **Gints Zilbalodis**, his second feature after making *Away* (in 2019) which was a fable about loneliness. He's also known for many other animated short films that debuted online before he started moving into making these features. Whereas *Away* is about loneliness, *Flow* is about friendship, companionship, and loyalty. The title is once again a literal title because the story is about how we meet and befriend different people as life flows along, taking us to unknown destinations and through many trials & tribulations. Much like *Away*, the story is a metaphor for life as a human being, this time told through an adventure featuring different animals in a strange world. It's entirely dialogue free and features Zilbalodis' distinct cel-shading animation style, more rudimentary than Pixar or DreamWorks or Sony but still animated with heaps of emotion and compassion.

Flow is about a super cute, but stubborn, lonely, solitary **black cat**. The film is set in a sprawling imagined world, beginning in a beautiful green forest with a river and lots of trees & grass. Cat lives in a nice house, which it returns to every night, living a simple life. The film's intro explains what happens next: "The world seems to be coming to an end, teeming with the vestiges of a human presence... as its home is devastated by a great flood, he finds refuge on a boat populated by various species." One day the world begins to flood, and the cat finds its life threatened. It eventually ends up on a wooden boat drifting in the water, which is at first occupied by a wonderfully lazy capybara. Eventually a narcissistic lemur shows up, as do other animals - a dumb, goofy golden retriever dog and a large white-feathered bird reminiscent of a crane. All these animals are references to various friends you'll encounter in life - the lazy one, the dumb one, the self-obsessed one. Even if they may be nothing like you, they are still important to have in your life and will help you through tough times - overcoming great challenges and surviving great floods. That's what friends are for, of course.

The screenplay for *Flow* is by Matiss Kaza and Gints Zilbalodis, and it's directed by Zilbalodis, who made this film in partnership with French and Belgian production companies. Even though his visual style isn't as intensely detailed as most modern animated movies (e.g. strands of fur are not visible in the animation) that doesn't mean they're any less realistic. Not only does it all look gorgeous, with vivid colors and spectacular sunsets and realistic water animation, the real artistry is in the character animation. The main cat character in *Flow* is as realistic as can be - from the way it reacts and responds to threats in the world, to the way his ears and tail move, in addition to other tiny details like his pupils changing with his emotions. The sound design is also amazing - since there is no dialogue, the various animal noises (meowing, woofing, chirping) are an important part of defining each character in this story. The animation and sound together make every second of this film emotionally engaging, it's so entrancing even if there isn't a single word spoken in its 85 minute runtime (much like *The Red Turtle*). This is the real power of animation when it is this marvelous.

As gorgeous as *Flow* is to watch, the plot is fairly simplistic and it does get strangely confounding at the end (where are they even going, what is this place, why this architectural style, why does this happening in this scene, why is it flooded anyway?). That said, it's not the kind of film where over-analysis is beneficial - it's a beautifully-made, deeply cinematic film meant to give audiences an **emotional** experience and also remind them of the immeasurable importance of **friendship**. I prefer *Flow* much more than *Away*, which felt like a video game, whereas this is an actual adventure. The main black cat is absolutely wonderful and delightful to follow as it navigates the waters and makes new friends. I've already had debates over whether the cat is actually a boy or a girl - while the official description refers to it as a "he", the way it moves and interacts leaves that up for debate. What isn't up for debate is this film's grandeur. A must watch for all animal lovers.

Alex's Cannes 2024 Rating: **8 out of 10**

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Le monde du silence

Critique | Flow de Gints Zilbalodis | Un Certain Regard

Si le début du Festival était une célébration du chien, la seconde semaine est dédiée à nos amis les chats, qui plus est dans un genre que Thierry Frémaux pourrait qualifier de « rare » en sélection cannoise : l'animation. Après *Anzu, chat-fantôme* présenté à la Quinzaine, c'est au tour d'un Certain Regard de dégainer son film d'animation félin avec *Flow*. Un chat noir sauvage vague à ses occupations en forêt. Une grande inondation apocalyptique détruit tout, et notre pauvre petit chat va devoir survivre, entre la grande catastrophe et les autres animaux avec qui il doit faire équipe : un lémurien, un grand oiseau, un chien et, pour notre plus grand bonheur d'amateur de memes Internet, un capybara. Comment cohabiter et faire preuve d'empathie en temps d'apocalypse ?

De prime abord, le film a un grand pouvoir de séduction : sa beauté plastique et son animation 3D. Les environnements sont d'une grande richesse de matières (feuillages, eau, bois du bateau), de lumières et de couleurs, un monde présenté dans sa diversité, de la forêt animale aux ruines d'un monde humain à peine disparu. On pense aux jeux vidéos de Fumito Ueda, aux ruines de *The Last Guardian* et du gigantisme que procurait *Shadow of the Colossus*. Quant aux animaux, l'émerveillement est total tant leurs mimiques, réactions et déplacements sont justes (l'iris des yeux du chat par exemple), et font fondre les cœurs de tendresse. Chacun a sa caractérisation (le capybara paresseux, le chien joueur ou encore le lémurien voleur), et la dynamique de groupe est fascinante à suivre sur une heure vingt, d'autant plus que le film se passe de dialogues : un *show don't tell* terriblement efficace.

Mais le plus admirable est sans doute la mise en scène de Gints Zilbalodis, qui prend le pari de rendre sa caméra aussi fluide que l'eau. Les possibilités de l'animation lui permettent de se faufiler partout, et de donner à cette odyssée toute sa pleine grandeur : les nombreux plans séquences qui jalonnent le film sont limpides, jamais tape à l'œil. Un exemple parmi une dizaine : le chat tombe à l'eau, on le suit dans sa lente descente dans les abysses avant qu'une gigantesque baleine ne le fasse remonter à la surface. Le réalisateur sait très bien guider notre regard dans son cadre, offre merveilleusement à contempler son univers. Chaque *cut* devient alors signifiant, ressenti par le spectateur.

Avec sa fable poétique, Gints Zilbalodis propose une expérience sensorielle assez unique, ramenant le cinéma à sa première fonction d'attraction. Un certain regard, assurément.

Flow de Gints Zilbalodis, prochainement au cinéma.

CULTURE

Au Festival d'Annecy, spiritualité et quête intérieure

Lors d'une très belle édition, riche d'une sélection de haute tenue et d'invités de marque, le Festival du film d'animation d'Annecy, qui s'est achevé samedi 15 juin sur une participation record, a célébré des œuvres mettant en scène des interrogations intimes, liées à la foi religieuse ou la foi en soi-même.

Annecy (Haute-Savoie)
De notre envoyé spécial

Au Festival Annecy, cette année, il ne manquait que le tapis rouge pour avoir l'impression d'être à Cannes. Dans le cadre sublime des bords du lac, l'événement a accueilli un nombre record de festivaliers (17 400 contre 16 000 l'an dernier) et un étourdissant ballet de grands noms du 7^e art, animé ou pas : Alain Chabat, Wes Anderson, Terry Gilliam, Michel Hazanavicius, Nick Park, étaient tous venus parler de projets alléchants ou, tout simplement, de leur amour du cinéma d'animation.

Mais la 48^e édition a aussi brillé par la qualité de sa sélection en courts et longs métrages. Un choix éclectique dominé par des films évoquant les périls du nationalisme, et notamment les persécutions qu'il déchaîne : *La Plus Précieuse des marchandises*, bouleversant conte animé de Michel Hazanavicius sur la Shoah et les

«*Vice-Versa 2*»,
un autre voyage
au centre de la tête.

Justes, ou *Papillon*, récite en peinture animée du destin hors du commun d'Alfred Nakache, le « nageur d'Auschwitz », qui a valu à sa réalisatrice Florence Mialhe le prix André-Martin du meilleur court métrage français. Sans oublier le surprenant *Totto-Chan. La petite fille à la fenêtre*, long métrage de Shinnosuke Yakuwa, sur



Prix du jury pour un long métrage : *Flow*, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau, du jeune réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis, est une sorte d'arche de Noé... sans Noé ni dialogues ! Festival d'Annecy

la dérive belliqueuse du Japon des années 1930 vue à travers les yeux d'une enfant, récompensé du prix Paul-Grimault.

Annecy 2024 a également été marqué par des films introspectifs. Le Cristal du long métrage est de ceux-là, mais n'est pas forcément le plus convaincant. *Memoir of a Snail*, de l'Australien Adam Elliot, raconte, avec des figurines animées, les déboires d'une orpheline collectionneuse d'escargots, séparée de son frère jumeau à la mort de son père, puis harcelée à l'école, mais qui finit par sortir de sa coquille grâce à une octogénaire excentrique. Racontée à la première personne et en voix off, cette lente éclosion d'un personnage pourtant attachant souffre de trop de misérabilisme.

L'autre grand gagnant du palmarès, avec le nombre record de quatre prix (dont ceux du jury, du public et de la musique), est aussi une épopée intime, même si elle prend des allures d'odyssée mythologique, voire biblique. *Flow*, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau,

du jeune réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis, est une sorte d'arche de Noé... sans Noé ni dialogues !

Dans un monde déserté par les êtres humains, les eaux montent subitement à la vitesse d'un cerf au galop, que voit détalier un chat noir apeuré. Forçant sa nature hydrophobe, le félin saute à l'eau pour sauver sa peau sur une embarcation de passage. Il y cohabite tant bien que mal avec un castor placide, un chien jovial, un échassier hautain et un lémurien kleptomane. Point d'anthropomorphisme dans cette fable photoréaliste en 3D immergeant le spectateur dans des décors naturels grandioses, mais une interrogation existentielle aux accents métaphysiques. Allant au-delà de l'instinct de survie, la petite tribu, fascinée par son reflet dans l'eau ou dans un miroir, semble s'interroger sur sa destinée et sa condition.

C'est à un autre voyage, au centre de la tête cette fois, qu'invite *Vice-Versa 2*, présenté en avant-première à Annecy avant sa sortie

mercredi 19 juin. Reprenant la même recette qui a fait le succès du premier volet de cette production Pixar où les principales émotions (joie, tristesse, colère...) d'une jeune ado sont incarnées par des personnages hauts en couleur, cette suite pimente les sens des personnages d'un soupçon d'ennui et d'une grosse louche d'anxiété. Cette exploration très drôle de l'âme humaine s'attaque aussi aux croyances de l'enfant, dont le système complexe est fondamental dans son expérience du monde.

Abordant cette fois franchement la spiritualité, *The Colors Within*, très joli film de la Japonaise Naoko Yamada, met en scène les relations amicales entre trois lycéens qui cherchent leur voie. L'une d'elles, Totsuko, étudie dans un établissement catholique de la région de Nagasaki. Ado rêveuse, elle a la capacité de voir les êtres qui l'entourent en couleurs, mais cela ne l'aide pas à apaiser la confusion des sentiments propre à son âge.

« Sa foi contribue à la façonner, agissant à la fois comme une lumière dans l'obscurité et comme un obstacle, commente la réalisatrice. De ses petites culpabilités naît sa prise de conscience de soi. » Aidée par une religieuse bienveillante, Totsuko chemine doucement mais sûrement sur une voie qui devrait lui permettre de mieux se connaître, de concilier ses aspirations personnelles et ses convictions spirituelles, bref, de s'épanouir. Stéphane Dreyfus



repères

Un palmarès
éclectique

Cristal du long métrage :
Memoir of a Snail, de l'Australien Adam Elliot, premier cinéaste à remporter pour la deuxième fois ce prix à Annecy, après un premier trophée en 2009 pour *Mary&Max*. En salles début 2025.

Prix du jury pour un long métrage :
Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau, du Letton Gints Zilbalodis. En salles le 30 octobre.

Cristal du court métrage :
Percebes, des Portugaises Alexandra Ramires et Laura Gonçalves, fait du cycle de vie du pousse-pied, crustacé pêché dans l'Algarve, une métaphore de cette région du Portugal.

Les premières images de *Flow*, film d'animation encensé au festival d'Annecy, nous dévoilent un personnage principal beaucoup trop mignon

Image : ©UFO Distribution



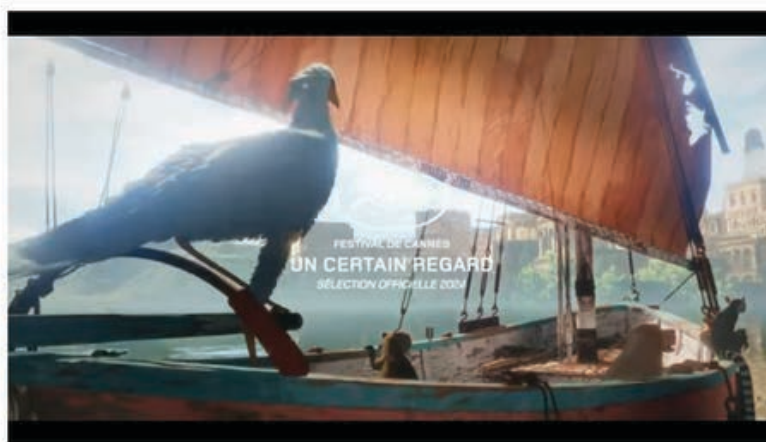
Par Eliette Campion

Publié le 24/06/2024



***Flow*, road movie d'animation dans une version mini et adorable de l'arche de Noé, promet un récit initiatique accompagné de paysages à couper le souffle.**

Parmi tous les réalisateurs venus présenter leur film au festival international du film d'animation d'Annecy cette année, Gints Zilbalodis a particulièrement fait parler de lui en raflant pas moins de trois prix avec son dernier film *Flow* — qui avait été présenté avant ça au Festival de Cannes, en compétition Un certain regard. *Flow* est un film sublime, qui conte l'histoire d'un petit chat noir dans un monde submergé, forcé de collaborer avec d'autres animaux pour survivre.



Il y a cinq ans, le réalisateur letton avait déjà attiré l'attention avec son premier long-métrage *Ailleurs*, qu'il avait réalisé et animé seul. Oui, Gints Zilbalodis force le respect, surtout quand on sait que le réalisateur est un autodidacte ayant appris l'animation sur Internet.

Le succès d'*Ailleurs*, qui reçoit le prix Contrechamps à Annecy, lui a permis de financer *Flow*, fruit d'une collaboration lettonne, belge et française. Cette fois, Gints Zilbalodis a donc pu être plus ambitieux, grâce à une équipe de la boîte française Sacrebleu production, sous la direction de Léo Silly-Pélissier, chef d'animation de Michel Ocelot.

Le film, entièrement muet comme les autres œuvres de Gints Zilbalodis, est donc une expérimentation esthétique, dans un style d'animation 3D venant du jeu vidéo. Suivant des animaux adorables (un chat, un chien, un Lémurien, un oiseau blessé et un capybara) sur une barque, explorant un monde envahi par les eaux, le film promet d'offrir des paysages magnifiques, dans une poétique réflexion sur les individus et le vivre ensemble.

Un film pour les enfants comme pour les adultes, à découvrir le 30 octobre en salle.

Flow, le regard de Gints Zilbalodis

SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE publié le 22.05.2024

PARTAGE



FLOW © Dreamwell Sacrebleu take 5

Projeté au Certain Regard, *Flow*, le deuxième long métrage d'animation de *Gints Zilbalodis*, a pour héros un chat forcé de partager un petit bateau avec d'autres animaux à la suite d'une terrible inondation. Une histoire qui fait écho au choix du jeune cinéaste letton, habitué au travail en solitaire, de s'entourer pour la première fois d'une équipe technique.

Quel est le point de départ de ce film ?

Avant *Flow*, j'ai réalisé un long métrage d'animation intitulé *Away* pour lequel j'ai tout effectué moi-même. Le film évoque un personnage seul sur une île qui cherche à se reconnecter aux autres. L'histoire et le processus de réalisation du film comportaient donc de grandes similitudes. C'est un peu la même chose avec *Flow* : le film narre la trajectoire d'un personnage indépendant et autosuffisant qui doit apprendre à travailler en équipe, ce qui a été mon cas sur ce film. Une fois de plus, j'explore mon expérience de la réalisation au travers de ce long métrage.

Quelle a été votre méthode de travail ?

Contrairement à la plupart des films d'animation, nous n'avons pas utilisé de story-board. Au lieu de cela, j'ai créé un environnement en 3D et j'y ai placé les personnages pour explorer les possibilités de mise en scène. C'était nécessaire car dans *Flow*, il y a beaucoup de séquences très longues et compliquées, impossibles à dessiner dans un storyboard, dans lesquels la caméra se déplace dans l'espace. Ce processus d'animation un peu brut m'a permis d'explorer de nombreuses idées. Il m'a aidé à me rendre compte si la narration fonctionnait ou non. C'était aussi la première fois que je travaillais avec une équipe. J'ai donc dû acquérir de nouvelles compétences. Avant, lorsque j'avais une idée, je devais trouver comment la réaliser moi-même. Cette fois, il m'a fallu présenter chaque trouvaille. C'était parfois compliqué, mais aussi très gratifiant lorsqu'elles évoluaient grâce à la collaboration de chacun. La plupart de mes collaborateurs étaient jeunes, passionnés et désireux de faire leurs preuves.

Qu'avez-vous appris au cours de la réalisation de ce film ?

Que tout prend plus de temps qu'on ne le pense au départ ! J'ai beaucoup appris sur la gestion des collaborateurs et sur la délégation du travail. Comme le chat dans le film, c'est quelque chose qui ne me vient pas naturellement. *Flow* est mon deuxième long métrage, mais c'est peut-être le premier que j'ai réellement dirigé car auparavant, je travaillais complètement seul. C'était donc un vrai défi pour moi, surtout au début. J'ai dû apprendre les bases très rapidement, mais peut-être que le fait d'être novice au travail en équipe a finalement nourri le film.

Qu'aimeriez-vous que les gens retiennent de *Flow* ?

J'ai tendance à oublier l'intrigue des films, mais je me souviens toujours des sentiments, des émotions ressenties. J'espère donc que de ce point de vue, *Flow* créera une expérience suffisamment forte pour que les gens s'en souviennent.

Pouvez-vous nous parler de votre prochain projet ?

Les cinq dernières années passées à travailler sur ce film ont été très intenses pour moi et nous venons juste de le terminer, alors j'ai hâte de me reposer un peu ! Mais j'ai déjà une idée pour mon prochain film : il s'agira d'un film d'animation dans lequel je souhaite explorer les thèmes et les techniques de *Flow* de manière plus approfondie. J'aimerais utiliser la caméra de manière encore plus active pour raconter l'histoire. Qu'elle devienne presque un personnage indépendant doté d'un esprit propre.

FLOW

Gints Zilbalodis présentait son deuxième long métrage d'animation dans la catégorie Un Certain Regard.

Avec *Flow*, le cinéaste letton Gints Zilbalodis donne sa vision d'une arche de Noé privée de présence humaine avec à la place, un chat comme protagoniste de ce récit d'aventure. Nul anthropomorphisme dans *Flow* mais une avancée du récit comme affranchie d'enjeux narratifs classiques, resserrée autour d'éléments primaires (la survie et le rapport à l'autre, le sens du collectif). Si Gints Zilbalodis nourrit la destinée du félin d'une solitude créatrice faisant écho à la sienne (minorée sur ce deuxième film par un travail d'équipe plus conséquent), il privilégie constamment l'expérience pratique et sensorielle de ses animaux. *Flow* donne ainsi la sensation de déambuler dans l'univers d'un jeu vidéo et d'avoir substitué sa caméra à un joystick. Le film assume cette inscription en choisissant une animation qui ne cherche pas à gommer ses artifices et rend le mouvement des éléments tout aussi fluide que saccadé. Après *Les Fantômes* de Jonathan Millet et *Eat The Night* de Caroline Poggi et Jonathan Vinel, *Flow* vient alors à son tour confirmer ce tropisme pour un monde virtuel semblable à un refuge. ♡ M.D.

Flow de Gints Zilbalodis (Lettonie).
Un Certain Regard.

EN Gints Zilbalodis presented his second animated feature film in the category Un Certain Regard. ♡

Festival d'Annecy 2024 : "Flow", un film survivaliste animalier au visuel très léché

En compétition officielle au Festival international du film d'Annecy, "Flow" a remporté le Prix du Jury et le Prix du Public, s'imposant ainsi comme le long-métrage le plus primé de cette 62^e édition. Le film avait également été présenté à Cannes dans la catégorie Un Certain Regard.



Neil Senot
France Télévisions - Rédaction Culture

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Le chat est le protagoniste principal du film "Flow" réalisé par Gints Zilbalodis. (SACREBLEU PRODUCTIONS)

En 2019, Gints Zilbalodis avait impressionné le monde de l'animation en présentant au Festival d'Annecy son premier long-métrage *Ailleurs*, lauréat du Prix Contrechamp. Pour cause : le jeune cinéaste letton avait réalisé le film seul, son ordinateur pour seul compagnon.

Cinq ans plus, le réalisateur revient au Festival avec *Flow*. Présenté en compétition officielle, le film a cette fois-ci requis le travail d'une grande équipe et se démarque par un visuel inédit, hybridation entre l'animation et la cinématique des jeux vidéo.

Flow est un film à hauteur d'animaux. Le personnage principal est un chat noir qui dort dans une maison abandonnée et passe ses journées, entre chasse et toilette, dans une nature luxuriante. Autour de lui, des chiens, des lapins, des cerfs. Son existence est bouleversée par une soudaine montée des eaux qui engloutit progressivement toutes les terres de son environnement. Pour survivre, il monte à bord d'un bateau dans lequel se trouve déjà un capybara. Ils sont rapidement rejoints par un labrador très joueur, un lémurien cleptomane et un héron rejeté par les siens.

Conséquence de ce règne animal, le film ne comporte aucun dialogue. Si le personnage du chat attendrit indéniablement les spectateurs, sa caractérisation est très lointaine des traditionnels félins du monde de l'animation, notamment de l'animation japonaise. Tous les animaux du film se comportent exactement comme des animaux. Le chat miaule, prend peur, le chien aboie, frétille. Leurs mouvements, les sons qu'ils produisent créent un hyperréalisme rare qui surprend et permet de se projeter entièrement dans ce récit d'apocalypse.

Écologie et solidarité

Film construit autour d'un cataclysme, le scénario de *Flow*, notamment via l'absence totale d'humains, laisse à penser que les inondations ne sont que la suite de longues catastrophes climatiques. Sans jamais en montrer les causes – le film suit le périple des animaux uniquement à travers leurs regards –, Gints Zilbalodis pose un arrière-plan propre aux inquiétudes contemporaines, y répond en laissant la nature aux mains d'espèces domestiquées ou peu considérées par l'humanité.

Plus que de montrer que la vie peut se faire sans les hommes, *Flow* explore la possibilité d'une solidarité animale. Le long-métrage impressionne par sa technique, mais émeut aussi. Sans une parole, le réalisateur rend compte de l'évolution des relations entre les espèces. La bienveillance et l'entraide s'installent, les différences ne sont plus utilisées pour s'imposer mais pour le bénéfice du collectif. Une leçon cruciale de vivre ensemble.

"FLOW"

By David Cuevas May 22, 2024



THE STORY – The world seems to be coming to an end, teeming with the vestiges of a human presence. Cat is a solitary animal, but as its home is devastated by a great flood, he finds refuge on a boat populated by various species, and will have to team up with them despite their differences. In the lonesome boat sailing through mystical overflowed landscapes, they navigate the challenges and dangers of adapting to this new world.

In the early days of the 2010's, when teens were mainly preoccupied by the ear-worm-inducing tunes of Katy Perry and LMFAO, a young Latvian artist started to take interest in the animation medium. Without knowing the international success that would later follow his body of work, Gints Zilbalodis devoted his time by continuously working on a passionate personal project. His later years of adolescence were spent practicing and learning quintessential skills with professional software such as Photoshop, Toon Boom Animate Pro, After Effects, Logic Pro, and Final Cut Pro. The self-produced "Aqua" (2012) was released after two years of continuous craft. In the short dialogue-less narrative, we follow a non-descript cat stuck in the middle of a natural catastrophe. A flood inundates the feline's habitat, displaced and forcefully pressured by the reins of Mother Nature's reckoning to adapt to its surroundings. In seven affecting minutes, Zilbalodis sets integral motifs, themes, and techniques that would later permeate throughout his decade-sprawling filmography, showcasing his remarkable artistic evolution.

Self-contained with cinema's greatest implementation of a Capybara since Eadweard Muybridge's "Capybara Walking" (1887), the renowned Latvian filmmaker returns to his inaugural source material with his latest feature, "Flow." Collaborating with Eurimages & Sacrebleu productions, the international scale of the project provided a unique team experience. With "Flow," Zilbalodis emulates the thematic tapestry of his emotional short, excavating cinematic explorations regarding evolution, adaptation, and social tolerances in the process. As "Flow" references the base-level foundation of Aqua's thematic & narrative instigators, Zilbalodis cleverly reconstructs and expands upon his artistic authorship with a bountiful command of the natural order.

From the get-go, Zilbalodis and his team stray away from the Hollywoodization of perfect textures and photo-realistic fur. For the film's design, the movement and velocity of the composition provide the electrifying orchestration of the dialogue-less narrative. There's an insatiable amount of artifice in nearly every shot, dirtying and shaking the handheld movements to enforce a naturalistic filter. Rejecting a gentrified pastiche, Zilbalodis' cinematography provides crane tilts, whip-pans, and free-flowing disorientation to accompany the film's impressive catalog of one-take wonders. Comparisons to Terrence Malick's signature cinematographic style are justified, as "Flow's" visual expressionism finds live-action inspiration in the buoyant Blender-created universe. The impossibilities and financial limitations of large-scaled natural-disaster setpieces are now achievable with a smaller-scaled team of dedicated artists & animators. The 3D playground permits the accessible artistic opportunity to enunciate the visual language – enforcing the fixation of the mute anthropomorphized subjects as a tool to dictate a physical & allegorical separation between land, prey & predator.

With the exception of one needless aerial-bound sequence, the film is rarely standoffish in its cinematic form. However, the gargantuan scope during the aforementioned scene distracts the viewer from the film's intended collective delusion. Obviousness as sustained by cinematic viscerally diminishes the effect of the technique, calling attention to the tech-demo artifice at the scene of the crime. As a complete piece, Zilbalodis would have benefited from a more patient directorial approach, holding onto the duration of his compositions with more room to breathe and sink within the lush poetry of his vast lands. Perfection is never the key to success, as fluidity takes emotional precedence.

In the context of its narrative form, "Flow" is clearly aware of its fictionalized recounts; borrowing from our collective understanding of animal behavior and storytelling traditions. Narratives involving animalistic symbology have circulated our planet for centuries; with the preservation of "Aesop's Fables" and "Noah's Ark" as vital examples. "Flow" is more or less indebted to the aforementioned traditions; preoccupied by the morals and lessons consumed during its formidable runtime. Zilbalodis confidently showcases the juxtaposition of traditionalist society with an inciting apocalyptic blow, where the divide between creatures is eradicated with the demand for survival. "Flow" is an adventure flick, an animated gem that avoids its subgenre's nastier colonial undertones. Zilbalodis advocates for refuge and compassion, as the mortality of the creatures awakens the film's unabashed confrontations with death. "Flow" isn't a children's picture per se — as the feature's climactic peak offers plentiful theological insight by implementing smooth ambiences, intergalactic drones, and colorful compositions, provoking thought and intellectual stimulation.

At its sentimental core, "Flow" is a tale about straying away from the power structures that divide our complex societies. In unity, the animals begin their alliance within the cataclysmic inundation, discovering a new balance in their displaced waterworlds. Unraveling the decadence and debris of lost civilizations, Zilbalodis spotlights an energetic retriever, a covetous lemur, a proud secretary bird, a resourceful capybara, and an observant black cat on an unconventional journey. In many regards, "Flow" is a perfect continuation of Zilbalodis' oeuvre — a conclusive master's thesis of long-digesting provocations regarding the limits of evolution and the beauty in shared survival. Akin to the film's contemplative thematics, "Flow" begins and concludes with a literal reflection. As the helpless animals stare at their unified body of water, drifting in their self-image, the resonance of their indifferences embraces the imminence of a natural calamity.

Malheureusement, nous n'avons pu trouver aucune offre de streaming.

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THE RECAP

THE GOOD - Enraptured by its dialogue-less form, Flow beautifully showcases the intricacies of survival with an expressionistic vision. Zilbalodis's follow-up to "Away" (2019) is a tranquil meditation on evolution, mortality, and co-existence, offering a unique perspective that will surely intrigue animation fans and film enthusiasts.

THE BAD - A more patient and poetic storytelling approach would have amplified the power of Zilbalodis' profound insights. While mostly effective as a vital storytelling tool, the technique itself occasionally drifts into tech-demo territory.

THE OSCAR PROSPECTS - **Best Animated Feature**

THE FINAL SCORE - 7/10



CANNES 2024. "FLOW", L'ANIMAZIONE GENIALE DEL LETTONE GINTS ZIBALDOIS

HOME / ATTUALITÀ



Autore: Bruna Alasia



CANNES – *Flow* geniale film d'animazione di **Gints Zilbalodis** in concorso nella sezione *Un Certain Regard* del **festival di Cannes**, quella che segnala i talenti emergenti. Ha ricevuto applausi interminabili, come mai accaduto a un film in questa edizione. Gints Zilbalodis è un giovane regista lettone, arrivato con *Flow* al secondo lungometraggio dopo l'acclamato *Eisewhere*, uscito nel 2019.

La storia di Flow

L'opera ha uno sviluppo talmente avvincente da affascinare dall'inizio alla fine adulti e bambini. Racconta di un gatto estremamente avventuroso e autonomo che una mattina si sveglia dopo una catastrofe ambientale: il suo mondo è sparito sott'acqua a causa di un diluvio universale, il suo angolino di terra non esiste più, non gli resta che nuotare per sopravvivere.



Per caso, sbattuta dalle onde, gli passa davanti una barchetta alla quale riesce ad aggrapparsi. Insieme al gatto vi trovano rifugio un lemure, un labrador, un capibara e un bianco elegantissimo trampoliere. Andare d'accordo tra loro si rivela arduo ma tutti sono obbligati a smussare le differenze e ad adattarsi al nuovo.

Un tocco d'artista

I personaggi di *Flow* dovranno imparare a sostenersi, dimostrare coraggio, solidarietà e intelligenza, riuscire a passare dalla solitudine all'amicizia. L'epopea del film, dipinta con tocco d'artista, è intima e spettacolare. Il viaggio è avventuroso non solo attraverso la natura, anche nel variare degli stati d'animo.



Zilbalodis cesella benissimo, nei particolari, la psicologia dei protagonisti, senza parole, con il suono dei tipici versi animaleschi, con le musiche che sottolineano il potente affresco dei colori. Un'animazione nuova, molto originale, che Cannes benissimo ha fatto a inserire in concorso. Un'opera che rivela un nuovo grande autore.

Flow Review: An Animated Masterwork

A Cinematic Ode to Nature's Creatures

By [Arash Nahandian](#) — 3 days Ago



The animated film [Flow](#) wastes no time drawing viewers into its quiet yet captivating world. From the start, we find a black cat living alone in a cozy forest cabin. Empty except for sculptures and signs of its former human resident, the space feels at once lonely and serene.

This cat seems accustomed to solitude yet carries an air of curiosity and independence. Outside, giant statues hint at past affection for the feline. Soon, all will change when disaster strikes in Zilbalodis' poetic journey about empathy, survival, and the bonds between creatures facing a world in flux.

Natural Passages

We first meet the central character, a curious black cat, who lives simply in a cozy forest cabin. Though alone, signs remind us that humans once resided here too. The feline seems content roaming the verdant outdoors, until Mother Nature suddenly intervenes. Without warning, a tremendous flood engulfs the landscape.

Striking imagery shows the force of this swirling, watery onslaught. Panicking deer and birds flee for higher ground as waves rapidly consume the earth. Our cat hero desperately claws to survive, eventually finding temporary refuge aboard a drifting sailboat. There, a sleepy capybara and others also seek shelter from the rising tides.

This unlikely grouping of displaced animals must now cooperate simply to stay afloat. Each creature possesses unique strengths, helping the whole as they voyage into the unknown. Their bond grows through facing perils together, from treacherous seas to mysterious ruins glimpsed through the currents. Basic instincts of survival and curiosity overlap amid the ruins of the old world, slowly reclaimed by the waters below.

Though their fate remains unwritten, Zilbalodis grants these travelers a poetic, emotive journey. Their passage reminds us that even the smallest ark holds potential for new ties when individuals brave life's torrents side by side, as nature ever shapes its steady course regardless of our desires.

Natural Motion

Zilbalodis sure knows how to bring animated worlds alive. [Flow](#) treats us to immersive CG settings where the environments themselves feel like living, breathing characters. Its digit

It's no exaggeration to compare these displays to landmark works like [Bambi](#), known for animating nature with documentary-like realism. Here too, every flurry and flap feels organic as daylight washes forests in dawn mists. Animals exhibit behaviors as authentic as any documentary, from the expressive cat down to the tiniest feather ruffles.

Yet what really sets *Flow* apart lies in its hybrid animation approach. While creatures gain dimensionality through digital armatures, their pelts take on a more abstract touch. Fur becomes almost impressionistic, evoking hand-drawn flair through layered strokes. It lends a charm that transcends photorealism by imbuing characters with heart.

This blend of futuristic CGI and nostalgic line work achieves that rare harmony of realism and soul. It ensures *Flow*'s world, however plausible, retains an artistic spirit. Viewers forget any limitations as lifelike movements flow seamlessly from frameworks guided by passion, not just programming. Ultimately, Zilbalodis blends technical frontiers with timeless storytelling craft to bring animated naturalism to new heights.

Natural Performers

Zilbalodis presents us with a menagerie of marvelous animal actors in *Flow*. Each creature charms with authentic gestures that tell their tale without the need for words.



Our leading cat captivates through peeking ears and swinging tails alone. Gone is the chatting of Disney counterparts; this coal-coated star emotes fears and playfulness through action. We feel his fluttering spirit lift at joyous rediscovery just as surely as cautionary crouches.

Alongside stands Stoic Capybara, the gentle giant who provides his raft of refugee havens. His tranquil presence anchors their voyage. Then enters a light-hearted lemur, forever entranced by drifting debris in waves. Playful paws and roving eyes bring levity yet reveal feline fascination with nature's little wonders.

And let's not forget the friendly dog aboard, tail wags ushering welcome to all. Zilbalodis gifts each other innate personalities while celebrating what unites them—the drive to survive together through storms. Their subtle bonds elicit emotion, whereas other works force feeling.

Flow presents animals as autonomous souls rather than mouthpieces. Gone are tiresome talks, replacing instinct. We connect to the core rather than the persona. The result rings truer than perfected portrayals elsewhere. Zilbalodis simply lets naturalism nurture empathy through eyes that truly see and feel.

In this wordless world, subtle shivers and fleeting glances speak volumes. Behaviors borrowed from beloved pets feel universal. Ultimately, his menagerie mirrors that all God's creatures share this Earth, and our fates may prove intertwined in its unfolding tale.

Natural Soundtrack

What a delight to hear *Flow*'s authentic menagerie brought to life through ingenious sound. Zilbalodis studied animals meticulously to weave their varied tongues into a flowing chorus. From purrs and mews to squawks and splashes, nothing feels forced or overdone; each noise simply lets personalities shine.

His score by Rihards Zaupe lifts the action beautifully without relying on words. Strings sweep us along the adventure while leaving room to notice nature's subtler cues. Weather patterns swoop and soar around the animal actors, heightening both grandeur and intimacy. One can't help but feel plunged into their watertight vessel, treading waves alongside our unlikely crew.

Together, the music and effects generate a vivid soundscape where emotion breathes freely. You're left smiling at a dog's excited barks or holding breath at looming dangers signaled by the others' distress calls. Each being contributes its gift, forming a portrait greater than any solo performance.

The nuanced mix lets attentive ears eavesdrop on lives that speak without voice. Through sounds alone, Zilbalodis breathes understanding between species and welcomes us into their hidden

world. In *flow*, harmony arises from appreciating diverse melodies woven through the waves.

Striking Harmonies

While nature programs show animals alone in their habitats, *Flow* imagines what may arise when species must unite. Its scenes feel richly observant as each character contributes qualities for communal survival. The cat proves clever but solitary, steering them through crises with its wits. Lighthearted as a pup, the retriever woos even those not keen on canine company. With curiosity enough for all, the lemur brings a spark of joy in dark times.

Though diverse in disposition, their cooperation deepens while peril mounts on the limitless sea. Watching fish gather only for one, soon shared by the crew, awoke the realization of their bond. Interdependence, not independence, would lift them from danger's depths.

Flow highlights how different gifts, when offered freely rather than forced, can strengthen the whole far beyond any one alone. Appreciating disparate traits in oneself and others opens doors to surprise where strict lines were once divided. Though waves still threatened to tear them apart, together they danced above turmoil in a strange and right harmony.

These lessons echo Zilbalodis' earlier film, where friendship across perceived "otherness" formed a buoy against darkness. Both works celebrate how good can emerge when we stop merely surviving side by side and start truly living together. Even without dialogue, *Flow* speaks the soul's ancient language of fellowship and leaves viewers hoping for more of its wise, stirring vistas ahead.

Evergreen Enchantment

Flow brings an animated experience like none other seen in years. Zilbalodis crafts a world where animals simply are, complete without needing human mirrors. We see through their eyes, feeling each flutter and fear as intensely as adventure. The director's skills reach astonishing heights, creating a reality of fur and forests that engulfs the mind.

Yet what resonates long after are moments that show souls, not just species. A cat alone finds solace in sharing with shipmates, who become friends. Bonds blossom that drown out any differences because fellowship bears burdens better together. Understated strengths like these show why young and old bond with Zilbalodis' visions.

This newest offering elevates expectations for what animation entails. Without preaching, it reminds us that the best in our nature surfaces when faced with life's storms. *Flows* of beauty and gentle wisdom suggest great reward for their spread worldwide. Mark these words: Zilbalodis' star will shine bright for works to follow as audiences flock to his dreamlike worlds where hope floats free. For anyone moved by art holding up humanity's light, this film proves an evergreen enchantment indeed.

THE REVIEW

Flow

10
SCORE

Gints Zilbalodis crafts an animation masterwork that captures the natural majesty and inner lives of animals with unparalleled authenticity. *Flow* tells a timeless story of survival and fellowship through its non-anthropomorphic characters, bringing light amid darkness without need for words. Emotionally rich and technically virtuosic, it will enchant all ages and stand as one of the medium's finest achievements.



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Fiches Films

Fiche film : Flow (Cannes 2024)

🕒 24 mai 2024 👤 Nicolas Thys 💬 Lâchez-vous !

Répandez la bonne parole...



Flow du réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis a été présenté en sélection Un Certain Regard au Festival de Cannes 2024.

Flow a reçu 4 Prix au Festival d'Annecy 2024 dont le Prix du Jury et celui du Public.

Flow (2024)

Réalisateur(s) : Gints Zilbalodis

Distributeur : UFO Distribution

Durée : 1h25min

Sortie en salles : 30 octobre 2024

Résumé : Un chat se réveille dans un univers envahi par l'eau où toute vie humaine semble avoir disparu. Il trouve refuge sur un bateau avec un groupe d'autres animaux. Mais s'entendre avec eux s'avère un défi encore plus grand que de surmonter sa peur de l'eau ! Tous devront désormais apprendre à surmonter leurs différences et à s'adapter au nouveau monde qui s'impose à eux.



- **Notre avis en direct du festival de Cannes :** Que d'eau ! Contrairement à Jean-François Laguionie dans *Slocum et moi* qui montre un bateau qui n'atteint pas l'eau, Gints Zilbalodis nous entraîne dans un récit où s'affrontent différentes références mythologiques autour d'une barque et d'un déluge. Auteur d'un excellent premier long métrage, *Ailleurs*, réalisé en autonomie complète du scénario à la création sonore, et qui donnait l'impression de naviguer dans un jeu vidéo, cette fois il continue dans une esthétique similaire mais en s'entourant d'une petite équipe et en apportant quelques rebondissements à son esprit pour le moins contemplatif.

Toujours réalisé en images de synthèse, *Flow* ne cherche pas l'hyperréalisme ou le détail à tout prix mais utilise des aplats qui apportent une dose de minimalisme agréable et une efficacité maximale à un récit qui évite l'ornemental et le pittoresque. L'univers du film est dépourvu d'humains, même s'ils ont existé, la preuve en est avec la présence d'immenses statues représentant des hommes, des ruines de maisons avec lits et bouteilles et de grandioses cités abandonnées au milieu de fantastiques paysages. Seuls subsistent quelques animaux marginalisés, réalistes dans leurs déplacements et qui n'ont comme seul langage que le leur : un chat noir, protagoniste du métrage, entouré d'un labrador, d'un capybara, d'un lémurien et d'un rapace. Aucun repère géographique n'est alors possible : le film se situe partout et nulle part, dans un non-lieu comme les affectionne son auteur. Autour d'eux, une baleine géante semblant venir d'un autre temps, des cerfs qui fuient et surtout des poissons de mille et une couleurs.

Et une fois le déluge passé, les animaux se retrouvent dans un petit canot arrivé à l'impromptu et font quelques escales là où les vagues les portent. Le cinéaste évite au maximum l'anthropomorphisme, même si certains traits de caractère paraissent peu animaux comme le fait de tenir la barre d'un bateau, et utilise juste quelques clichés bien connus autour du chat : les pupilles qui se dilatent, les objets qui tombent, le rayon de lumière qu'il ne peut s'empêcher de poursuivre. Le but : voyager, observer, survivre, s'entraider malgré les différences. Et surtout s'ébahir devant les métamorphoses du paysage, toujours impressionnant.

Zilbalodis réalise ainsi un véritable film d'aventure mais dans lequel l'intrigue, véritable collage multiculturel, est mise de côté aux profits des sensations et des sentiments. Une manière pour lui de se approprier un médium en constante évolution et de penser le flux des images avant la narration dans une expérience qui pourrait être prolongée de façon encore plus immersive. **4/5**

■ Culture • Cinéma

CRITIQUE

Flow : le film d'animation peut-il remporter le Cristal du long-métrage à Annecy ?

15 juin 2024 • Par Robin Negre



"Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau". ©UFO Distribution

Le film de Gints Zilbalodis est à la fois une aventure symbolique et un voyage minimaliste basé sur l'entraide et l'acceptation.

Film contemplatif sans aucun dialogue humain, *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau* a séduit le public du Festival d'Animation d'Annecy grâce à sa poésie, son ambition et son élégante animation. Inscrit dans la compétition officielle, le long-métrage pourrait bien remporter le prix suprême, le Cristal du long-métrage ce samedi 15 juin. En suivant le parcours d'un chat face à une montée des eaux dangereuses et imprévisibles, *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau* transporte le spectateur dans un voyage halluciné et sensoriel.

Dans un monde désolé où l'humanité semble avoir disparu, un chat constate la montée imminente des eaux, risquant d'engloutir entièrement son île.

Trouvant refuge sur une barque de fortune, il dérive avec le courant tout en faisant la rencontre d'autres animaux, également rescapés et seuls. Une cohabitation forcée qui pose les thématiques du film et emmène la réflexion, tout en créant de nombreuses scènes délicates, touchantes et même drôles.

Mélange des fables de La Fontaine sur une Arche de Noé moderne, *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau* pose dès les premières minutes son propos. Le monde est animalier, sans que la raison ne soit connue, et derrière la domination du plus fort, la dangerosité de la situation (la montée des eaux) oblige certaines alliances éphémères à se créer. Chat, chien, castor, ou encore lémurien sont sur un bateau et le dialogue se fait via le comportement et l'appivoisement des uns et autres. Les animaux sont volontairement humanisés à travers leur réaction et leur décision, mais *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau* garde une certaine distance et ne tombe pas dans une représentation anthropomorphe. Le film n'a pas de dialogue et se sert des différents événements pour faire vivre son récit (et sa dramaturgie).

Voguer vers l'inconnu

L'eau monte, la barque vogue, mais les animaux ne peuvent avoir d'autres buts que de survivre et d'avancer. Entièrement dépassés par la situation, ils existent dans un monde aussi beau qu'inquiétant et le mystère posé par le film — qui ne cherche jamais à sur-expliciter son postulat — lui offre une liberté salvatrice. La civilisation est absente, mais les vestiges demeurent. Tours gigantesques, statuts immenses, édifices à la gloire de divinités inconnues... Il ressort de *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau* un aspect lovecraftien — sans la plongée dans la folie — en plus poétique.

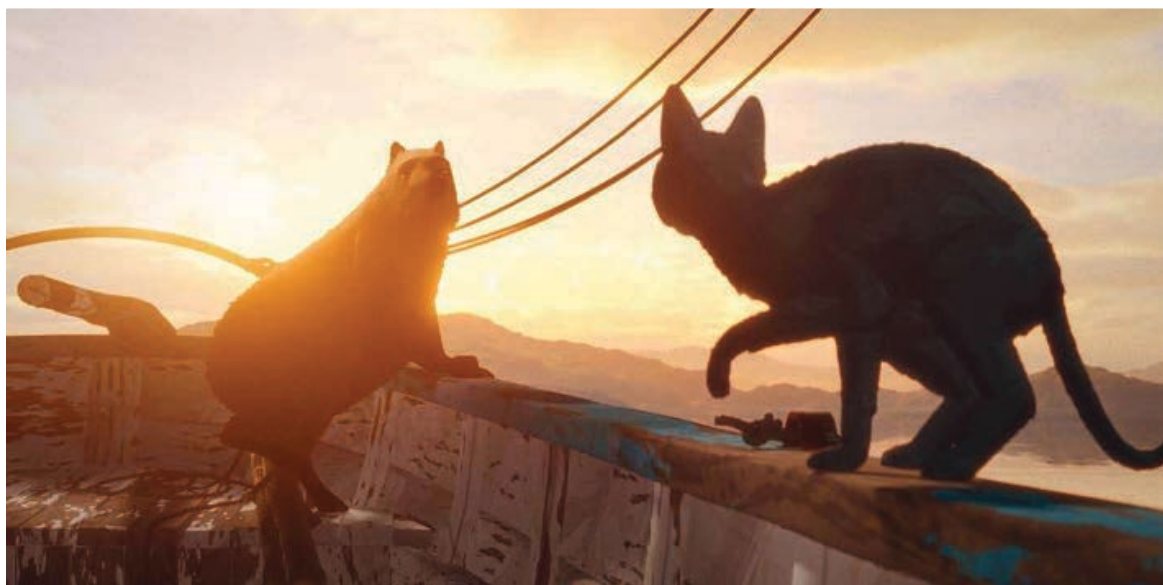
Derrière l'inconnu et le souvenir de l'immense, l'intime et le minimaliste se perçoivent dans la quête de ces animaux, contraints de surmonter l'eau, sans savoir ce qu'ils trouveront.



Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau. ©UFO Distribution

Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau est minimaliste. Le film parvient à toucher au cœur grâce à la construction minutieuse de ses personnages. L'animation donne vie aux animaux, qui bénéficient tous d'un caractère précis. Les dynamiques entre eux et les relations offrent cette émotion nécessaire.

Derrière le mystère et le danger, derrière la sobriété et le parti-pris, le film se construit grâce à l'émotion et les péripéties. Sans rien dire, les animaux disent tout de l'humain et du monde dans un film passionnant qui devrait,



Gints Zilbalodis *Flow*, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau

Dans le même
bateau
Nicolas Geneix

Sortie le 30 octobre 2024

Film d'animation. Lettonie/France/Belgique (2024) 1 h 24. Réal. : Gints Zilbalodis. Scén. : Gints Zilbalodis, Matiss Kaža. Dir. d'anim. : Léo Silly-Pelissier. Script : Ron Dyens. Son : Gurwal Coic-Gallas. Mus. : Gints Zilbalodis, Rihards Zaļupe. Prod. : Matiss Kaža, Gints Zilbalodis, Ron Dyens, Gregory Zalman. Cies de prod. : Dream Well Studio, Sacrebleu Productions, Take Five. Dist. fr. : UFO Distribution. Prix du Jury et Prix du Public au Festival d'Annecy. Voir aussi n° 761-762, p. 71, Cannes 2024, et n° 763, p. 75, Annecy 2024



Tandis qu'*Ailleurs* (*Projām*, 2019), le premier long métrage de Gints Zilbalodis réalisé de manière indépendante et solitaire, tournait en festivals, le cinéaste pensait à *Flow*, un projet rassemblant une petite équipe et dont la ligne narrative était déjà claire. Une histoire de déluge, aux accents écologiques peut-être, aux échos universels certainement. Le monde entier est submergé, restent les animaux. Tandis que l'eau menace toujours, cinq d'entre eux, d'espèces diverses, entament un incertain périple à bord d'une embarcation abandonnée par des humains qui ne sont plus là, mais qui ont laissé des traces monumentales.

Nul Noé, aucun sauveur ni sauveteur, pas vraiment de chef. Éventuellement un guide, un oiseau, blessé pour avoir défié son groupe d'origine en faveur d'un chat. Ce félin, amené à dépasser sa peur de l'eau s'il veut survivre, voit son attitude autarcique désormais illusoire et insuffisante. D'autres bêtes lui tendent la patte : un placide capybara, un chien qui s'émancipe peu à peu de sa meute d'origine, cette structure collective (parmi d'autres)

qui ne se remet pas en cause malgré ses mauvaises décisions. Le lémurien, qui thésaurise tout ce qui brille, comme on lui a toujours dit de le faire, devra lui aussi évoluer. Tout ici est mouvement, dans les détails du langage corporel crédible de chaque individu comme au cœur de l'univers impressionnant et précaire environnant. Élan vital, soucis primaires, et pas de dialogues ajoutés aux miaulements ou aux grognements : tout fait vrai dans ce monde imaginé. L'histoire semble un flux, au point qu'atteindre une cité en partie immergée ou une haute tour au loin ne peut constituer une véritable fin.

Un « désir d'autrui »

En un sens, *Flow* poursuit ce qu'*Ailleurs* commençait : perdu et isolé à la suite d'un accident aérien, aidé par un oiseau, un jeune homme à moto devait quitter un cimetière, échapper au monstre noir de toutes ses peurs et rejoindre un port, une société, après s'être littéralement jeté à l'eau. L'initiation par le collectif, c'est le petit chat noir, pas si mignon de prime abord dans son refus de l'autre, qui va l'éprouver notamment, comme un défi aux schémas des scénarios classiques. Ce protagoniste ne connaît pas une aventure individuelle structurée autour d'un monde extraordinaire où aller pour en revenir. Il est impossible d'échapper à l'environnement sensationnel où l'on cherche à ne

Élan vital, soucis primaires, et pas de dialogues
© UFO Distribution

Un point sur le cinéma d'animation

pas mourir. Les notions d'alliés et d'antagonistes s'avèrent caduques, car la quête consiste en la mise en question d'un héroïsme impuissant s'il demeure autocentré. Au-delà de la volonté de rester sain et sauf s'exprime peu à peu, pour l'équipage embarqué, un « désir d'autrui », une envie qui fait se demander ce que l'on cherche en définitive dans cette galère, mais qui mène à la générosité, selon les mots du philosophe Lévinas : « Je ne me savais pas si riche, mais je n'ai plus le droit de rien garder¹ », sinon pour subsister. Lorsque le chat parvient à pêcher, comme l'oiseau s'en montrait capable, il finit par distribuer le résultat obtenu. Sorti de ce qui le définissait auparavant, le voilà plus ouvert et plus complet. Le lémurien collectionneur renoncera, lui aussi, à son premier système de valeurs, pour retrouver, après un moment de séparation, la compagnie bigarrée avec laquelle il a vécu des événements déstabilisants et fondateurs. Et cette expérience éthique qui redéfinit l'existence, ce mouvement vers l'autre qui transforme l'image même qu'on avait de soi, c'est un film d'animation odysséen pour tous les âges, dénué de toute mièvrerie, phénoménal et singulier, qui nous les fait éprouver.

La source de solutions où puiser

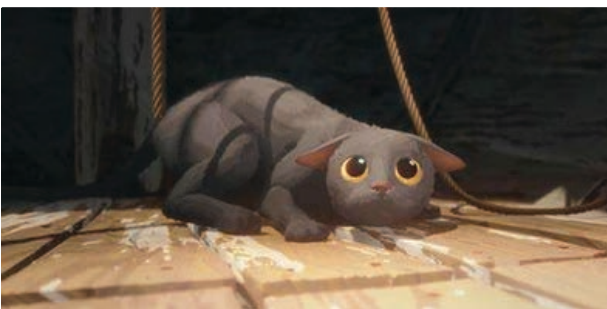
Pour représenter le désastre, et la mortalité de la civilisation, Gints Zilbalodis et son équipe explorent l'imaginaire matériel de l'eau qui « coule toujours² », écrivait Bachelard. Son essor est redoutable lorsqu'elle déferle, et porteur quand il faut naviguer : l'animation 3D impressionne constamment, et c'est peu dire que le film se montre immersif et sensoriel. La mer dessine aussi un espace fondamental, une source de solutions où puiser par-delà le danger, et pas seulement pour la baleine de passage qui en a absolument besoin. L'absence de mots, qui faisait la force d'*Ailleurs* comme du court métrage *Inaudible* (2015) – dans lequel l'orage et l'isolement étaient déjà mortels –, permet de se

concentrer sur le paysage visuel et sonore, sur le monde auquel chaque être vivant participe sans hiérarchie autre que décrétée. Le cinéaste ne passe pas par le storyboard, mais élabore d'abord un environnement où la caméra installe des situations, puis suit des actions, ce qui semble révélateur. Il s'agit pour lui de concevoir un climat et un chronotope aptes à accueillir ceux qui vont le traverser autant qu'y exister, de penser à la lumière pour structurer l'image et à la musique en amont du montage. On retrouve l'importance primordiale de l'univers suscité et du parcours des personnages dans l'un des films préférés de Zilbalodis, *Les Fils de l'homme* (2006), d'Alfonso Cuarón, et sa course éperdue pour la vie qui conjugait la gravité et le comique, le trivial et le sublime. Du reste, l'auteur ne cache pas les influences très diverses à l'œuvre au sein de sa création singulière, plus proche de Miyazaki que de *Bambi*. La série postapocalyptique *Conan, le fils du futur* (1978) ou son art d'appréhender la magie du réel naturel se reconnaissent dès *Ailleurs*, non moins qu'une certaine poésie vidéoludique. En effet, l'architecture composite, insolite et organique, dans *Flow* aussi, évoque le *game design* de *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005), de Fumito Ueda. Les récits qu'aime à inventer Zilbalodis se souviennent de *Journey* (2012), de Jenova Chen (concepteur d'un autre jeu vidéo intitulé *Flow*), de ses itinéraires où se rencontrent plus de compagnons que d'ennemis et de ses moments d'épiphanies atmosphériques. Montée ou décrue des eaux, intensité du soleil au crépuscule ou visions nocturnes sidérales peuvent aussi faire penser à une certaine peinture balte, par exemple du Letton Vilhelms Purvītis, qui, autour de 1900, transfigurait les paysages sans trahir la matérialité des choses perçues. Le film d'animation contemporain paraît le lieu idéal pour de tels métissages. Zilbalodis dit volontiers que ses récits, entre apprentissage et révélation, reflètent le processus de son travail, très solitaire face aux obstacles pour *Ailleurs*, ouvert à la coopération pour *Flow*. Le film n'a ni la lourdeur d'un apologue ni la prétention inadéquante d'un programme politique. Il délivre pourtant une projection intime et limpide de l'alternative qui nous est donnée, pendant et après une catastrophe, ou à l'orée d'une situation limite : alliance des différences ou barbarie. n

1. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Fata Morgana, 1972, p. 49. 2. Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves – Essai sur l'imaginaire de la matière*, José Corti, 1943, p. 13.

La volonté de rester sain et sauf © UFO Distribution

L'eau qui « coule toujours » © UFO Distribution



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Journaliste : LAURA TUILLIER

Nombre de mots : 551

CINÉMA

«Flow», de mieux en miaou

Dans un monde sans humains et submergé par les catastrophes climatiques, Gints Zilbalodis nous embarque dans une aventure collective et fabuleuse à hauteur de bêtes.

Avrai dire, on ne saura pas si le chat du deuxième long métrage d'animation de l'autodidacte letton Gints Zilbalodis s'appelle vraiment *Flow*, ni d'ailleurs s'il porte ou a porté un nom : en effet, personne n'est là pour l'appeler, pour le câliner ou lui servir sa pâtée. *Flow* est un solitaire qui vit comme les autres animaux qu'il croise, isolé dans une nature luxuriante mais dépeuplée de toute présence humaine. Le soir néanmoins,

il rentre se pelotonner dans le lit d'une cabane abandonnée : que s'est-il passé ? On pense à une catastrophe climatique, alors qu'arrive justement une terrible vague, digne de nos pires cauchemars, qui emporte dans son déchaînement *Flow* et quelques autres animaux.

Prodige. A partir de là, se noue un récit d'aventures qui mène le petit chat gris de paysage en paysage, au gré des vents qui emportent une embarcation de fortune sur laquelle il prend place. Le petit prodige que constitue le film de Gints Zilbalodis (présenté à Cannes dans la catégorie Un certain regard) tient en grande partie au fait qu'il se place dans une optique diamétralement opposée à celle qui règle normalement les rapports entre animation et animaux, à savoir un anthropomorphisme simplificateur

qui s'échine à gommer les différences entre eux et nous. Ici, aucune parole ne sortira de la bouche des héros, qui se contenteront de leur langage propre, tout comme ils ne seront jamais plus qu'eux-mêmes, sachant aboyer, jouer, grogner ou s'ébrouer mais pas beaucoup plus – à une exception près, lorsque l'oiseau puis le capybara (ce gros rongeur lymphatique) se mettront à tenir la barre. De bout en bout, *Flow* tient son pari de s'embarquer dans l'aventure à hauteur de bête, nous donnant à partager leurs terreurs – le film est tendu par l'imminence du danger, qui peut surgir de n'importe où – autant que leur capacité à continuer d'avancer, mus par un instinct de survie frontal. Dans le même temps, le film sait assumer sa part de symbolique, à partir du moment où le chat doit composer, sur cette sorte d'arche de Noé

«Flow», de mieux en miaou

Edition : 30 octobre 2024 P.25



Flow a pour lui de n'afficher aucun anthropomorphisme. PHOTO UFO DISTRIBUTION

sans Noé, avec des espèces radicalement différentes de la sienne.

Finesse. Film sur le collectif à l'épreuve de la catastrophe, *Flow* parvient à constituer une véritable équipe à laquelle on s'attache, en partie bâtie sur des clichés (le brave chien, le malin lémurien) mais que la finesse des

situations empêche de sombrer dans la lourdeur d'une fable cucul. Si l'animation en 3D est stupéfiante de réalisme en ce qui concerne les animaux et nous plonge dans un univers visuel fabuleux, le trait narratif est elliptique et convoque une ambiance planante, calquée sur un rythme et une logique de vie qui nous est totale-

ment étrangère. Un art de l'existence qui, à l'image du saut élastique du chat, se déploie dans le temps présent vécu comme une forme d'éternité. Une éternité à apprendre de ses erreurs, et à recommencer.

LAURA TUILLIER

FLOW de GINTS
ZILBALODIS 1h25.

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Journaliste : Olivier Delcroix

Nombre de mots : 1014



CINÉMA

«FLOW. LE CHAT QUI N'AVAIT PLUS PEUR DE L'EAU», UN FILM D'ANIMATION ONIRIQUE EN FORME D'ODYSSÉE FÉLINE **PAGE 32**

CULTURE

«Flow», une odyssée féline venue d'ailleurs

Olivier Delcroix

Le Letton Gints Zilbalodis a enchanté par sa poésie Cannes et Annecy. Dans son film d'animation, un chat solitaire évolue dans un monde étrangement similaire au nôtre.

Onirique, imaginatif, toujours en mouvement, voici un film d'animation d'un nouveau genre. *Flow*, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau s'apparente en effet à une expérience sensorielle inédite. Comment ne pas s'émerveiller devant le second film d'animation du jeune Letton Gints Zilbalodis (*Ailleurs*) ? Projeté à Cannes dans la section Un certain regard, ce surprenant chef-d'œuvre sensoriel et immersif raconte comment un chat se réveille dans un uni-

vers envahi par l'eau, alors que toute présence humaine semble avoir disparu de la surface de la planète.

Fuyant la submersion de la maison où il s'abritait, ce félin au caractère bien trempé se réfugie sur un navire décrépit habité par un paisible rongeur (un capybara). Le voilier devient petit à petit une sorte d'arche de Noé, où le rejoindront d'autres animaux : un labrador, un lémurien (tout droit sorti de *Madagascar*) et un échassier blanc.

Film fantastique d'une fluidité à couper le souffle, *Flow* est une parabole marquante qu'on pourrait croire postapocalyptique. De passage à Paris, Gints Zilbalodis, trentenaire aux yeux clairs et au sourire malicieux, reconnaît que son idée revient de loin. « Je possédais un chat qui ressemblait à celui du film lorsque j'étais encore au lycée, se souvient-il. Enfant, je créais déjà des courts-métrages d'animation dans mon coin. Je ne sais pas pourquoi j'étais un garçon solitaire. C'est ma personnalité. J'ai toujours aimé travailler à mon rythme. Désormais, j'ai appris à travailler en équipe. »

Né dans une famille d'artistes (une mère peintre et un père sculpteur) à Riga, en Lettonie, Gints est très tôt ini-

tié au cinéma par son père. « Mon oncle tenait une salle de cinéma à Riga, le Cinéma du Forum, raconte-t-il. Nous avions des billets gratuits. Mon père m'a ainsi fait découvrir tous les films de Hitchcock, Kubrick, Kurosawa, Fellini et Truffaut. Ce n'étaient pas forcément des films pour enfants. Mais ce fut très formateur. »

On imaginait volontiers que son Hitchcock préféré serait *Lifeboat* (1944). « Pas du tout, c'est *Fenêtre sur cour*, répond-il, amusé. J'aime son dispositif très simple. Ce que je préfère, ce sont les séquences sans dialogues. Ces moments où James Stewart observe les autres. Par contre, ce que j'aime dans *Lifeboat*, c'est l'idée de la contrainte. Hitchcock s'impose des limites. C'est ce qu'il faut également faire en animation. Il est bon de se mettre des barrières. Comme ça, on est obligé de trouver des solutions originales. »

Nulle trace d'êtres humains dans *Flow*, comme s'ils avaient mystérieusement cessé d'exister. « Oui, acquiesce-t-il. Je n'ai jamais pensé un seul instant mettre en scène des êtres humains, parce que je savais qu'il n'y avait pas de dialogues. » Dans le film, les animaux ne parlent pas non plus. Ils se comportent comme des ani-

maux. Flow pourrait-il être un anti-Disney ? « Peut-être que oui, assure-t-il. Mon film est différent d’un film d’animation américain sorti d’un grand studio. Je respecte les enfants. Je ne leur mâche pas le travail. Flow ne répond pas à toutes les questions. Il faut qu’ils imaginent l’histoire, qu’ils se la réapproprient. Je n’explique pas comment le monde en est arrivé là. » Gints Zilbalodis, lui, ne perd pas de temps avec une scène d’exposition trop longue. « Ce serait ennuyeux. » Son film d’animation plonge tout de suite dans l’action. « Dans le cinéma indépendant, nous pouvons tenter d’expérimenter des choses nouvelles. On peut prendre des risques, être plus flexible », précise-t-il.

Y a-t-il quelque parallèle à dresser entre lui et ce chat sans nom qui fuit la montée des eaux ? « Je ne peux pas nier qu’il s’agisse d’une histoire personnelle, admet l’intéressé. Le chat est indépendant et solitaire comme moi. C’était intentionnel. Il passe son temps à fuir ses terreurs en grimpant d’abord sur le toit de sa maison, puis en remontant le courant de l’océan jusqu’à monter dans ce bateau ou en haut du mât lorsque les animaux se chamaillent. On ne peut pas passer son existence à éviter les choses qui nous gênent. Je voulais montrer comment le chat décide progressivement d’affronter ses peurs, de quitter sa zone de confort. »

Chorégraphies de caméras

Sur le plan technique, la fabrication de Flow reflète l’état d’esprit indépendant de Gints Zilbalodis. Même s’il a appris à travailler en équipe pour ce second long-métrage, il a refusé de faire un story-board. « Je n’en ai pas fait tout simplement parce que je montais le film directement en 3D, explique-t-il. Il y a beaucoup de chorégraphies de caméras à mettre en place dans le film. La caméra bouge tout le temps. C’est presque un personnage en soi. Elle suit le chat et raconte les terreurs, les émotions ou la curiosité du protagoniste principal. »

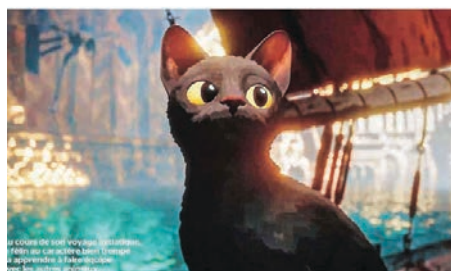
C’est sans doute pour cela que le montage de Flow est toujours fluide. Il n’y a pas de coupure entre deux plans. Le film suit le chat dans son périple dépayasant. Cela crée une participation active du spectateur. Gints

Zilbalodis confie également qu’il a façonné son odyssée onirique en fonction de la musique qu’il composait lui-même. « C’est l’émotion de la musique qui m’a guidé, avoue-t-il. Parfois, ma partition m’a conduit à changer la direction de certains plans. Je me laissais guider par mon inspiration. » C’est la combinaison de toutes ces étrangetés créatives qui fait de Flow un film d’animation à part. Une pépite poétique à découvrir. ■

« Flow. Le chat qui n’avait plus peur de l’eau »

Animation de Gints Zilbalodis

Notre avis : ●●●○



Edition : 30 Octobre 2024 P.48

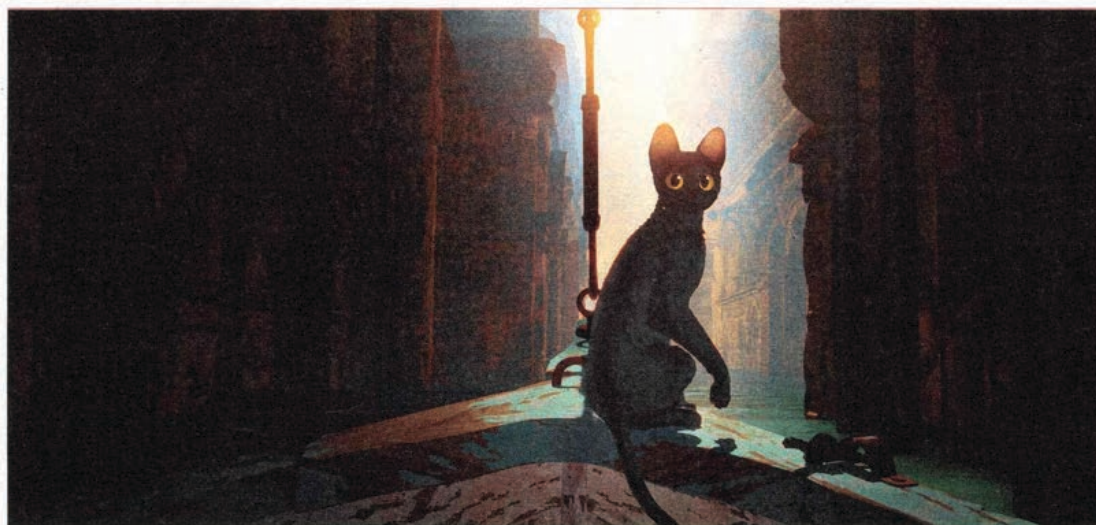
Famille du média : Médias spécialisés grand public

Périodicité : Hebdomadaire Audience : 1995000

Nombre de mots : Cécile Mury

Journaliste : 580

CINÉMA



Flow

Le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau

Gints Zilbalodis

Dans un monde bientôt englouti, sans humains ni paroles mais plein de vie, un chat et ses amis survivent sur un bateau à la dérive. Une merveille.



Une maison abandonnée au fond d'une forêt. Autour, d'étranges statues félines et une rivière qui enfle et enfle encore, jusqu'à se faire torrent, puis fleuve, menaçant de submerger l'écran... Où sommes-nous ? À mille lieues de toutes les terres habitées et habituelles de l'animation, à l'entrée d'un monde aussi fascinant qu'énigmatique, peu à peu englouti par une inexorable montée des eaux. Il n'y a pas d'humains, seulement les vestiges d'une civilisation noyée, ruines démesurées et autres artefacts flottants, au cœur d'une nature grandiose et dangereuse. La fin de tout ? Certainement pas. Cette rêverie monumentale sans le moindre dialogue foisonne de vie, végétale et animale.

Au commencement, et avant tout, il y a un chat. Non pas l'une de ces créatures bavardes et anthropomorphiques que les dessins animés ordinaires débitent à la chaîne. Un vrai chat, tout noir, attendrissant, gracieux et futé, qui ne sait que miauler

mais excelle dans un périlleux périple de survie, l'amenant, au fil de l'eau, à surmonter sa peur et sa méfiance. À bord d'un bateau à la dérive, il se mêle à une hétéroclite ménagerie à plume et à poil : un capybara pataud, un lémurien un peu obsessionnel, un chien amical et un drôle d'oiseau blanc. Chaque scène d'appropriation, avec suspense, est un petit miracle de fluidité et de poésie, en équilibre parfait entre mystère et tendresse. Se raconte ainsi une touchante et spectaculaire histoire d'amitié et de solidarité entre espèces.

De décors fabuleux (forêts immergées, montagnes et perspectives vertigineuses) en rencontres fantastiques (entre autres, une inoubliable et étrange baleine), ce film offre un choc esthétique, une ode hypnotique à la nature, dans sa toute-puissance ambiguë, création et destruction. Mais aussi une fable touchante sur le rapport à l'autre, le bonheur et la nécessité d'apprendre à vivre ensemble. Ce parcours d'ouverture coïncide pleine-

ment avec celui du réalisateur, le Letton Gints Zilbalodis, artiste surdoué d'à peine 30 ans. Après son premier film, le fascinant *Ailleurs* (2020), entièrement créé en solitaire (de l'animation à la musique originale) devant un simple ordinateur, le voilà qui collabore désormais avec une équipe de jeunes animateurs, entre la France, la Lettonie et la Belgique. On retrouve ici sa passion pour les univers oniriques somptueusement inquiétants, l'influence de maîtres tels que Hayao Miyazaki, mais aussi celle du jeu vidéo. Comme dans *Ailleurs*, l'usage inspiré de la 3D apporte une sorte de patine irréelle aux images, la tremblante rugosité des rêves, qui contraste merveilleusement avec les mouvements très réalistes de ce fragile bestiaire de réfugiés. Œuvre sans parole, *Flow* n'est pas muet pour autant. Voyage bruisant, porté par une bande-son à la fois épique et contemplative (encore une fois composée par Gints Zilbalodis, en collaboration avec son compatriote Rihards Zalupe, compositeur et percussionniste), c'est aussi une « transe sonore », un film à écouter. L'insolite arche sans Noé voguera longtemps dans nos mémoires de cinéphiles.

▷ Cécile Mury

Film d'animation, Lettonie/France/Belgique (1h25) | Scénario : G. Zilbalodis et Matiss Kaza.

Au cœur de décors fabuleux et hypnotisants, une ode au vivre ensemble.

DREAM WELLS STUDIOS/SACREBLEU PRODUCTIONS/TAKE FIVE PRODUCTIONS | AUGUSTA QUIRK/CBE FILM/FILMATION ENTERTAINMENT

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Périodicité : Hebdomadaire Audience : 1232000



ANIMATION ***Vous nous suivez ?***

“Flow” : à miauler de plaisir

Le plus beau film d'animation de l'année 2024 nous vient de Lettonie, et il n'a rigoureusement rien à dire.

Entendons-nous : *Flow* n'est pas une fiction vide de sens mais une œuvre sans paroles, ce qui, convenons-en, n'est pas du tout la même chose. Dans cette merveille de poésie, d'action et d'humour où la bande-son joue un rôle capital, le cinéaste Gints Zilbalodis, génie de la chose animée, nous invite à suivre les aventures de Flow, un petit chat noir très expressif qui échappe de peu à la catastrophe quand de

gigantesques inondations noient son environnement familial y rendant la vie impossible. Embarqué sur un bateau de fortune où d'autres trouvent bientôt refuge – un chien crétin, un lémurien cleptomane, un héron stratège –, notre félin entame un voyage au très long cours où il apprendra les vertus de la solidarité et à surpasser sa détestation de l'eau. Question de survie. Dans tous les festivals où il dévoile le bout de ses moustaches (Cannes, Annecy...), *Flow*, sous-titré *Le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau*, séduit public, jurys et critiques. À la fois film de suspense et méditation (jamais sentencieuse) sur l'entraide, cet antidote à la niaiserie abyssale des dernières productions du supermarché Disney nous entraîne sans un mot dans son récit trépidant et son esthétique enchanteresse. Que vous ayez 10, 40, 70 ans ou plus et que vous aimiez ou non les animaux, on est prêt à parier qu'il vous émerveillera. **Olivier De Bruyn**



Flow,
de Gints Zilbalodis.
En salles.

Journaliste : Olivier De Bruyn

Nombre de mots : 259

Edition : 30 octobre 2024 P.27

Famille du média : PQN (Quotidiens nationaux)

Périodicité : Quotidienne Audience : 2596000

Journaliste : VÉRONIQUE CAUHAPE

Nombre de mots : 860

L'Odyssée 3D d'un vaillant matou

Le deuxième film de Gints Zilbalodis est une bouleversante épopée

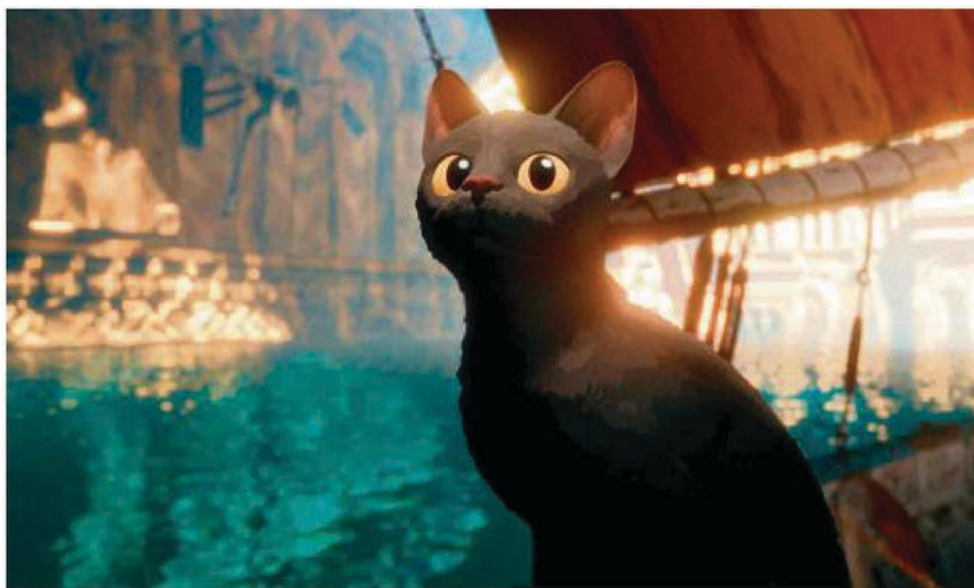


Image extraite du film d'animation «Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau». UFO DISTRIBUTION

FLOW, LE CHAT QUI N'AVAIT PLUS PEUR DE L'EAU

Sélectionné en compétition officielle du Festival du film d'animation d'Annecy, en juin, *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau* a fait l'unanimité auprès du public, dont une grande partie n'a pu retenir ses larmes. Celles-ci relevaient moins d'un sentiment de tristesse que d'un trop-plein d'émotions accumulées durant une heure trente.

Nombreux furent les festivaliers qui, dès lors, et malgré la rude concurrence des autres films en lice, n'en démordirent pas : *Flow* était destiné à recevoir la plus haute récompense, le Cristal du long-métrage. Lequel est finalement allé au superbe *Memoir of a Snail*, du réalisateur australien Adam Elliot. *Flow*, pour sa part, loin de repartir bredouille, a obtenu trois prix : celui du jury, celui du public et celui de la Fondation Gan pour le cinéma. Un mois plus tôt, présenté dans la catégorie Un certain regard, le film avait conquis Cannes.

C'est à une histoire sans paroles ni commentaires que nous convie le jeune réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis, 30 ans, dont le précédent long-métrage, son premier, *Ailleurs* (2020), déjà repéré et couronné du prix Contrechamp à Annecy, avait aussi adopté ce parti

pris pour rapporter le périple d'un jeune garçon parachuté sur une île mystérieuse, après un accident d'avion. Cette fois, toute trace humaine a disparu. La nature a (re)pris le dessus qui, hélas, risque à son tour d'être engloutie par la menaçante montée des fleuves, des rivières et des océans. Dans ce monde postapocalyptique, un chat noir aux yeux jaunes immenses a élu domicile dans une maison vide. Parmi ses voisins, toutes sortes de bêtes domestiques et sauvages vont et viennent, occupées à trouver de la nourriture. Guère sociable, le chat garde ses distances.

Airs d'arche de Noé

Le déluge approchant, le félin, que l'eau rebute au plus haut point, décide de prendre les voiles avant qu'il ne soit trop tard. Et trouve refuge sur un bateau de fortune où ne tarderont pas à le rejoindre d'autres animaux, eux aussi effrayés par les inondations : un capybara narcoleptique, un lémurien cleptomane, un labrador joueur en quête de compagnie et un échassier au caractère solitaire.

Sur l'embarcation aux airs d'arche de Noé, chacun s'est octroyé un emplacement précis, dont la défense exige une attention de tous les instants. La méfiance est de mise, qui oblige à ne pas quitter l'autre du regard, donc à observer ses attitudes, ses rituels, ses manies. Ce qui ne va pas sans susciter curiosité et étonnement, cha-

Après avoir conquis Cannes, «Flow» a été triplement primé au Festival du film d'animation d'Annecy, en juin

cun considérant les différences de l'autre comme autant d'étrangetés jugées incongrues, voire ridicules.

Les animaux à quatre pattes et le volatile s'observent ainsi en chiens de faïence une bonne partie du film, puis s'accordent une certaine confiance au fil des dangers et des épreuves, jusqu'à faire clan. On l'aura compris, *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau*, en se tenant auprès des animaux et à leur hauteur, vise à nous envoyer le reflet de nos propres agissements face à ceux qui ne nous ressemblent pas, la crainte que l'on peut éprouver d'abord, avant de s'entendre mutuellement, une fois connaissance faite. L'identification aux animaux se fait sans que le film ait recours à l'anthropomorphisme – un fait rare dans les films d'animation, qui se plaisent généralement à doter le règne animal d'un langage humain.

A l'inverse, *Flow* crée sa magie à partir de l'observation et de la reproduction minutieuses des comportements de chacune des espè-

ces. C'est l'un des tours de force du film que de rendre fascinant le moindre mouvement animal. Comme si l'usage du dessin et de la 3D (à la pointe du réalisme) apportait une nouvelle acuité à notre regard, nous faisant redécouvrir ce que nous avons déjà maintes fois regardé. Hommage à la nature et à ceux qui l'habitent, le film laisse entendre le bruissement des feuillages, le grondement de l'eau, les cris et le chant des oiseaux, les miaulements et les aboiements, la musique composée par le réalisateur, en collaboration avec Rihards Zalupe, s'insinuant avec discrétion, telle une preuve de respect.

Le périple de survie, quant à lui, se transforme en une épopée spectaculaire et bouleversante, au cours d'un récit qui avance au fil de l'eau, au gré des tourbillons et de vagues aussi hautes que des immeubles. Conduite sans esbroufe, l'aventure infuse poésie et humour, selon les situations vécues et les lieux traversés. Forêts immenses, ville semi-engloutie d'une beauté saisissante, sculptures géantes abandonnées au beau milieu des paysages, jusqu'à cette gigantesque baleine préhistorique qui parfois surgit des profondeurs, tout cela donne à l'expédition une dimension fantastique, captivante de bout en bout. ■

VÉRONIQUE CAUHAPE

Film d'animation letton, français et belge de Gints Zilbalodis (1 h 25).

Edition : 30 octobre 2024 P.23

Famille du média : PQN (Quotidiens nationaux)

Périodicité : Quotidienne Audience : 2541000

Journaliste : Renaud Baronian

Nombre de mots : 681



Le film « Flow » de Gints Zilbalodis a été choisi par la Lettonie pour représenter le pays aux Oscars, un fait très rare pour un film d'animation.

Chat nous épate !

Film choc sans personnages humains et sans dialogues, « Flow » révolutionne le cinéma d'animation. Du jamais-vu.



Renaud Baronian

UN CHOC visuel et sensoriel, voilà à quoi doivent s'attendre ceux, enfants comme adultes, qui vont aller voir « Flow » au cinéma. Ce film d'animation qui ne ressemble à aucun autre arrive en salles auréolé de récompenses dans tous les festivals du monde. Et il a été choisi par la Lettonie pour représenter le pays aux prochains Oscars, fait très rare pour un film d'animation.

Signé du prodige letton Gints Zilbalodis, à peine 30 ans, « Flow » raconte, sans aucun dialogue, comment un jeune chat noir va assister à une catastrophe écologique de grande ampleur, une soudaine montée des eaux. Pour survivre dans cet univers où les humains semblent avoir été engloutis, le félin, réfugié sur un bateau, va devoir s'allier avec d'autres animaux (un chien, un capybara, un lémurien et un oiseau) et apprendre à lutter contre sa peur...

Une ode à l'intelligence animale

Tout est fou dans ce film : le graphisme, sublime, le bruitage hyperréaliste des animaux, la reproduction ahurissante de précision de leurs attitudes, le suspense permanent, la musique magnifique composée par le cinéaste... Capable de séduire aussi bien les cinéphiles qu'un public familial de 7 à 97 ans, cette ode à l'intelligence animale constitue par ailleurs une révolution en matière de

cinéma d'animation. Enfin un film où les chats, chiens et autres espèces ne dialoguent pas et ne se comportent pas comme des humains. Il y aura, dans ce domaine, un avant et un après « Flow ».

Gints Zilbalodis détaille le pourquoi de cet hyperréalisme animalier. « Tout a commencé avec les chats. J'ai fabriqué un court-métrage sur le mien car, à force de l'observer, je me suis dit que je le comprenais. Ensuite, j'ai aussi eu un chien, et il s'est produit la même chose. Nous avons regardé beaucoup de vidéos, parcouru des zoos... Tous les comportements que l'on voit à l'écran sont calqués sur ceux que nous avons observés. »

« On a tellement vu de films d'animation avec des animaux qui parlent, pensent et agissent comme des humains, je crois qu'on en a tous assez, poursuit-il. Je considère qu'on n'a pas besoin d'exagérer les attitudes d'un animal quand on le reproduit en animation : leurs émotions se suffisent à elles-mêmes, d'autant qu'elles sont universelles... et imprévisibles, ce qui est parfait pour les rebondissements d'un récit. »

« On a fait une sorte de casting »

Lui qui avait travaillé seul sur son premier film a dû s'adapter au travail en équipe — parfois jusqu'à 50 personnes, un défi qu'il a encaissé à sa manière : « Cette expérience était en grande partie intentionnelle, car c'est ce que vit le chat de Flow : il ne peut plus se

débrouiller seul, il doit s'allier avec d'autres pour survivre, je voulais vivre la même chose que lui. »

Le choix des animaux à l'écran ? « On a fait une sorte de casting d'animaux, pour trouver ceux qui pourraient former un groupe : il s'agissait de les faire interagir pour faire vivre l'histoire. Or on remarque que les uns et les autres sont dans le conflit et la bagarre à certains moments, à l'exception du capybara : c'est un animal

pacifique et amical dans la nature. » Il précise même que ce rongeur est le seul du groupe auquel le récit n'ajoute aucun comportement fictionnel : « Tous les animaux de Flow apprennent des choses au cours de l'aventure, sauf le capybara, qui n'a rien besoin d'apprendre, il est le Sage qui va inspirer les autres... »

« Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau », film d'animation franco-letton de Gints Zilbalodis, 1 h 25. Dès 8 ans.

Accueil • Pop culture



Flow, ou le chat de Noé dans une épopée sublime et onirique

Image : © UFO Distribution



Par Yuri Rebeko

Publié le 30/10/2024



Le petit chat beaucoup trop mignon qui a conquis Cannes et Annecy arrive enfin dans nos salles obscures, et on vous dit pourquoi il ne faut surtout pas le rater.

Dans un monde sans humains, un adorable petit chat vit seul dans une maison abandonnée. Une vie de chat parfaite, en somme. Mais sa paisible existence va être mise à mal par une soudaine et apocalyptique montée des eaux. Il va devoir se résoudre à quitter son monde, accompagné d'un capybara narcoleptique, d'un lémurien cleptomane, d'un oiseau snob et d'un chien débonnaire. Commence alors une odyssée à travers un monde submergé, faite d'aventures, de rencontres et d'images poétiques à couper le souffle. Et tout ça sans une seule phrase de dialogue.

Gints Zilbalodis avait fait sensation dans le monde de l'animation avec son premier film, *Ailleurs*, déjà sans dialogues, et dont il avait assuré presque tous les postes : scénario, animation, musique, montage. Le film avait gagné en 2019 le prix Contrechamp au Festival d'Annecy. Cinq ans de travail plus tard, doté d'un budget plus important et de coproducteurs plus nombreux (français, pour la plupart), il revient donc avec *Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau*. Présenté en section Un certain regard au dernier Festival de Cannes, *Flow* sort enfin ce mercredi sur les écrans, et c'est une réussite totale. Une réussite qui relève du petit miracle, tant les paris entrepris par le film d'un point de vue technique, esthétique et narratif sont tenus du premier au dernier plan.

Prouesse technique et esthétique

En mélangeant une fluidité d'animation 3D avec des couleurs pastel, une texture 2D pâteuse et brute, le film parvient à créer une atmosphère de conte auquel on croit à chaque instant. On est frappés par le naturel déconcertant des mouvements de ses personnages à quatre pattes, par le travail sur la lumière et sur les mouvements de caméra. Le film travaille également la texture de l'eau, probablement la plus difficile à réussir en animation, d'une manière remarquable. En choisissant de placer sa caméra "à hauteur de chat", il la plonge parfois dans l'eau, comme si le cadreur était lui-même à moitié immergé. C'est dans ces scènes que la réussite technique du film est impressionnante, et met à l'amende bien des superproductions.

De la prouesse technique découle une prouesse esthétique. L'image est baignée d'une lumière diffuse, qui donne au film un aspect onirique et poétique. On découvre ce monde avec émerveillement, ces décors atemporels constitués de ruines qu'on visite, et dont on s'imagine le passé. Ce qui n'est pas sans rappeler certains jeux vidéo récents – on pense évidemment à *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, pour la texture pastel des images ainsi que la déambulation onirique et muette des héros dans un monde qui les dépasse.

On pense aussi à *Stray*, le jeu français ayant pour héros un chat dans un monde abandonné par les humains. Ces références semblent pleinement assumées et digérées par le film, qui parvient à créer un trait d'union élégant entre ces deux univers. Et c'est peut-être une des premières fois que cette sensation si particulière de l'extase de la découverte, souvent liée à l'exploration dans un jeu, est si bien retranscrite au cinéma.

Un chat et un chien sont dans un bateau



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L'autre pari risqué que le film tient jusqu'au bout est son absence totale de dialogues, en se concentrant sur des animaux par définition muets. Le travail d'écriture pour rendre ces personnages attachants, ayant des traits de caractère simples mais compréhensibles, sans céder à une vision anthropomorphique, est simplement impressionnant.

Car les animaux du film sont bien des personnages écrits, avec leurs affects et leurs personnalités, mais on ne leur plaque jamais des expressions humaines ou des émotions qui seraient trop éloignées de leurs comportements instinctifs. Le chat est indépendant parce qu'il est un chat. Il est égoïste, courageux et peureux en même temps... parce qu'il est un chat. Il en va de même pour les autres animaux. Chacun pourra y reconnaître son animal de compagnie, mais aussi ses propres comportements.

Dans le monde de *Flow*, il n'y a pas de gentils, pas de méchants, juste des animaux qui n'ont d'autre choix que de survivre à des éléments qui se déchaînent contre eux. À rebours des productions pour enfants surrythmées, qui se battent pour l'attention de leur public, *Flow* adopte un rythme plus lent, plus méditatif. Quitte à l'être peut-être un peu trop, au gré de séquences qui peuvent parfois sembler un peu répétitives. Mais on est vite rattrapés par la poésie visuelle et le flot (sans mauvais jeu de mots) de l'histoire, si bien que quand l'aventure prend fin, on aurait aimé qu'elle continue.

WEEK-END

Cinéma

UNE FABULEUSE ODYSSEE FELINE

Le film d'animation **Flow** est l'histoire surprenante d'une arche de Noé sans Noé, dont le héros est un chat jaloux de son indépendance. Par quelle magie cette œuvre parvient-elle à immerger totalement le spectateur dans son récit, alors qu'elle est dénuée de dialogues ? Réponse avec son jeune réalisateur letton, Gints Zilbalodis.

Stéphane Dreyfus



MEVIELS - UFO DISTRIBUTION

Lors du dernier Festival du film d'animation d'Annecy, où Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau a ra lé quatre prix (un record), sa projection officielle offrait un double spectacle : celui d'un long métrage à nul autre pareil et d'un public fasciné par ce qu'il voyait à l'écran. Professionnels blasés comme jeunes spectateurs laissaient échapper des exclamations, approbations attendries ou cris étouffés de stupeur face à l'odyssée d'un chat confronté à la montée rapide des eaux. Avant un déluge d'applaudissements.

Noé rhabillé en félin noir ? Et son arche en modeste barque ? « Et pourquoi pas ? », s'est demandé Gints Zilbalodis, petit génie du cinéma

« Tout est construit autour de l'émotion, car je n'ai pas de dialogues pour l'exprimer. »

d'animation. À 30 ans à peine, il livre un fi lm merveilleux et mystérieux, à la fois fable, aventure méditative et expérience visuelle captivante malgré l'absence de dialogues. Hormis quelques miaulements, bien sûr...

Il faut dire que les temps ne donnent guère envie de ronronner. Dans un monde sans hommes, le retour à l'état de nature de ce chat domestique est aussi soudain que brutal. L'eau des rivières se met à monter à la vitesse d'un cerf au galop, que voit détalier le matou apeuré. Le félin saute à l'eau pour sauver sa peau sur une embarcation

un placide capybara (sorte de castor d'Amérique du Sud), un labrador jovial, un échassier hautain et un lémurien cleptomane. Comment vont-ils survivre face aux éléments déchaînés ? C'est le suspense que laisse planer le réalisateur sur sa fascinante épopée.

Au-delà de l'instinct de survie

« Comme chacun sait, les chats craignent l'eau, sourit sobrement Gints Zilbalodis, regard bleu fi xe hypnotique. Mais cette peur incarne toutes

les autres, et notamment celle d'autrui, avec lequel il faut bien coexister et collaborer. L'élément aqua-

tique est au diapason des craintes du chat : quand il est effrayé par la présence d'autres animaux, les lots semblent agressifs et menaçants ; lorsqu'il commence à s'ouvrir à ses compagnons d'infortune, les eaux sont plus tranquilles et apaisantes. Ce personnage, c'est moi, qui ai dû apprendre à

travailler en équipe sur ce fi lm. »

Visage allongé aux traits souvent fi gés, Gints Zilbalodis rompt avec sa nature introvertie pour accompagner son fi lm. Le cinéaste letton a réalisé seul ses premiers courts métrages et même son premier long métrage, *Ailleurs*, qu'il a achevé à 25 ans, en 2019, après trois ans et demi de labeur acharné. Une expérience visuelle et muette audacieuse mais, à vrai dire, un peu vaine. Il n'en est rien de *Flow*, dont le scénario a été coécrit avec ses deux producteurs, le Letton Mattis Kaza et le Français Ron Dyens, patron de la société



Sacrebleu, à la manœuvre de très beaux courts et longs métrages animés et animaliers (*L'Extraordinaire Voyage de Marona*, en 2020). Car l'aventure laisse place à une interrogation existentielle aux accents métaphysiques. Allant au-delà de l'instinct de survie, la petite tribu, fascinée par son reflet dans l'eau ou dans un miroir, semble s'interroger sur sa destinée et sa condition.

Au plus près des personnages

Éminemment humaniste, la morale de cette fable féline cherche un sens à la vie en multipliant les allusions mystiques ou religieuses. À bord de leur arche de fortune, les aventuriers à poils et à plumes croisent de mystérieuses et monumentales tours s'élevant vers les cieux. « *Ces références spirituelles ne sont pas conscientes. Ce qui me guide, c'est ce que ressentent les personnages. Tout est construit autour de l'émotion, car je n'ai pas de dialogues pour l'exprimer.* » Rares sont les films d'animation qui s'aventurent dans le muet, mais il est vrai qu'ils y gagnent en profondeur sur le fond comme sur la forme, à l'instar de *La Tortue rouge* (2016), magnifique robinsonnade de Michael Dudok de Wit. « *Les dialogues distraient souvent de tout le reste, notamment de la musique et des effets sonores, mais aussi de la mise en scène.*

Or, j'aime raconter des histoires très visuelles que l'on ne pourrait voir ailleurs qu'au cinéma. »



Il est vrai que *Flow* en met plein les mirettes ! Point d'anthropomorphisme dans cette œuvre d'animation en 3D au réalisme stylisé, qui parvient à donner une incroyable sensation de proximité avec les personnages. L'immersion dans des décors naturels grandioses est totale, parfois semblable à celle ressentie dans des jeux vidéo ou des films en réalité virtuelle. « *Ce n'est pas ma culture, corrige Gints Zilbalodis. Je suis un fan d'animation, mais aussi de prise de vue réelle, notamment des cinéastes, comme Alfonso Cuarón, Martin Scorsese ou Steven Spielberg, qui font durer les plans en suivant les personnages de près par des mouvements complexes de caméra.* »

Pour mettre en place cette mise en scène souvent spectaculaire, parfois vertigineuse, jamais gadget, le cinéaste ne passe pas par un story-board (ébauche dessinée du film), mais préfère procéder à des repérages dans des décors sommaires en trois dimensions. « *Je cadre le champ de la caméra sur ce qui me semble pertinent ou qui me surprend, un peu comme un documentariste le fait dans un environnement réel.* »

Cinq ans et demi ont été nécessaires pour la réalisation de cette merveille tout public (à partir de 7 ans), pour un budget deux fois moindre à celui d'une production française moyenne. Pour un résultat deux fois supérieur en salles ? C'est tout le mal qu'on lui souhaite.

Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau, de Gints Zilbalodis, 1 h 25, en salles



SACREBLEU PRO

Le réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis signe une odyssée humaniste à la mise en scène spectaculaire et immersive, dans une 3D stylisée.



« Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau », un film qui nous embarque

Multirécompensé au Festival d'Annecy avec notamment les prix du jury et du public, ce superbe film d'animation réinvente l'arche de Noé. Rencontre avec son réalisateur, Gints Zilbalodis.

Par Florence Colombani

On en a vu des films apocalyptiques ces dernières années. De catastrophes nucléaires en glaciation subite, de mutations fongiques en virus dévastateurs, la planète ne cesse de se métamorphoser sur nos écrans pour le pire et le encore bien pire... Avec Flow, le chat qui n'avait plus peur de l'eau, surprise ! La catastrophe est réelle et se déroule en deux temps... mais elle se transforme en bonne nouvelle. D'abord parce que le film du réalisateur letton Gints Zilbalodis – 28 ans et un talent fou – est d'une splendeur esthétique à vous réconcilier avec l'Apocalypse... et puis parce que l'histoire qu'il raconte est porteuse d'espoir.

Commençons donc par la catastrophe : quand le film débute, le monde est déserté par les hommes qui y ont laissé leur marque (de somptueuses constructions en témoignent)... Les animaux vivent pour la plupart dans la « Je ne voulais pas montrer d'êtres humains, nous raconte Gints Zilbalodis, mais au contraire amener les spectateurs à s'oublier le temps de la projection en s'identifiant au chat, en ressentant ses émotions. » Lui-même, autodidacte qui avait – avant ce film en partie produit par des Français – toujours travaillé seul, se reconnaît dans l'expérience du chat contraint par les circonstances de collaborer avec les autres passagers de cette nouvelle arche de Noé. « Un peu comme mon héros, je me suis habitué à partager le travail avec une équipe... J'ai dû faire comme lui, et m'adapter ! » s'amuse-t-il.

Une métaphore qui garde une part de mystère

On suit donc le chat dans son épopée, ponctuée de mille dangers, de moments drôles et d'autres – souvent liés à l'oiseau qui prend le héros sous sa protection – qui touchent au sublime. L'animation 3D et la qualité du dessin font qu'à tout moment le spectateur se sent immergé dans un monde fascinant, éclatant de beauté naturelle, mais aussi inventif et poétique.

Les ruines de palais (en partie sous l'eau) et les statues géantes évoquent l'Asie, tandis que la végétation et certains animaux situent l'action plutôt en Europe et d'autres en Amérique. « Ce mélange, ce n'était pas seulement histoire de brouiller les pistes, souligne le cinéaste. Nous avons combiné des références architecturales de différentes civilisations, car ce que je raconte, c'est un monde qui n'est pas le nôtre et il fallait lui donner une épaisseur, une vérité. »

De même, la vague géante évoque la catastrophe climatique en cours sans être la seule lecture possible de la métaphore : « Cette vague, ça peut être quelque chose qui se joue dans la vie intime de chacun, un événement qui change tout et qui vous oblige à vous transformer en profondeur. Au départ, le chat cherche à monter toujours plus haut pour éviter l'eau, mais c'est une impasse. Il va falloir plonger. Ça vaut pour beaucoup d'expériences dans la vie. » Le résultat est que malgré les éléments anxiogènes de départ, le film nous amène tranquillement vers un avenir meilleur. Le chat apprend – comme l'annonce le titre – à ne plus avoir peur de l'eau, à s'adapter à ses nouvelles conditions de vie, à apprécier les autres animaux qui l'effrayaient au départ.

S'adresser autrement aux enfants

En termes d'animation, l'influence majeure que revendique Gints Zilbalodis est celle d'Hayao Miyazaki, notamment de son peu connu dessin animé pour la télévision *Conan, le fils du futur* (1978) qui montre également un monde submergé par les eaux. Mais il a aussi pensé des scènes entières de *Flow* comme des plans-séquences à la Alfonso Cuarón : « L'intérêt de l'animation est que ce type de cinéma donne encore plus de liberté. Je peux emmener le public où je le souhaite sans jamais trop expliquer, trop décoder. Aux spectateurs d'être actifs. »

Le film s'adresse aussi aux enfants (à partir de 10 ans) : « Les animaux du film n'appartiennent pas aux catégories "méchant" ou "gentil" que l'on réclame souvent dans les récits pour enfants. Ils ont beaucoup plus de subtilité et d'imagination dans leur regard qu'on ne le croit. »
De quoi s'embarquer corps et âme dans l'aventure.

"Flow" : "C'est la première fois que des animaux sont les héros d'un film de fin du monde"

Son univers animé est un trésor de poésie. Après un premier film réalisé en solo, le réalisateur Gints Zilbalodis signe une sublime dystopie animalière. Il nous livre les secrets de création de cette grande aventure de cinéma. Entretien.



"Flow", une pure merveille d'animation. Dream Well Studio - Sacrebleu Pr

Par Cécile Mury

Plus de 100 000 abonnés sur Twitter

Il s'appelle Gints Zilbalodis, il a à peine 30 ans et nous vient de Lettonie avec Flow, une pure merveille d'animation, l'odyssée sans paroles d'un englouti par les eaux. De passage à Paris, il a bien voulu nous raconter les coulisses de cette grande aventure de cinéma.

Qu'avez-vous imaginé en premier ? Le déluge ou le chat ?

Le chat ! Et même mon propre chat, à vrai dire, à l'époque où j'étais encore étudiant, il y a des années. Il m'avait inspiré un court métrage sur un animal qui avait peur de l'eau. En reprenant l'idée pour Flow, si longtemps après, j'ai vraiment voulu orienter l'histoire différemment. À l'origine, par exemple, tout se passait dans l'océan. Visuellement, c'était un décor trop uniforme, et même ennuyeux, à l'échelle d'un long métrage. Donc j'ai imaginé ce monde partiellement submergé, qui permet une variété d'environnements et de péripéties différentes. La nature, à travers cette gigantesque inondation, est devenue une partie intégrante de la narration, le seul vrai antagoniste du film. Les différents animaux que rencontre le chat ne sont pas ses ennemis, même s'il y a parfois des conflits. Il ne s'agit plus seulement de la peur de l'eau, mais de celle des autres, et de la manière dont on peut apprendre à l'appivoiser, à faire confiance.



Pour « Flow », le réalisateur a été inspiré par son propre chat. Dream Well Studio/Sacrebleu Productions/Take Five Productions

À ce propos, vous avez réalisé votre premier long métrage, Ailleurs (2019), entièrement seul, alors que, pour celui-ci, vous vous êtes entouré d'une équipe d'animateurs. Ce chat, c'est vous ?

Oui, sans aucun doute... Ailleurs, c'est l'histoire d'un personnage isolé sur une île, sans secours, sans connexions. Exactement comme moi, à l'époque, tout seul devant mon ordinateur. Je n'en étais pas conscient à ce moment-là, mais quand j'ai terminé Ailleurs, ce travail m'a permis de voyager, de rencontrer beaucoup de monde, d'ouvrir mon horizon. Flow reflète ce parcours personnel : un chat très indépendant, qui doit apprendre à coopérer avec les autres. La différence, c'est que dans la fiction il y a beaucoup de tensions et d'appréhensions entre les animaux. Dans la réalité, entre nous autres humains, pendant la fabrication du film, c'était infiniment plus fluide et collaboratif !

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Gints Zilbalodis : « "Flow" reflète mon parcours personnel : un chat très indépendant, qui doit apprendre à coopérer avec les autres. » Photo Gareth Cattermole/Getty Images via AFP

Flow est aussi une aventure dans des décors spectaculaires et énigmatiques, comme on en voit rarement au cinéma. Comment les avez-vous conçus ?

Nous voulions que ce monde soit très immersif, que l'on puisse presque toucher l'eau, sentir les matières, le vent, l'herbe... Et parce qu'on adopte le point de vue du chat, près du sol, tout semble plus grand, voire démesuré. Quand je commence un film, je ne fais pas de storyboards, je crée l'environnement en 3D, pour chercher des plans, presque comme une reconnaissance de lieux, en prises de vues réelles ou en documentaire. C'est un travail de préparation important pour moi, parce que, dans le film, les sentiments – la curiosité, la peur – sont exprimés par les mouvements de caméra. C'est presque un personnage à part entière. Elle est parfois très proche des animaux, mais elle peut aussi s'en éloigner, comme si elle était distraite par quelque chose dans le paysage. Je souhaite procurer une certaine liberté au spectateur, lui donner l'impression qu'il peut naviguer dans ce monde par lui-même, rêver, collecter des indices, sans être trop guidé. Je n'aime pas les histoires où tout est prémâché, exposé, expliqué. D'où vient cette inondation, que s'est-il passé ? Mystère. Je préfère laisser le public se faire sa propre idée.

Vous composez vous-même la musique de vos films. Comment ce travail s'intègre-t-il dans votre processus créatif ?

Pour moi c'est à l'origine de tout, essentiel. Je commence à travailler sur la musique dès l'écriture du scénario, elle nourrit mon imagination, m'aide à trouver des idées, à bâtir des scènes. Cette fois, j'ai aussi collaboré avec un autre compositeur, Rihards Zalupe, qui est plus expérimenté que moi, qui a vraiment donné de l'ampleur aux thèmes que j'avais créés dans mon coin, sur mon ordinateur. Ensuite nous avons tout enregistré avec un grand orchestre, en gardant malgré tout certaines sonorités électroniques, et même des bruits un peu étranges, qui contribuent à l'identité unique du film, à cet effet d'immersion et de mystère dont je parlais tout à l'heure.

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En sélection au dernier Festival de Cannes, puis à celui d'Annecy, Flow a déjà une belle carrière derrière lui. Qu'est-ce que ces expériences vous ont apporté ?

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Travaillez-vous déjà sur votre prochain film ?

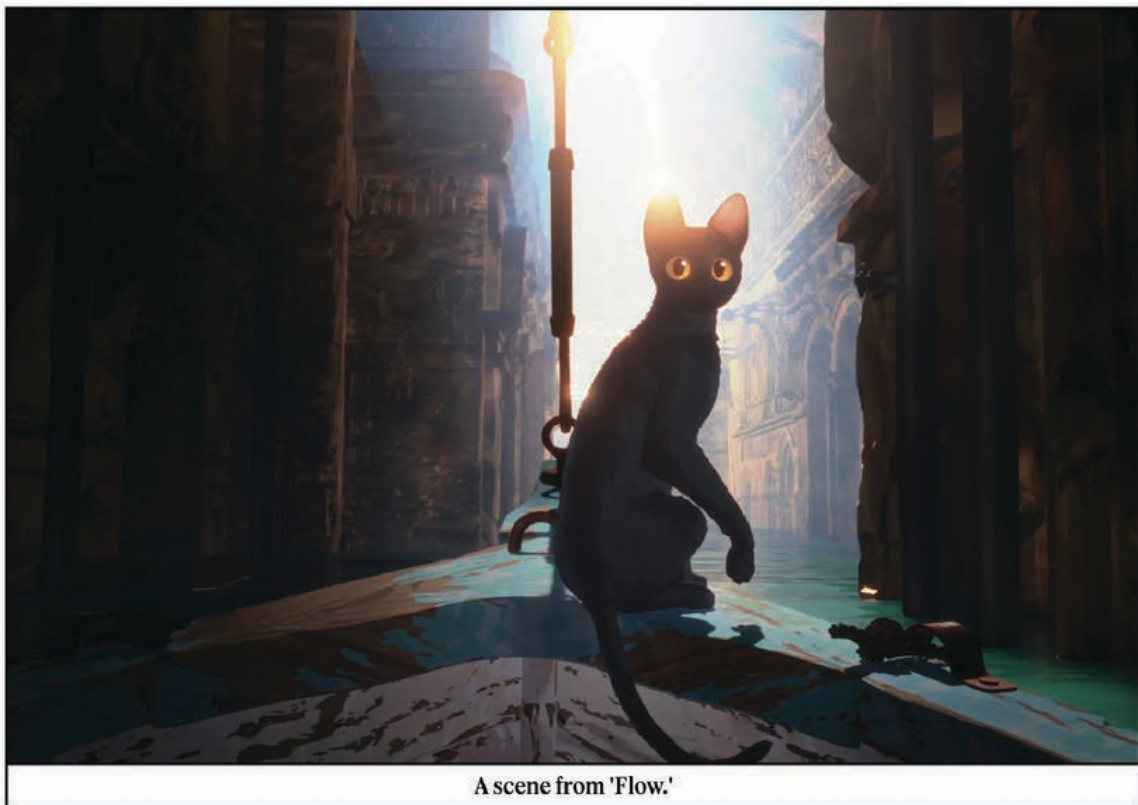
Oui, j'ai commencé à l'écrire... Et à composer la musique. C'est encore une histoire d'aventures en animation, mais cette fois je travaillerai aussi avec des acteurs... et des dialogues ! Je ne peux pas en dire beaucoup plus, mais ce sera sans doute plutôt destiné aux adultes, moins « tous publics » que Flow, mais toujours aussi personnel. J'ai eu des propositions pour travailler pour de grands studios, mais je préfère continuer à faire mes petits films indépendants, en toute liberté.

MOVIE REVIEW

'FLOW' IS THE PERFECT MOVIE FOR ANIMATION FANS, ANIMAL LOVERS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DOOMSAYERS

Latvia's submission for the Best International Feature Oscar follows a cat and several other furry friends trying to survive the end of the world as we know it

By DAVID FEAR
NOVEMBER 20, 2024



A scene from 'Flow.'

SIDESHOW/JANUS FILMS

And a pussycat shall lead them! *Flow*, the animated film that's Latvia's submission for the Best International Feature Oscar, kicks off with a beautiful moment of tranquility: A small, black feline, staring wide-eyed at itself in a rippling puddle. It's somewhere in a forest, surrounded by foliage, and the ambient sounds of nature fill the soundtrack. A rabbit runs by, momentarily startling the cat. It's soon followed by a pack of dogs, chasing the bunny and barely registering the meowing bystander's existence. The creature will eventually amble up to a house with a cracked attic window, slipping inside for an early afternoon nap.

It's all very soothing, giving you the sense that you're watching the **animation** equivalent of ASMR. Then, after some business involving a stolen fish, our furry little friend finds itself in the same patch of green earth as before. Once again, the dogs sprint past it. This time, however, they're followed by a thundering herd of deer. The animals appear to be running away from something. In the background, the trees begin to violently sway back and forth. And then, a huge wave rushes through and washes away everything in its path, including the cat. It eventually gets back to dry land, but then the water keeps rising. And rising. And rising....

A survivalist thriller that's designed to appeal equally to animal lovers, avant-garde-cartoon aficionados and environmental doomsayers, *Flow* will spend the next 80 minutes following this feline and his fellow interspecific travelers as they try to navigate the end of the world as we know it. Eventually, the Golden Retriever who'd been part of that roving gang of doggy miscreants will join the freaked-out kitty on a boat they happen to spy passing by. So will a capybara, a lemur and a secretarybird. When the cat falls overboard and can't paw its way back to the surface, it's rescued from drowning by the opportune passing of a mammoth humpback, who catches the animal on its nose and breaches just in time. Saved by the whale! One life down, eight to go — although given the obstacles it will continually face, you worry that this resourceful lil' buddy will eventually run through all of them before the day is over.

Director Gints Zilbalodis may be gathering an admittedly adorable posse of all creatures bright and beautiful, each of them rendered in a gorgeous, sometimes crude style of animation that would be best characterized as Early PlayStation Cut-Scene Chic. But in terms of storytelling, he's going a specifically anti-Disney route here, and this road less traveled makes all of the difference. There's no dialogue, at least none decipherable to human ears — everything is a symphony of meows, woofs, squawks, grunts, squeaks, squeals and simian cries. With the possible exception of one act of heroism late in the film, none of the animals are anthropomorphized. They more or less act in accordance with their IRL counterparts. There is no identification regarding where this is taking place — some of the stunningly detailed backgrounds suggest Angkor Wat, others bear a striking resemblance to Venice — though the predominance of both medium-sized and massive cat statues suggest it's some sort of SPCA-sponsored sanctuary city. No explanation is given as to where the humans have gone. No explanation is given as to why a biblical flood is threatening to destroy it all, though for anyone who's cared to keep their eyes open and their heads out of the sand, no explanation is necessary.



The stars of the Latvian animated movie 'Flow.'

There's little to no hand-holding — and/or paw-, talon-, or hoof-holding — in *Flow*. There's simply making sure you keep your nose above water. There's another enigmatic sequence that occurs as Zilbalodis ushers us into the third act, in which some sort of cosmic force grants one of these critters what appears to be a last-minute reprieve from *terra firma*. But the real takeaway is that we have to rely on each other for salvation. And it's here where this experiential experiment in empathy, eco-activism and elation over the creative possibilities of a medium too often hijacked to sell toys truly hits its marks. Most of these animals either show up with or encounter a group of their fellow species (monkeys, dogs, birds). Most of them are abandoned or rejected by their peer groups, thanks to tribalism or simple self-preservation. The one moment in which these four-legged beasts resemble their furless, featherless two-legged neighbors is when several of them abandon a rescue mission midway through because of a passing distraction. Ain't that just like a *Homo sapien*?

Yet this disparate band somehow manages to endure, and though you can't accuse *Flow* of having a happily-ever-after ending, it somehow does go out on a optimistic note — a water-logged Planet Earth half empty, rather than half-fully ruined. There is a reprise of that lovely opening shot, basking in a calm before the inevitable storm to come. The movie ends as it begins, with no easy solution in sight. Only now we see a makeshift community staring back at themselves, no one alone, everyone companions in the apocalypse. It's a timeless moral. And yet, at this particular moment, for many of us staring down the next four years, the idea that a community can come together to take on the rising tides couldn't be more welcome or needed.

FEATURES / FILM / INTERVIEWS

Interview: Gints Zilbalodis on Animating the Wordless Wonder of ‘Flow’

Zilbalodis discusses what he hopes people will make of the film’s ambiguities.

by [Marshall Staffer](#) - November 21, 2024



Photo: Sideshow and Janus Films

Gints Zilbalodis’s *Flow* might be wordless, but that’s not for lack of its maker having things to say. In Zilbalodis’s sophomore feature, the Latvian animator expands from a one-man operation into overseeing a fleet of technicians to create a vast, imagined world. Within a landscape defined by the creeping presence of a great flood and a conspicuous lack of humans, an intrepid black cat must learn to cooperate with a wide array of creatures to survive. Even without language, it’s never in doubt what the animals perceive or feel at any given moment.

As the feline protagonist seeks higher ground from the rising tides, the story invites any number of allegorical readings, from a post-human retelling of the Noah’s Ark story or a warning about a climate change-ravaged Earth. Zilbalodis builds subtlety into each scene that can unlock layers of how the characters respond to the calamity surrounding them. But without being overly broad, *Flow* is big enough for people to project themselves into the film and see their own emotions and experiences reflected in the journey toward safety and solidarity.

I spoke with Zilbalodis during a stop in New York as he toured the world with *Flow* this fall. Our conversation covered how he leveled up to overseeing a full crew of animators, why he composed the score for the film as he wrote the screenplay, and what he hopes people will make of the film’s ambiguities given its pointed lack of exposition.

You made your previous animated feature, *Away*, by yourself. What were the benefits and challenges of bringing other people into your process?

It was a completely new experience for me, but it was always the plan to make that first feature myself and go through all these processes so that if I eventually had a chance to work in a team, I would understand everyone’s language and we could work more smoothly. It was basically my film school, making *Away*, and because of the success that it had at festivals, it allowed me to get the funding for *Flow*. But it was still a big challenge. I had to learn completely new skills because when I had an idea, I could just visualize it myself and make it. I didn’t have to explain it to anyone. Now, I had to articulate my thoughts and have a reason for everything.

It was also challenging for me to be responsible for all these people. I didn’t want to waste anyone’s time or budget. I’d never even worked in a studio, and now I had to be in charge of one! But the story of the film is about that. It’s about this cat who was used to being independent and self-sufficient, and then after the flood destroys the cat’s [home], it has to learn how to work with and trust others. It was really intentional doing that with *Flow*. When I wrote the script, I think I had imagined a lot of stuff going wrong, but the process of working with the team was much smoother. We were really supportive of each other, and I was quite lucky with that.

Did having to communicate some of the ideas in a way that other people could understand help clarify, or even change, anything in the script?

Unlike *Away*, in which I didn’t even have a finished script—I had an outline, and I would just improvise it visually—we needed the script for the funding. So I spent a long time alongside my producer and co-writer, Matiss Kaza, writing the script. But once it was finished, I started making animatics without even reading the script. I would just make it based on my memory of the writing. I also had music that I’d written at the same time as the script. I wasn’t using temp scores from other films, which helped me integrate the music a lot deeper. The music gave me ideas for the way that the story would go. And so, once I had the animatic finished, I would show that to the team. I didn’t show them the script. I think showing the visuals and the music told a lot more about my intentions, especially some of the scenes where the music is really in charge of everything and leading the story. It’s really hard to find words to explain these emotions, and it was much easier to show them the music. That really helped me in communicating everything.

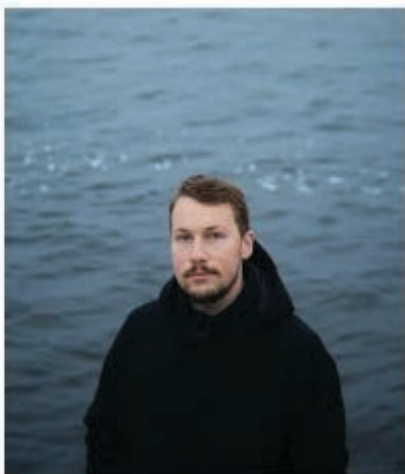
How did you find the balance of letting the music be expressive but not telling the audience how they need to feel?

Exactly, it’s about finding that balance. Because the music is done early while the script isn’t completely finished, it’s really integrated. It’s not something added on top of the film. It’s not forced upon it; it’s gently guiding it. I also wanted to have enough time to develop these cues.

Sometimes, a scene might develop this deeper emotion for four or five minutes, and the music is quite simple in terms of the notes. But it's built upon layers upon layers of how the sounds are very subtly adjusted. Because it has enough time to develop, it feels at a comfortable pace. It's not changing every 30 seconds into some different emotion. It's more fluid and just giving you direction [in terms of where the story is going and how to feel] without being too specific about how you should feel about it. Also, there are long scenes with no music as well, where it's just the sound. I think that helps us to feel more immersed in this world. Having these moments of quiet makes these louder moments feel even bigger because there's that dynamic range.

They don't speak, but there's absolutely dialogue between the animals in the film. Were you scripting their conversations, even if just in your head?

I didn't write specific words that they would say, but I would write “the cat is grumpy” or “the dog is annoying.” The script was quite direct, and a lot of the performances were built by our sound designer. Because we didn't have voice actors, it was really the sound designer's job to build all these voices. We used real animal voices. It's not just the sound, but also the animation, that helped convey what they're saying. It's the way these characters are framed, how the light is falling on them, and how the editing helps us understand what they're saying and feeling. You're not supposed to think about it, but subconsciously, I think it affects how you perceive them.



Writer-director Gints Zilbalodis. © Kristaps Kalns

Were you directly involved in the process of getting the animal voices?

I wasn't really involved. My sound designer would record a lot of animals; he would record his cat as well. Most of the animals are the actual species. The only one that was more challenging for us was the capybara, which, in real life, almost doesn't speak at all. They're very silent. So Gurwal [Coïc-Gallas], our sound designer, would go to the zoo, and to get the capybara to say something, he would have to tickle it to make some noises. But the voice was so strange. It didn't really fit this character because the capybara in our film is very chill, calm, and relaxed, and the voice of the real

capybara was very high-pitched and anxious-sounding. We had to look for other animals, and eventually we settled on a baby camel. Sometimes if you show exactly real life, it becomes almost more unbelievable. You have to make some creative decisions to make it feel more real. But in terms of the performances, we had references for all the movements and wanted to keep things as grounded as possible. It's all animated by hand; we didn't record any motion capture. Because it's so specific, we needed to build everything frame by frame.

Did you think of the animals in the film as anthropomorphized, or are you conceiving them with animal psychologies and just welcoming the audience to project human emotions onto them?

For the most part, we tried to keep them as believable as animals as possible. We studied real animals and while writing the script, we were making sure that they were behaving very instinctually. The motivations are very direct and clear. It's very important that we understand all of them. Keeping things as simple as possible is the key to doing that.

But, still, it's not a documentary. Sometimes, we needed to make sure that the animals have agency and are impacting the story. We did need to make them behave in less lifelike ways because if we didn't do that, they would just be lost at sea with no story. Because we already didn't have dialogue, we needed to use some of these other tools. But even for those moments, we would look for some real references to make sure that it was as grounded as possible.

I loved the recurring motif of the animals being drawn to their reflection. What do animals see in those moments? Do you think they possess the theory of mind?

One of the first things I thought [about] when writing the script was that the film would start with this cat looking at its reflection in the water. The water is very significant at that moment. It's the cat literally reflecting upon itself, so it was a way for me to tie the film together [from] beginning to end, showing how the characters have changed. In the beginning, we see the water trembling. It's disturbed as the cat's anxiety grows, but in the end, it becomes more peaceful. That was also in the script. I think it's a really simple but strong image.

For a long time, I couldn't figure out how to bring it back to the same place. I realized that just having that similar image is enough. In terms of just staging all these scenes, because there are these long takes where the camera follows these characters, I tried to avoid cutting back and forth between shot-reverse shot reactions. Having these reflections often allowed me to have the action, but also we can see the reflection of the character within the same image. It makes it a lot more visually direct without any unnecessary movement. It's a useful trick for blocking things.

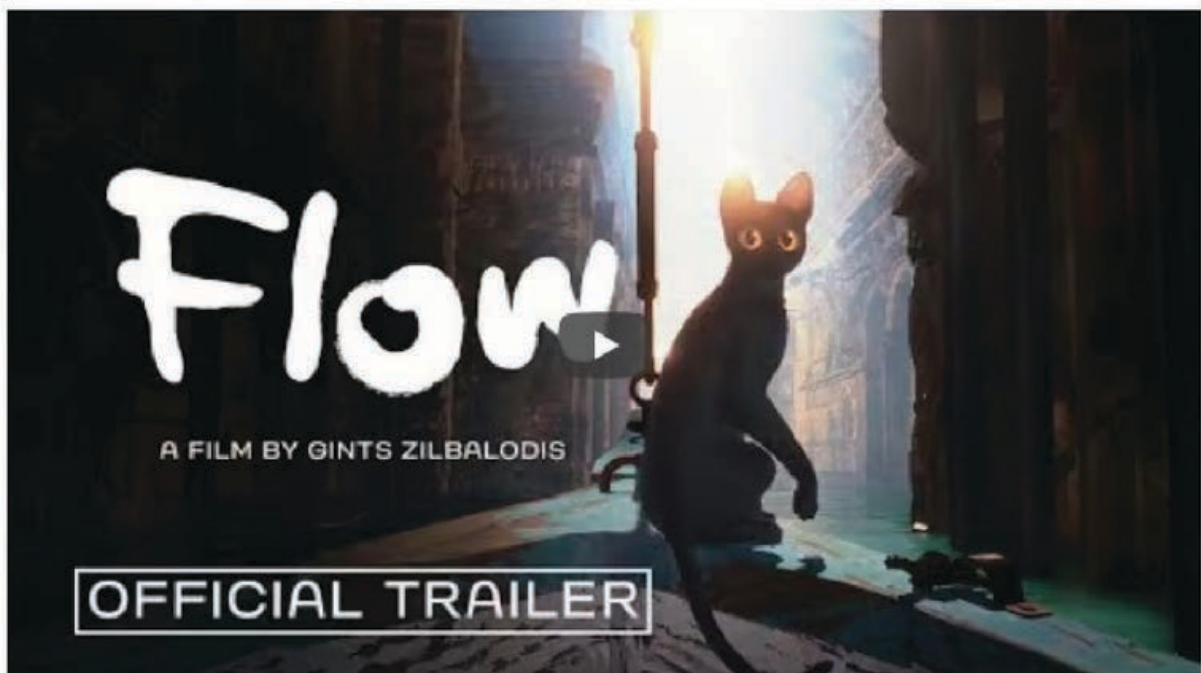
On the note of the water, how much of its presence in the film is meant to be taken literally or metaphorically? I initially interpreted *Flow* as a fable about climate change, but you might have had other things on your mind.

It all starts with the characters for me. I knew that I wanted to tell a story about a cat that's afraid of water, as most cats are, and I wanted to show how the cat learns how to overcome those fears. I wanted to show the biggest possible threat for this cat, so it was this big flood. I didn't want any antagonist, so it's really just the cat versus nature. All the animals are relatable in that sense. Nature itself is also not even an antagonist. We see these flooded cities, but it's not post-apocalyptically bleak. It's this quite beautiful way of seeing nature reclaiming these spaces.

These ideas of catastrophe grew naturally and organically. It wasn't a deliberate starting point for me. If I was thinking in direct messages, I think the story could feel too forced. I think about the characters, and then these ideas emerge naturally. We don't see the humans in the story, and we're left wondering what happened to them. It's left for the audience to think about that, but my own personal interpretation of that [is that] I think the humans were aware of this flood and left. The animals are left to fend for themselves, and I think it becomes a lot more emotional seeing the animals go through all this than seeing people go through that. We're more invested in a story like that. And it's also a fun adventure story; it's not pushing heavy stuff all the time.

The film's setting reminded me of the ending of Spielberg's *A.I.* because it might seem initially depressing that the world exists without humans in it, but then it becomes oddly comforting to know that forces like kindness and love continue on. Do you see similar traces of hope within the landscape of *Flow*?

I wouldn't say it's "hopeful," but going back to the water as a metaphor, it's really there to convey the cat's feelings. When the cat is afraid of all these other animals, the water is also very scary and aggressive. When [the cat] starts to open up to all of them, it becomes more tranquil, peaceful, and beautiful. It's about showing how the world is changing, and we need to learn how to adapt to it. I don't want to spoil the ending, but it could be read either way. I'm not even sure if it's a happy or sad ending. It depends on your point of view. Maybe for some, it's a happy ending; for others, not so happy. I like to let these things be open and have these bittersweet emotions where the audience has to think about the meaning.



Do younger and older viewers get the same meaning from the film? Or are there certain more mature themes that are only discernible by more mature viewers?

I've been to a lot of screenings with very young children, and they're really engaged in the film. If people go with their whole family to the film, I think there's something for everyone to take [away]. But I really wanted to respect the young audience, because I feel like some of these films for kids are explaining things too much or being too direct. Some [filmmakers] have forgotten how it felt like [to be] a child, when everything is so big, scary, and exciting as well. I wanted to have all these emotions. For adults, it can evoke all of that and remind us what it was like experiencing them all for the first time. But for kids, it's good to experience something challenging. Going through these emotions, you can feel cleaner and better about yourself afterward. It's still a fun journey, but you can grow as a person, hopefully.

I've been asked if [the film has] been understood by people in different places differently. For some reason, it's been understood in Korea, Japan, the U.S., and Europe quite universally. I think it's because there's no dialogue, and we're projecting our own experiences. We're seeing our own pets in the film. I think it's quite universal in that sense.

Flow is the Latvian submission for best international feature at the Academy Awards. The film feels somewhat universal because it has no real language, but is there a Latvian sensibility to it?

I would say there is. We want to do things our own way. We're very stubborn, but it's also quite universal. It's funny that it's the submission to the international Oscars category, which used to be called the “foreign language” category. There is no language, so I guess it's the language of cinema. I can't represent every person in Latvia, so I just tried to make it personal to me. I'm representing my point of view, but I think there's some overlap with other Latvians as well.

I feel like I should add that people should stay through the credits. Why did you add that final shot of those fins emerging and then submerging from the water?

It was one of the last things we added. It wasn't in the script. Basically, the film was almost finished, and I was asked, “What should we do with the credits? We should do something interesting.” I thought, “Maybe we should show some underwater imagery, and the camera could float in the water.” Then, I had this idea that it would show what was above the water. The production had ended, so we didn't have any animators anymore. But I could repurpose one of the scenes I had used earlier, and it was very instinctual. It felt like it would give this strong emotion to have that [image]. It's not even said if it happens right after the previous scene, if it's a memory, or if it's something else. To me, it felt like a strong image to end with.

The Spotlight
Animation

→ A scene from
Gints Zilbalodis'
movie "Flow."



A scaredy-cat must face its fears after a major catastrophe in 'Flow'

Story of a ragtag group of animals thrown together by a flood might earn Latvia its first-ever Oscar nod

Story by
Gregory
Elwood

OVER THE 95-YEAR history of the Academy Awards, a Latvian film has never been nominated for an Oscar. In 2025, it's possible that Gints Zilbalodis' celebrated wonder "Flow" will earn not only an animated feature nomination but a spot in the international film category as well. For a film that on its surface is about an unnamed cat who experiences a monstrous flood alongside an overly energetic dog, a friendly South American capybara, a lemur and a statuesque bird with a damaged wing, these may seem highbrow expectations.

But there's more to the story, says Zilbalodis, who burst onto the global animation scene after shepherding the 2019 feature "Away" on his own. The filmmaker was inspired to create "Flow," in part, by a cat he had in high school. At the time, the story manifested itself in a "very simple hand-drawn" short film about a cat and its fear of water — a universal narrative that

allowed the story to proceed without a traditional antagonist.

"It's really just the cat versus nature, or it's really a cat versus itself. It has to kind of overcome its fears," Zilbalodis says. "Many years later I decided to revisit this premise. But this time the focus is more on the cat's relationship with the other animals. The water is just there, a metaphor basically for this fear, because the cat is very independent, and it has to learn how to work together with others and how to trust them."

With the co-production between Latvia, France and Belgium, Zilbalodis went from being a jack-of-all-trades to forming his own production company — thereby mirroring the loner cat's sudden need to work in a team environment. "I was quite anxious about doing that. And some of these anxieties are built into this story," he says. He jumped headlong into a project 50 times bigger than his last feature but also, notably, 50 times smaller than a Disney animated film.

A larger group of collaborators doesn't

mean Zilbalodis' influence isn't felt throughout the film, however. Besides directing, producing and designing most of the main characters, he co-wrote the screenplay and is the cinematographer, editor and composer, among other roles.

"It's a bit embarrassing that you see my name a few times in the credits, but we needed to list those different titles for contractual purposes," Zilbalodis sheepishly says. "What I wasn't really involved with is the actual animation, the movement of the characters, the performance, which I allowed other people much better than me to do. I had every shot designed, edited and lit. But if an animator would suggest something, it was important that we try to incorporate those ideas."

Still, "Flow" faced several pressing challenges. The first was an age-old animation problem: creating realistic water. Zilbalodis laments that almost "every scene required a new tool to be developed. It's not like we have one tool for all kinds of water. We have a tool for a puddle, we have a tool for a lake, a stormy sea, a small splash, a big splash. So, we had to develop a lot of new technology and tools."

The film opens with our feline encountering a pack of overzealous canines in the blooming forest before napping in a seemingly abandoned Northern European-inspired home. There isn't a human in sight, but it appears the onetime owner of the home was a sculptor who was inspired by felines.

"I wanted it to feel quite timeless. It could be like this house is a hundred years old. It could be a newer one," Zilbalodis says. "That was deliberate. So, the environment is constantly evolving and changing, and it's not just for the sense of looking pretty. It's there to kind of help us understand these characters."

After a flood engulfs the cat's home, it finds itself in a small sailboat along with the other three animals. As the film progresses, they journey through architectural ruins that are often difficult to place. And, just like the cat, Zilbalodis wants us to feel as though we are experiencing these locations for the first time. And because it's from the cat's perspective, everything seems even bigger than it would be from a human point of view.

If you're hoping for a long expository scene explaining what occurred before the flood, you'll be disappointed. Zilbalodis would find it "quite boring" to go down that road. He believes viewers should be active participants and not just have everything spoon-fed to them. "I think if the audience has to work for something, they have to pay attention, then they care more about everything, not just the world but the story itself as well. They become more invested." 🐾



Gints Zilbalodis's acclaimed movie "Flow" opens in theaters in New York and Los Angeles today.

Gints Zilbalodis' Catapocalypse Movie 'Flow' Nabs an Almost Purrrfect Score of 98% on Rotten Tomatoes



By Ramin Zahed November 22, 2024

A ragtag group of animals, led by a charismatic black cat try to survive in a flooded, post-apocalyptic world in Gints Zilbadolis' acclaimed movie *Flow*, which arrives in select U.S. theaters today, via indie distributor Janus Films/Sideshow. The film, which received top prizes at Annecy and Ottawa Intl. Film Festival and is nominated for the Best Feature and Best Animated Feature European Film Awards, has already made over \$2.6 million worldwide. *Flow* is also Latvia's official entry in the International Feature Oscar category.

Critics have already embraced the movie with glowing reviews: *Flow* is currently boasting a fantastic 98% score on the reviews aggregation site RottenTomatoes.com. The reviewers love the movie's beautiful animation, wordless artistry and unusual take on a world where animals inherit the planet from a doomed human population. Awards watchers are already seeing the movie as a strong contender in the Best Animated Feature Oscar race, along with DreamWorks' *The Wild Robot* and Pixar's *Inside Out 2*.

Here is a sampling of what some of the top reviewers have to say about the movie, which is only writer-director-composer Zilbadolis's second feature (following 2019's acclaimed *Away*).

"Zilbalodis largely avoids the sort of whimsy and sentimentality that might plague, say, a Disney movie with the same premise. The animals act like real animals, not like cartoons or humans, and that restraint gives their adventure an authenticity that, in moments of both delight and peril, makes the emotion that much more powerful ... I was deeply moved."

— Calum Marsh, *The New York Times*

"With a gentle sense of post-apocalyptic mystery, this low-budget joy sets a raft of animals adrift in a flooded, Ghibli-esque world. Flow might be a digital confection, but it's also open, alive, elemental. In every sense, it's a breath of fresh air."

— Robbie Collin, *The Telegraph*

"Refusing to pander to its audience, Flow is an animated adventure that is poignant, unique, absolutely gorgeous, and a must-see."

— Kristy Puchko, *Mashable*

"Flow is something of an anomaly in that it puts greater weight on rich, impeccably lit environments than it does on character animation. Thought it looks pleasing to the eye, it isn't expressionistic enough in style to forgive these technical shortcomings."

— Peter DeBruge, *Variety*

"There's something about the purity of great animated storytelling that can shatter your heart and then make it whole again. Latvian director Gints Zilbalodis' captivating second feature, Flow, is that kind of marvel, a vividly experiential white-knuckle survival adventure that takes place in a world on the brink of ruin. Told entirely without dialogue, this tale of a cat that evolves from self-preservation to solidarity with a motley crew of other species is something quite special."

— David Rooney, *The Hollywood Reporter*

You can read our interview with the director [here](#)
Watch the trailer below: [here](#)

*Flow [Sideshow and Janus Films]*

FEATURES TOP STORIES

'Flow' Makes a Splash in the U.S. Specialty Box Office



By Animation Magazine

November 24, 2024

In the wake of a wave of successful festival screenings around the world and buoyed by positive critical reviews, indie animator Gints Zilbalodis' (Away) new dialog-free, post-apocalyptic animal adventure *Flow* has arrived in two theaters (in New York and Los Angeles) on a strong specialty box office current. Sold-out screenings largely attracting family audiences earned \$50.8K combines from the Angelika (N.Y.C.) and AMC Burbank, setting distributor Sideshow and Janus Film's highest per-screen average (\$25.4K).

Flow, which is eligible for consideration for the Best Animated Feature Academy Award as well as being Latvia's entry for Best International Feature, was the top grossing film of the weekend at the Angelika and the third-highest earner at AMC Burbank, behind multiple screenings of powerhouse Hollywood releases *Gladiator II* and *Wicked*.

The limited run was strong enough to place *Flow* in the domestic Top 20, landing at No. 17.

Sideshow and Janus Films will expand the film's release nationwide across several hundred theaters on December 6.

Elsewhere on the animation charts, DreamWorks/Universals' *The Wild Robot* came in at No. 8 in North America with an estimated \$2 million take (-53.6%) from 2,110 theaters (-784) in its ninth weekend, bringing the acclaimed Chris Sanders pic to a domestic cume of \$140.7M. The Peter Brown book adaptation, which passed the \$300M global milestone last week, now stands at \$317.4M worldwide.

[Sources: Deadline, Box Office Mojo]

MOVIES

Review: Animals brave the 'Flow' of rising waters in a wordless, animated triumph



Animals riding rising waters in a boat in the animated movie "Flow." (Festival de Cannes)

By Robert Abele

Nov. 22, 2024 12:42 PM PT

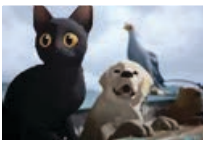
Animal welfare becomes the responsibility of the animals themselves in the gorgeous, hypnotic Latvian animated feature "Flow," in which a solitary cat encounters a catastrophic flood and, along with a dog, a bird, a capybara and a lemur, learns about more than mere survival.

Humans are conspicuously absent in the nature-rich, post-civilization backdrop that director and co-writer Gints Zilbalodis has created for the enchanting follow-up to his promising [2019 feature debut, "Away."](#) Yet none of the furry or feathered stars of this meditative, wondrous adventure need to wisecrack their way into our hearts. Rather, we get to know animals as animals, not as vaudevillians engineered for maximum cuteness (although the star cat is damn adorable). It's never explained what caused

the rising waters that spur the film's action, but "Flow" itself could break a dam that's held back animators from leaning into the beauty of behaviorally authentic beasts.

Yes, "Flow" is wordless, but it's not silent or language-free. In fact, it's so attuned to the vocal range of its characters that if, by a certain point, you can't figure out that one of the capybara's throaty grunts means "I ate too much" or a particularly harsh squawk from the bird translates as "Leave me alone," then you probably aren't reading the room well with your fellow humans either.

Before all this cross-species chat, though, we're marveling at Zilbalodis' fluid, shimmering visual majesty in establishing his computer-rendered ecosphere, marked by purposeful, roaming camerawork reminiscent of a cinematic marriage between Spielberg and Cameron at their most revealing and exciting.



AWARDS

'Flow,' a story that hinges on a cat's tale

Nov. 19, 2024

The fable-like story, co-written with Matīss Kaža, takes its wandering feline from the comfort zone of a woodsy, abandoned home — where the scariest reality is a roving pack of dogs — and into a newly ocean-logged world. The initial flood is a spectacle, but it's the climbing waterline that lets this independent cat know it can't keep counting on reaching higher ground. Refuge comes with a drifting boat and, quickly thereafter, some unfamiliar company. (Lemurs are so weird! Why are dogs so starved for attention? At least the capybara's nice.) There's also the occasional appearance from the depths of a friendly whale, now literally swimming among treetops.

Sure, the tiny vessel is an ark of sorts, but for singles only, and with no old man to play God's messenger. Instead, think an animal-kingdom schoolroom, where the lessons are in teamwork, boldness and conflict resolution. The cat's journey, which starts with its reflection in a shimmering pond, is the emotional center, but the large, long-legged bird's story is especially touching, with Miyazaki-like echoes.

It's hard not to consider humankind's own future in this region-unspecified, newly aquatic land where mountaintops are islands, northern lights dazzle and finger-like towers that seem man-made dot the background. But there's a timelessness to the narrative of "Flow" that keeps it from ever feeling like a cautionary environmental tale or dystopian saga.

One of the year's richest discoveries, "Flow" belongs as much to a timeline of animal-centric masterpieces (["Au hasard Balthazar,"](#) ["Gunda,"](#) ["EO"](#)) as it does the history of animated indies. And in its simple, generous spirit of giving these creatures palpable narrative power, there's a profundity: "Flow" might only be imagining their coping skills without us, but it's a charming, poignant vision of community and perseverance we could stand to be inspired by.

'Flow'

Rated: PG, for peril and thematic elements

Running time: 1 hour, 24 minutes

Playing: Opens Friday, Nov. 22, AMC Burbank

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11-22-2024 DESIGN

How 'Flow' turned a \$4 million budget into an animated work of art

The filmmakers used open-source software to create an unexpectedly fresh animation style.



[Images: Dream Well Studio]

BY **GRACE SNELLING** 5 MINUTE READ

Nearly every still of the animated film *Flow*, directed by Latvian filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis, feels like an art piece that could stand on its own. The movie—which centers around a group of animals surviving in a post-apocalyptic, human-less world—combines the edge-of-your-seat feeling of a survival video game with the painterly brushstrokes of an Impressionist artist. And, somehow, it manages to be a tearjerker without any dialogue at all.



[Image: Dream Well Studio]

Flow made its global debut at the Cannes Film Festival back in May. Since then, it's raked in a series of awards, including the feature film grand prize at the Ottawa International Animation Festival and the **Best Editing and Puerta América prize** at the Seville European Film Festival. The film **is set for an upcoming awards season debut** in the U.S., opening first in New York

and Los Angeles on November 22 and then nationwide on December 6.

Zilbalodis' first film, *Away*, was released in 2019 to **generally positive reviews**—a considerable feat, given that he was the sole animator behind the final product. *Flow* started similarly, with just Zilbalodis and, his laptop, and a concept, five years ago. Zilbalodis eventually onboarded a limited crew of less than 50 creatives, with an even more **limited budget, of around \$3.8 million**.

Part of the secret behind its low cost, Zilbalodis says, is that the entire project was made on **Blender**, a free and open-source 3D modeling software that can run on most laptops. Despite the project's constraints—or perhaps, in part, because of them—*Flow* feels like a breath of fresh air in an **animation landscape that's increasingly focused on realism**.



Flow - Clip 1
Gints Zilbalodis

We spoke to Zilbalodis about using Blender for the first time, avoiding the dreaded uncanny valley, and developing the endearing character design for 'Flow' movie's black cat protagonist.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Was this your first time using Blender for a film project?

Yeah, it was. I used Maya before, which is the industry standard software. I'm so used to Blender now, I think I've forgotten how to use Maya—it's built into my muscle memory.

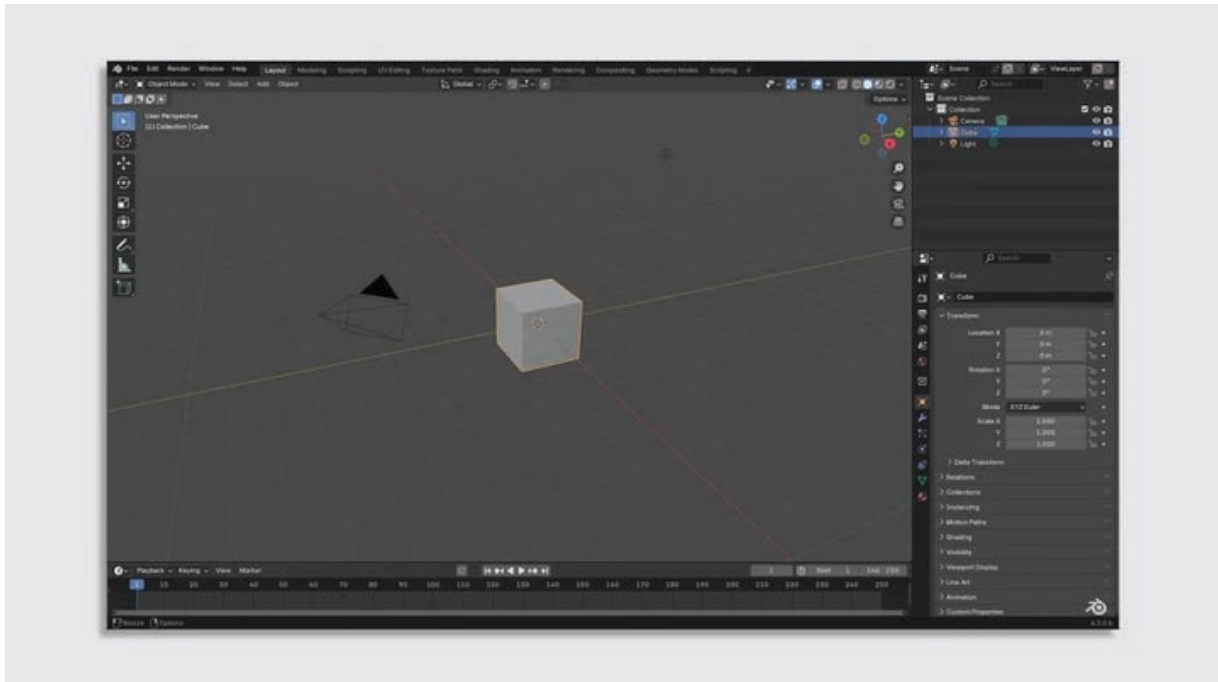


[Image: Dream Well Studio]

What's unique about Blender as an animation software?

Blender is an open-source software. I think it's amazing that there's a feature film of this scope being made on a software that anyone can just try out for themselves.

Blender is also very customizable. In this film, there's a lot of [water scenes], and we actually developed a lot of new tools in Blender just to make those. It also has a real-time render engine, which means you can actually see what you're making—you don't have to wait for the rendering to see all the lights, textures, fog, and effects. I could travel and work on the film on my laptop without a crazy workstation.



A screenshot of Blender's default user interface [Image: Blender.org]

You've mentioned before that animating water was the hardest part of this film, and that you made your own Blender tools to do it. What makes water so tricky to animate?

You have to build one tool for when the ocean is very active, and a completely different system for an underwater scene, or for a puddle, or just a splash of water. People also tell you also to avoid water in live action filmmaking, because you can never control it—but even in animation, it's really hard to get it into the right shape that you want.

Luckily, I had other people who are much smarter than me who understand all the physics and the coding to develop all that. But it's not just technical. We were also thinking through creative ways to tell the story. The water is a metaphor—there's the fear of water and the fear of others, and these are the two big fears in the film. When the cat is afraid of the other animals, the water is also very scary and aggressive. Later, when the cat starts to trust them, it's more peaceful and tranquil.

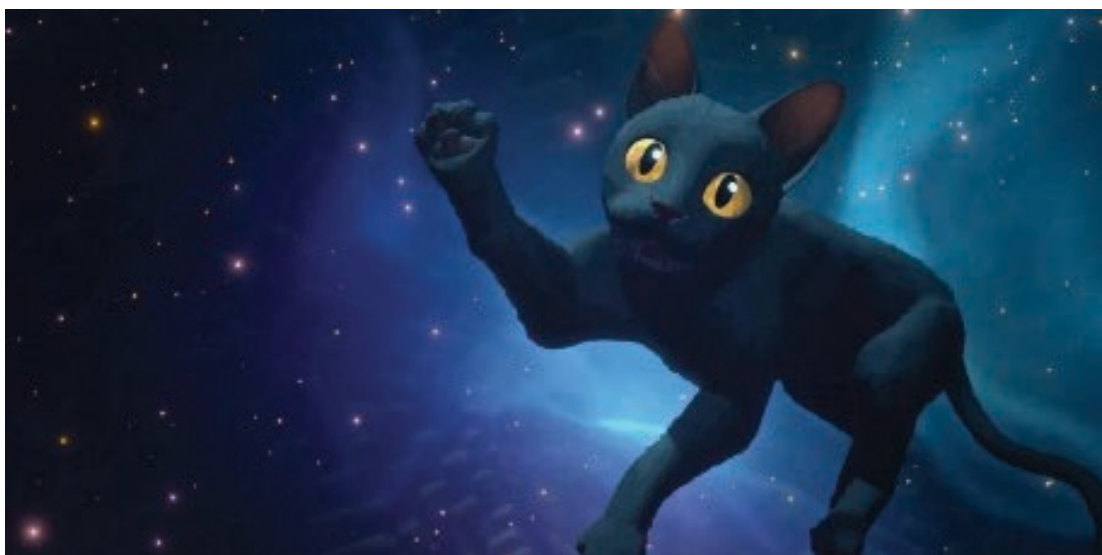


[Image: Dream Well Studio]

Your team was very small. Do you have an estimate of how many crew members worked on the film?

With concept artists, modelers, texture artists, music and sound people, production, and managers, there were about 50 people. That's including some of the people who were there for a very brief period. So I'd say the core team was maybe 20 people.

Usually it was just two or three people, including me, in the studio, and in the first few years, it was just me. It was a pretty small production, but it's much bigger than my previous film, which I made myself. This was maybe about 50 times bigger in terms of the budget, but it's actually 50 times smaller than most Disney films.



The movie takes a more abstract rather than realistic stylistic approach. Why is that?

In terms of the look itself—the colors and textures—the background is more detailed than the characters, and that's intentional. I didn't want too much detail in the characters, because then I feel they can look less appealing and relatable. If you add hyper-real detail, then you're risking approaching that uncanny valley feeling.

When we make it somewhat more abstract and graphic, we're kind of projecting ourselves onto the characters, or seeing our own pets—filling all these gaps. We can also be more expressive with their eyes, their movements, and the camera. If it were entirely realistic, it would be quite jarring to have that much movement. Because it's somewhat more abstract, we can **push things a little bit further and be more expressive**. We don't have realistic fur for the characters, instead you see these brush strokes on the characters. It's also technically a lot more simple not to render all of that.



[Image: Dream Well Studio]

Some commenters have noted how the 'Flow' movie's camera style and plot line feels almost like a video game. Was that a point of inspiration for you?

When you combine the documentary-style camera, where it's following the characters—especially from behind—and these wide shots where you see the environment, with the more graphic look, it does have that feeling of a [video game](#).

It wasn't entirely intentional for me, but I wouldn't consider it a bad thing, either. We've grown up with these kinds of images, and, to me, a lot of them feel nostalgic. Because there's no dialogue, we are telling the story through environments as well, and we can explore these environments, which, again is something that has been done in video games.

By looking for clues and discovering things for yourself, you can feel more participatory and actively engaged in the story. Sometimes, I think we make things as comfortable and clear as possible—but I don't think I'm as engaged if I don't have to do some work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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'Flow' Review – A Silent, Breathtaking Odyssey



BYRYAN GAUR | NOVEMBER 21, 2024 | 6:15 PM

You'll quickly run out of ways to describe the never-ending beauty of Gints Zilbalodis' *Flow*. Its visual splendor is so overwhelming that the awe-struck breath you take upon seeing the movie's opening image might as well be held until its final moments, just to save yourself the physical exertion of gasping over and over again. As grand as its visual scale may be — brought to life via immersive 3D animation — *Flow* manages to remain an understated and gentle trip through an unfamiliar Earth. It's a masterfully animated spectacle that allows you to experience the dangers, mysteries, and small joys of the world through the unlikely perspective of a courageous cat.

When discussing Western animation, we don't appreciate the massive effort it takes to get animated movies made in international territories. Rather than a massive studio like Pixar or DreamWorks fronting the entire costs, European animation is often subject to a melting pot of tax breaks and government funding from different countries. To piece together the \$3.8 million budget of *Flow*, multiple avenues of funding were required from three different countries: Latvia, France, and Belgium. *Flow*'s producer, writer, and director, Gints Zilbalodis, known for founding Dream Well Studio and for his 2019 animated feature film *Away*, collaborated with Belgian studio Take Five and French studio Sacrebleu Productions to bring this silent epic to the big screen, an intercontinental collaborative effort.

The smaller budget and narrower path to being green-lit are traded off with a more creatively daring animated tale than any major Hollywood studio would ever consider spending millions on. This dialogue-less adventure follows a black cat on a wondrous journey to survive a great flood of biblical proportions, requiring it to work with animals it previously saw as nothing but a threat. As these animals travel and even boat across a newly aquatic planet in search of dry land, not only do they not talk, but they are also barely anthropomorphized. One example can be seen with the small, beady eyes of an adorable capybara being preserved rather than the film giving it huge, expressive pupils.



'Flow' courtesy of Janus Films

The animals in Flow each flaunt their own visual flare. For the animals with short coats of fur, like one charming ring-tailed lemur our feline protagonist befriends, the fuzzy watercolor effect the animation imbues them with gives their movement a deeply satisfying fluidity. Meanwhile, feathered critters, like the main Secretarybird, look cushiony, tactile, and ethereal all at once. If Flow were nothing but a proof of concept, or even test footage, for how animals could look and move in this animated art style, it would still be endlessly watchable.

Flow is the rare kind of animated film that also captures the very precise wonder of playing an open-world video game. The imaginative lighting creates an exciting feast for the eyes that evokes the feeling of an RPG where new adventures lurk at every corner, as does a cute Nintendogs-coded golden retriever, and the extremely dynamic camera movement that frequently leads to remarkable one-shot sequences. However, more relevant than that is writer-director Gints Zilbalodis' dedication to minimal, environmental storytelling.



'Flow' courtesy of Janus Films

Flow even has a moment akin to the famous opening to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, where our leading black feline surveys the world it's about to explore. This outstanding introduction will leave your jaw agape and create tingling goosebumps; the sight of mountain-high structures submerged in a great body of water inhabited by whales is difficult to forget. Additionally, as the cat and its animal companions traverse this vast landscape, they find monuments to humanity, a species completely absent from the story.

We see houses, temples, and statues of both humans and animals, which make us ponder how Planet Earth got to this point. Did our civilization perish? Has this corner of Earth become uninhabitable by man? Did humans simply leave the planet? Asking these questions is a more gratifying and engaging experience than being telegraphed the answers. The script's mysteries and little to no explanation make its setting far richer, just like coming across ruins of past societies in a *Legend of Zelda* game.

Those droplets of environmental storytelling deepen your immersion into *Flow*. With an animated movie that looks as stellar as this, including the fact that it was made using *free* software, it's easy to get caught up in the technicalities of how this production team pulled this off rather than truly investing in the plot. *Flow* strikes the delicate balance between being a profound meditation on Mother Nature and a thrilling adventure. Sometimes, the plot will meander, a purposeful break from the action and anxiety that comes with a survival mission, to let you process the events. Some viewers might check out during these inconsequential moments, though at each narrative turn, *Flow* expertly keeps you locked in its grasp.



'Flow' courtesy of Janus Films

Most people see animation as a sugar rush — a surface-level pastime that can help families with kids kill a couple of hours. We desperately need more animated features like *Flow*, movies that lodge themselves in our minds by imagining things we have never seen before and presenting emotions we're not already expecting to feel going in. We have become used to animated films that make us laugh for two-thirds of it and then expectedly cry in the third act. But what if an animated film was more elusive? That's exactly why *Flow* is so great: it keeps things underne

The way *Flow* builds the relationships between its animal characters is masterful, and there is plentiful sharp humor and wit to be gleaned from them as well. However, the film's methods of keeping itself visually interesting through surrealism and mystery make Gints Zilbalodis' *Flow* a special movie that will live long in our memory.

***Flow* hits theaters in Los Angeles and New York on November 22 and then expands nationwide on December 6!**



Release Date: November 22, 2024.

Directed by Gints Zilbalodis.

Written by Gints Zilbalodis & Mat iss Kaža.

Produced by Gints Zilbalodis, Mat iss Kaža, Ron Dyens, & Gregory Zalcman. **Cinematographer:** Gints Zilbalodis.

Composers: Gints Zilbalodis & Rihards Zalupe.

Production Companies: Dream Well Studio, Sacrebleu Productions, & Take Five.

Distributors: Janus Films & Sideshow (U.S.), UFO Distribution (France).

Runtime: 85 minutes.

Rated PG.

Without a Word Spoken, The Emotions Are Clear

In 'Flow,' Gints Zilbalodis uses animation and sound design to convey the story's narrative.

By CARLOS AGUILAR

Like Noah's Ark minus the humans, a vessel carrying an odd bunch of creatures is afloat after a flood in the immersive computer-animated film "Flow." Led by a black cat, the group faces the dangers of nature together, often struggling to get along yet communicating entirely without dialogue.

It's the second wordless feature from the Latvian filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis, who argues that animation is more expressive than live action.

"You can use that expressiveness to convey things usually said with words," he said in a recent video interview.

We see how the animals behave — including a stoic capybara, a cheerful dog, a regal secretary bird and a rambunctious lemur — Zilbalodis added, and that's our way into understanding the characters.

The winner of the audience award at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival, the world's most prominent event for the medium, "Flow" is now the Latvian Oscar entry for best international feature film, a category for films not in English — an ironic designation, given that it's a wordless fable.

The absence of dialogue lends itself to animation, because "we're able to suspend our disbelief," Zilbalodis said. "It also forces me to think of unusual ways to relay emotions and ideas. I can't have the characters speak about them — I have to use the camera, the lighting, editing and music."

Watching "Flow," one becomes hyper-aware of environmental sounds, especially wind and water. Zilbalodis assumed that his French sound designer, Gurwal Coïc-Gallas, would enjoy the task, but in a recent interview, Coïc-Gallas said he was initially anxious about the responsibility of creating a soundscape that couldn't hide behind dialogue and — at times — not even a score.

"I was very afraid that the audience could fall asleep in the movie," he said. "We

worked a lot on the narrative immersion, because the soundscape reflects the emotion of the cat." By the end of making "Flow," Coïc-Gallas considered his first time working on a project devoid of dialogue to have been "an incredible gift."

"Flow" joins a growing number of animated features without dialogue produced away from American studios that consistently grace the lineups of renowned cinematic events like the Cannes Film Festival, subsequently gaining the attention of industry professionals and awards bodies stateside.

Zilbalodis, who started his own production company, Dream Well Studio, doesn't believe Hollywood would produce films like his. ("Flow" is a co-production with two other studios in France and Belgium.)

"Making films in a more independent way allows me not just to tell stories which are unconventional, but the way that they're told can be different as well," Zilbalodis said, referring to the long takes he used in "Flow," which sometimes go uninterrupted for several minutes.

Chiming in via email, the Dutch filmmaker Michaël Dudok de Wit, whose Oscar-nominated film "The Red Turtle" is an animated tale of man's relationship to nature, said that dispensing with dialogue required paying extra attention to the animated body language of the characters to make sure their motives were clear.

"The biggest reward of making 'The Red Turtle' dialogue free was that the absence of spoken language helped convey that very subtle quality that I love so much in many films: timelessness," Dudok de Wit said. "It's a quality I recognize in mythology, for instance, and in music."

For the Brazilian director Alê Abreu, whose debut "Boy and the World," also nominated for an Academy Award, deals with the evils of capitalism and environmental devastation, making a film without dialogue was a "delicious challenge."

"If an important narrative resource is given up in the construction of the script and characters, there's a possibility for other languages to be established," Abreu



SIDESHOW/JANUS FILMS

"Flow," left, is the second wordless feature from Gints Zilbalodis, who argues that animation is more expressive than live action. Michaël Dudok de Wit also dispensed with dialogue in the Oscar-nominated film "The Red Turtle," below.



STUDIO GHIBLI/WILD BUNCH, WHY NOT PRODUCTIONS, ARTE FRANCE CINEMA, CN4 PRODUCTIONS, BELVISION

said. "Not using dialogue puts the creator, and then the viewer, in a different state of mind based only on the power of the image and sound directly expressing the emotion of the film."

A more practical advantage, Abreu added, is that not needing dubs or even subtitles greatly facilitates the circulation of a film around the world, as it becomes universally accessible.

For Zilbalodis, making all of his features and shorts to date dialogue free was in part, he said, because of his lack of confidence in writing lines for his characters.

The concept for "Flow" first emerged as a short film titled "Aqua," which Zilbalodis made while in high school, inspired by a cat he had at the time. In that early precursor,

the cat was alone and surrounded by water, a setup with built-in conflict, since felines dislike water.

"When I decided to revisit this premise, I wanted to focus more on the cat's relationship with other animals, and how these two fears — the fear of water and of others — are linked," Zilbalodis said.

Worried that dialogue might draw all of the attention, the director tried to avoid making a film that could be just put on in the background and listened to in order to follow the story.

"You really need to pay attention to understand 'Flow,' but if you do, you'll be rewarded by something really engaging," Zilbalodis said. "The experience is more important than the plot."

GETTING ANIMATED

'Flow' Doesn't Have Dialogue — But Its Sound Design Speaks Volumes

Director Gints Zilbalodis and sound designer Gurwal Coïc-Gallas tell IndieWire about maintaining the momentum of the animated animal adventure through sound.

BY SARAH SHACHAT

NOVEMBER 29, 2024 1:00 PM



'Flow' Courtesy Everett Collection

“**Flow**” does not have any dialogue — at least none outside of the sounds made by its ragtag team of animals escaping a seemingly Biblical flood — but it’s far from a silent **film**. The massive challenge and gift that director **Gints Zilbalodis** gave to sound designer Gurwal Coïc-Gallas was to provide that world as much weight, texture, and character as the **animation** does.

The kind of movie Zilbalodis wanted to build was one where the audience could appreciate the spectacle while fully immersed in the action. This meant narrowing down the sheer amount of sounds in the world and strategically focusing on what would be most evocative. And Coïc-Gallas knew exactly where to look for inspiration on how to do that.

“I love Jacques Tati, and [he] does exactly that,” Coïc-Gallas said. “You don’t hear everything. You choose one sound, then another sound; we made ‘**Flow**’ a bit like that. We chose sounds to create an emotion.”

That was perfectly in line with Zilbalodis’ philosophy of how sound in the movie should reflect our experience of moving through the world with its soulful black cat protagonist — which is not the same as reflecting the experience of the world itself. “If you design everything exactly like [it sounds] real life, it would not feel real. It would take you out of the experience. Sometimes you need to be creative to make it feel more real,” Zilbalodis told IndieWire.

Coïc-Gallas cited the ending as a prime example. As the landscape dramatically changes, with the earth opening up and trees and rocks and water all falling in, Coïc-Gallas focused the film's sound on the crunches and crackle of the trees. "Because the sound of the trees is so powerful, it's enough. And it's like that all the way through the movie," Coïc-Gallas said. "It's an incredible present for a sound designer."

But Zilbalodis gave Coïc-Gallas another present, which was his work on the film's score. The music i with the sound to amp up our sense of wonder and/or danger as the animals sail into each new environment. Zilbalodis composed about seven hours of music for the eventual 50 minutes of cues used in the finished film.



Disney Everett Collection

"If I'd done the music later, the whole story might've been very different. It also allows me to not use temp music. I can just use [the cues I'm writing], so I create a lot of material, a lot of variations on the same theme," Zilbalodis said. "So I have all these options and because I'm also editing the picture, I can tweak the edit to work with the music and go back and forth. Even if it's not the same person doing the editing and the music, I think that the composer and the picture editor should really work together."

Coïc-Gallas could then take that edit and bring out sounds to give the action onscreen real heft and impact, and to maintain the characters' momentum through space. Especially given that "Flow" has a couple of bravura long takes that would likely scare anyone (except perhaps Jacques Tati), injecting a sense of movement and pacing into the sound design was paramount.

The birds are moving. The wat around all the time," Coïc-Gallas said. "And all the sound environments reflect the emotion of the cat."

When the cat finds a refuge to nap in an abandoned home, for instance, Coïc-Gallas sculpts the environment to be full of beautiful, safe-sounding natural sounds, birds, and insects, so what we hear is almost musical in its own right. "But when the cat is traveling away, the sound changes, and the backgrounds change. Sometimes they are mysterious, sometimes scary. Everything sounds natural, but the way that it is edited absolutely isn't."



'Flow' Courtesy Everett Collection

"I think the two of the longest shots, which are both almost five minutes long in their entirety, are driven by sound. There's no music," Zilbalodis said. "It required changing [the sound] to make them interesting for that length of time."

The fear of audience boredom certainly animated Coïc-Gallas to keep finding ways to shift our, and the cat's, perspective of moving through the world and employ sound with incredible specificity. "[Zilbalodis knows] you can't just ask for 'wind,' you have to ask for a wind with leaves. You are more specific because you've worked in a concrete way with sound," Coïc-Gallas said to Zilbalodis. "The fact that you've done all the sound design and sound editing of your previous movie really was really helpful."

There was one aspect of the sound design of "Flow" that no amount of previous experience could be helpful for, though: coaxing sound out of animals to get all the noises and expressions that Coïc-Gallas needed. His own cat "went silent" for about two months as soon as a microphone started appearing around the house; the film's chatty lemurs were only willing to make about three distinct sounds when recorded; and experiments in tickling a capybara did not yield sounds that felt true to the patient, sleepy older sibling figure that the character embodies in the movie.



'Flow' Sideshow and Janus Films

“I spent all day trying to record the capybara for nothing. So Gints heard the sound, and because Ginz is very polite, he didn’t shout about the sound of capybara, but it was terrible. So we tried to look for another sound in [sound libraries], and Gints had the idea of some camels,” Coïc-Gallas said. “I found the sound of a baby camel and it worked.”

Although Coïc-Gallas regrets that he’s disappointing zookeepers everywhere with the final sound design for the animal characters in “Flow,” it was more important for the animals to be as expressive as the actions onscreen. That, more than a wall of sound or tricks with directionality, is what helps immerse viewers in the journey.

“You have to create movement so you don’t get too boring. You choose a specific sound that you put first and create a specific emotion. It’s a different way of editing sound from live-action because you don’t have to be real. In live-action, when you see a car passing, you do have to make the sound. But in animation, you don’t need that,” Coïc-Gallas. “You can do everything you want. It’s very free.”

“Flow” is in select theaters now and opens nationwide December 6.

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Gints Zilbalodis's *Flow*

By David Hudson

THE DAILY—NOV 26, 2024

Gints
Zilbalodis's
Flow
(2024)



With each passing season, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid imagining what this planet is going to look like once we've finally made it uninhabitable for ourselves. In *Flow*, Latvia's entry in the race for the Oscar for Best International Feature Film and the winner of the audience award at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival, director Gints Zilbalodis never explains what's brought on floods of biblical proportions that his protagonist—a young gray cat whose character is “as well-developed as Atticus Finch,” as Calum Marsh puts it in the *New York Times*—flees after escaping a furious pack of dogs and a deer stampede.

“Fearful and suspicious,” writes Steven Scaife at Slant, “the cat eventually boards a sailboat as water swallows the landscape, falling in with other animals whose personalities are just as easy to decipher: a chilled-out capybara, a hoarding lemur, an excitable Labrador retriever, and a high-strung secretary bird. We're never at a loss to know how the cat feels at any given moment, as Zilbalodis finds multitudes in the position of its ears, the wideness of its pupils, and the skittering of its legs.”

In the *Los Angeles Times*, Robert Abele notes that “none of the furry or feathered stars of this meditative, wondrous adventure need to wisecrack their way into our hearts. Rather, we get to know animals as animals, not as vaudevillians engineered for maximum cuteness (although the star cat is damn adorable).” Abele finds himself “marveling at Zilbalodis’s fluid, shimmering visual majesty in establishing his computer-rendered ecosphere, marked by purposeful, roaming camerawork reminiscent of a cinematic marriage between Spielberg and Cameron at their most revealing and exciting . . . One of the year’s richest discoveries, *Flow* belongs as much to a timeline of animal-centric masterpieces (Au hasard Balthazar, Gunda, EO) as it does the history of animated indies.”

Flow is also “of a piece with Zilbalodis’s lauded 2019 debut *Away*,” writes the *Hollywood Reporter*’s David Rooney, who adds that “both are essentially silent movies and both owe a debt to the painterly canvases of animation master Hayao Miyazaki. The new work drops characters designed in classic cartoon style into ravishing photo-realistic environments, at times recalling the woodsy landscapes of Danish artist Peder Mørk Mønsted. Images of nature shimmer with light and color, though a shadow of danger is never far away.”

“A movie brimming with sentiment but not sentimentality, this is one of the most moving animated films in recent memory,” writes Christian Blauvelt at IndieWire, and *Rolling Stone*’s David Fear finds a connection between Zilbalodis’s fantasia and the endangered world we live in: “For many of us staring down the next four years, the idea that a community can come together to take on the rising tides couldn’t be more welcome or needed.”

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PRESTIGE JUNKIE

Sorry Moana, You're Up Against This Cool Cat for Oscar

'Moana 2' and 'Inside Out 2' made bank, but Gints Zilbalodis' hauntingly inventive 'Flow' — on a \$4M budget — could surprise everyone



KATEY RICH
DEC 02, 2024

Presented by
THE DAY OF THE
JACKAL



NO WORDS *Flow*'s feline star and his canine shipmate communicate without language, leaving the audience to fill in the gaps. (UFO Distribution)

I spent Thanksgiving weekend in my hometown in South Carolina and experienced something I never thought I would again: An enormous crowd lined up for a new release at the fairly shabby local AMC.

I had brought my children and their cousins to see *Moana 2*, and we were lucky to score seats in the very first row; the next showing, just an hour later, was almost completely sold out as well. We clearly weren't the only ones. *Moana 2* debuted as an instant smash, and by combining its powers with *Gladiator II* and *Wicked* the trio of releases created a long holiday weekend in which Hollywood, for once, truly had something for everyone.

Moana 2 and *Inside Out 2* put Disney-Pixar in a fascinating position heading into this year's best animated feature Oscar race. The studio is backing two enormous smash hits that are loved, but not nearly as well-loved as their predecessors and may struggle with awards because of it.

Undeniable Goliaths in the best animated feature category, with 15 wins across 23 years, Disney and Pixar still have formidable competition to deal with in this year's race. The Wild Robot director Chris Sanders, a [guest on my podcast](#) back in October, has been nominated for best animated feature three times but never won. Meanwhile Aardman Animation's icon Nick Park is back with the Netflix-backed *Wallace & Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl*, which could make for Park's fifth Oscar win, and second for animated feature. (Wallace and Gromit starred in three animated short winners in the '90s, not bad for an old man and his dog.)

Then there are the outsiders, who are more competitive in this race than you might expect. The animation branch almost always makes room for an oddball contender from abroad, and this year can choose from such projects as Australia's *Memoir of a Snail* — from Adam Elliot, who won the animated short Oscar in 2004 — or Latvia's *Flow*. Later in this newsletter I'll share my conversation with *Flow*'s director Gints Zilbalodis, and how he created a film that's both haunting and entirely accessible to audiences of all ages (my kids included).

None of this necessarily means there won't be room in the best animated feature race for *Moana 2* or especially for *Inside Out 2*, which didn't have to share its box office savior narrative when it opened in June. Then again, *Moana 2*'s origins as a Disney+ series may make it feel a little more episodic and disjointed than the original, but it's a pretty powerful comeback awards narrative for an industry still digging itself out from the Streaming Wars.

Could a vote for *Moana 2* mean a vote against streaming service disruption? And a vote for the triumph of theatrical? I've seen wilder campaign ideas work!

I'm perennially fascinated by the best animated feature race not only because I have young children (though it certainly helps), but because of the ways it can upend the expected Hollywood power rankings. Netflix has yet to take home its first best picture Oscar, but it won animated feature two years ago with Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio*. The anime-focused distributor GKids is almost never a force in awards season — unless, like last year, it's releasing a film by legend Hayao Miyazaki, and besting Pixar and Netflix to win an Oscar for *The Boy and the Heron*. That means that a dialogue-free Latvian film starring animals is absolutely competitive, especially when it's as compelling as Gints Zilbalodis' *Flow*. And Zilbalodis, despite his relaxed and genial nature, is probably getting used to blowing people away.

When Zilbalodis made the 2019 animated film *Away* entirely on his own, he earned acclaim that was mixed with astonishment; **The Guardian** praised the “extremely determined Latvian film-maker” who had made “something wondrous and original in a home studio.”

For his follow-up, Zilbalodis, 30, knew it was time to bring on collaborators and make something even more ambitious, but he wasn't going to parlay his success into a job at a larger studio like DreamWorks Animation or Pixar. “I was lucky to have that opportunity to get the funding in Latvia,” says the filmmaker, who made his first animated short while he was still in high school.

“I don't think a film like this could be made anywhere else, to have this trust in me,” says Zilbalodis, who lives in Riga, Latvia's capital city. “And I think it's exciting that there's going to be more and more films made in places without big industries, and we're going to see different perspectives on things from different types of people. Not just the different kinds of stories, but how they're told.”

His new animated feature *Flow*, which has been making its way across the fall festival circuit since debuting at Cannes, is exceptional proof of that belief. Told entirely without dialogue — and backed by a haunting score composed by Zilbalodis and Rihards Galupe — it follows the journey of a standoffish black cat through a flooded world.

The origin of the flood itself is a mystery, but so is the world itself: There are no humans but signs they once existed, from elaborate cities to an enormous mountaintop statue of a cat.

The world may be puzzling, but the cat and his eventual compatriots are recognizable and immediately lovable. There's a gentle capybara, an enthusiastic yellow lab, an antic lemur and an enormous, quietly noble secretary bird, all together on a rowboat looking for salvation — or at least dry land.

"I feel like we've seen similar stories from a human perspective, but we never experienced a story like this from a cat's perspective," says Zilbalodis, who based both the dog and cat on his former pets. "I just wasn't interested in humans. But I did want to leave some clues for the audience to consider what might have happened before the story began, or what might happen afterwards as well."



FLOW STATE "Because I wrote the script, I'm not precious about it," says Flow director Gints Zilbalodis. "When you have fewer resources, it forces you to really focus and be more deliberate." (Gareth Cattermole/Getty Images for IMDb)

When I saw *Flow* at the Toronto Film Festival in September it made a fascinating contrast with another festival premiere, *The Wild Robot*, another story about animals banding together to survive in the wild. Both are among the most acclaimed animated films of the year despite coming from wildly different circumstances — *The Wild Robot* a \$78 million effort from DreamWorks Animation, and *Flow* made for \$4 million pieced together with funds from three different European countries.

“Of course, it’s nice to have more money and to be less stressed about things,” Zilbalodis concedes. “But maybe when you have fewer resources, it forces you to really focus and be more deliberate.”

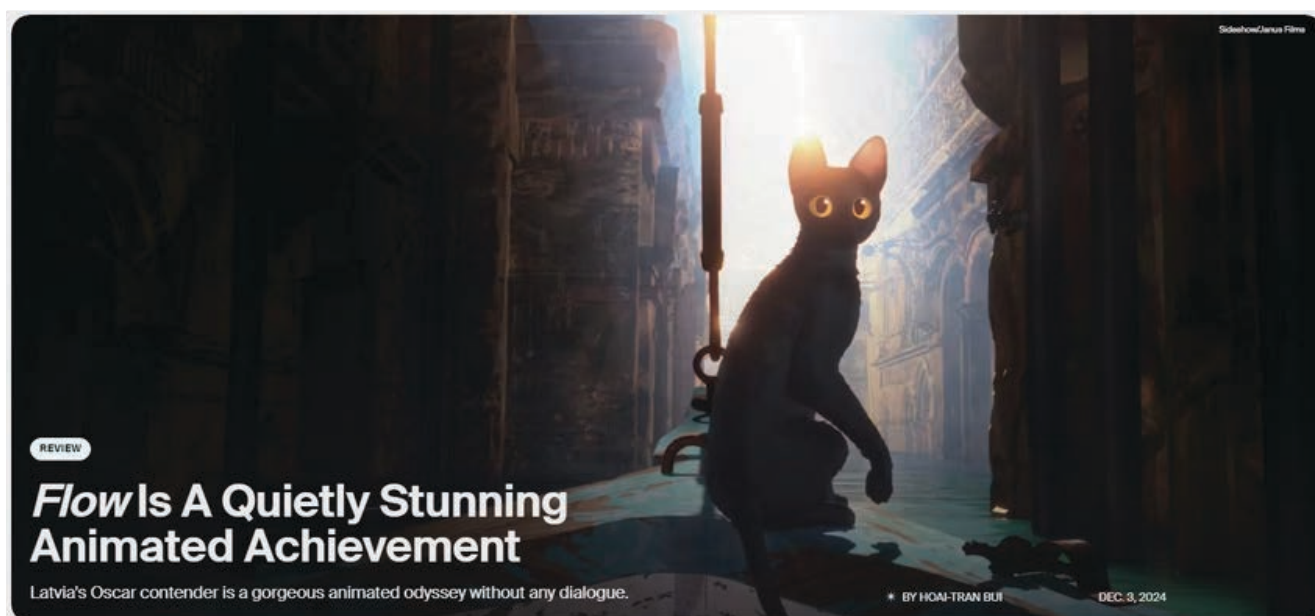
For Zilbalodis, being deliberate also means making room for improvisation, which in his case involved building an animated sketch of the world of *Flow* and moving his virtual camera within it, creating some of the sweeping shots that make the film such a visual marvel. Though Zilbalodis was working with a team this time, this part of the process was more like being a one-man band.

“Because I wrote the script, I’m not precious about it,” he explains. “I’m adapting it and making discoveries. And I do this myself because some of these things are kind of hard to explain my intention to others.”

One of the most captivating things about *Flow* is what’s explained and what’s not. We understand the slowly developing bond between the cat and the capybara without dialogue, but the nature of this world — and even the destination where their boat eventually takes them — remains mysterious.

When I watched *Flow* a second time with my children, they had the same big questions I did: Where did the cat statues come from? What’s up with the giant whale-like creatures? I warned them that Zilbalodis probably wouldn’t answer these questions in our interview, and he didn’t — but emphasized that they had understood everything they needed to know anyway.

“I feel like kids are a lot smarter than people tend to believe and can follow the stories. And I think this is a pretty easy-to-understand story,” he says. “I want the audience to think about the characters first, and that was my main priority. But I think it’s kind of interesting to have these evocative images. It’s more interesting to tell the story where the audience has to put the pieces together themselves.”



REVIEW

Flow Is A Quietly Stunning Animated Achievement

Latvia's Oscar contender is a gorgeous animated odyssey without any dialogue.

BY HOAI-TRAN BUI

DEC. 3, 2024

INVERSE REVIEWS

A black cat wanders through a forest when it sees its next prey: a wriggling fish in the river, just out of reach. But before Cat can pounce, a pack of dogs rushes in, plucking the fish out of the water. But what luck! The dogs fight over it, giving this feline the chance to snatch the fish and run off — fleeing before the dogs notice their meal is no longer there. Cat and dogs give chase, but this normal scene in the wilderness is interrupted by the abnormal: a stampede of fleeing deer, followed by a towering wave of water so huge it blots out the sky. Soon, Cat is caught in the tidal wave, which quickly covers the entire world in an endless flood.

Flow, an animated adventure film directed by Gints Zilbalodis and written by Zilbalodis and Matīss Kaža, is Latvia's entry for the Best International Film Oscar — and it's easy to see why. A narratively minimalist, visually splendid odyssey, *Flow* is an invigorating new innovation in 3D animation thanks to its unique hybrid of traditional CG animation and video game cinematics. The result is something like a painting come to life, a stunning tableau upon which Zilbalodis can draw his sweetly moving story of animals weathering a biblical apocalypse.



Cat is accompanied on this strange odyssey by a dog, a capybara, and a secretary bird. [IDESHOW/JANUS FILMS](#)

Flow's story is a relatively straightforward one: Cat moves from one obstacle to the next trying to survive the flood. But despite being a solitary creature, it gains unlikely allies along the way: a hard-nosed capybara with a heart of gold, a greedy lemur that loves anything that shines, an aloof Secretarybird with a wounded wing, and a cheery yellow Labrador that has to work to earn Cat's trust. The group of misfit survivors end up taking refuge on the same dingy boat, which they quickly learn how to steer through the turbulent waters.

The group undergoes many distressing close calls, each sequence relentlessly tense and efficiently constructed. Some are the kind of obstacles you expect like rocky waters that turn into a giant waterfall, a gang of rival lemurs that raid the boat of its supplies. Others are more unpredictable, like the empty ruins of human cities that the group solemnly navigate, or a strange Mayan-style temple that appears to exert some cosmic power over the Earth.

It would be easy to compare *Flow* to a Pixar or Disney film, but there's a lovely minimalism to the Latvian film that is miles away from the mile-a-minute dialogue and winking humor typical of U.S. animation. Instead, there's a undercurrent of curious melancholy to the film as the animals find themselves floating through an abandoned world, all the signs of humans having inhabited it long ago, but either abandoning it or perishing before the flood.

Cat, for example, had been living in a house that was seemingly recently inhabited; its bed still made, pencils and paper still lying strewn across the desk (many of them containing sketches of cats), dishes still on the table. But the outside has been taken over by overgrown plants and weeds, and the structure seems on the verge of collapse. You can imagine that Cat, stubbornly loyal to this empty house, was fruitlessly waiting for its human to come home.



Cat finds a giant cat statue in the woodsSIDESHOW/JANUS FILMS

It's in these small, lovely details that *Flow* finds its magic. It's a different vision of a post-apocalyptic landscape: an Earth empty of humans, but still teeming with life. All sorts of animals, exotic and common, fight to survive this great flood, many defying their natural instincts and banding together. It's a wholesome arc, to watch Cat and a strange found family learn how to co-exist after knocking heads (often literally), before finally coming to embrace and protect each other. There's something almost ... human about it.

It all coalesces in a sweet, beautifully rendered eco-fable that proves that life can exist beyond the apocalypse, if only for the cutest, furriest of creatures. Its simple, endearing story, combined with its unique animation, makes *Flow* one of the most unique, refreshing apocalypse movies to be released this decade.

Flow is playing in limited theaters now. It opens in wide release December 6.

RELATED TAGS

Director Interview: Gints Zilbalodis on FLOW

By [Nicolas Rapold](#) | December 3, 2024

One non-studio animated feature gaining attention and admiration this year is FLOW from Latvian filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis. It's an immersive, dialogue-free journey led by a cat in a world suddenly overrun by a massive flood. Humans seem to have vanished, leaving behind animals to fend for themselves during this climate disaster. The saucer-eyed black cat encounters other beasts doing their best, such as a capybara, a lemur, a towering secretary bird, and a pack of dogs. These animals inhabit a world that's been compared to the transparently luminous realms of ruins and nature in the classic computer game Myst, but their movements often track closely with those of actual animals (especially the fear responses of the cat).

In advance of the film's nationwide release on December 6, I talked with Zilbalodis about the inspirations and behavioral models for his character designs as well as the film's environments.

Was the inspiration for the film more environmental, or mythological, like Noah's Ark?

Neither of those, really. It's a personal story first for me. This is my first film that I've made with a team and a proper budget. Before, I was working by myself. I thought it would be a good idea to tell a story about these feelings and experiences I would have when I would work with a team, because that's something that I was a bit anxious about. I thought I could tell a story about a character who has to learn how to trust others and how to work together. And I thought that the cat would be the perfect character for this journey, because cats are very independent.

I actually made a short film about a cat who's afraid of water many years ago. The focus of that film was more on fear in general. But when I decided to adapt it into this feature, I wanted to focus more on the cat's fear of relationships with these other characters. But then these allegories or interpretations emerged organically. I thought the flood would be a great source of conflict, because that's something we don't need to explain to anyone: that cats don't like water.

And I just thought it would be interesting to see this flooded world, unlike the short film I'd done, which was set in this vast open ocean. I thought it would be more interesting to have a bigger variety of landscapes so that we can tell the story through the environment. But I was aware of how it could be seen as a story about climate change or natural disaster.



Still from FLOW. Courtesy of Sideshow and Janus Films.

Was the character design and movement of the animals inspired by actual animals?

In all the films I've done so far, I have not used dialogue. I thought that having these animals behave like [real] animals would allow me to tell the film more visually. I also thought that we've seen this type of film where the animals are basically humans. They just look like animals, but they behave like humans, and they tell jokes or walk on two legs. There are some good examples of that, but I'm tired of seeing that over and over. And I feel like having the animals behave in a more grounded way makes the story more engaging and emotional as well because then the stakes feel bigger, and everything seems bigger because we're seeing it through the cat's point of view. And also they're funny! We don't need to exaggerate the animals or have them tell jokes because they're funny and entertaining as they are.

So we studied real animals. We looked at a lot of references for pretty much every moment in the film. But we're not copying. We're interpreting real life. We're not interested in making a documentary, we're telling a story. So it's about finding that balance where it feels believable, where they feel like real animals, but also they can be expressive, and they can convey emotions. The motivations that drive these characters are quite instinctual, so I believe it's not too far of a stretch to imagine that animals would behave in this way. Of course we have to take some artistic liberties to tell the story.

What references specifically were you looking at? Nature documentary, YouTube videos, or what?

Well, I personally had cats and dogs growing up, so I knew their behavior quite well, for when I'm coming up with the story. And also with cats and dogs, I think we have to be more specific and really pay attention that we get them right because most people recognize them and their behavior. So they would feel if it's not right. With the other animals, like the lemur and the capybara and the bird, I think we have a little bit more freedom. So our animators would record their own pets, and of course there's an endless library of cat videos and dog videos on YouTube. We went to the zoo to study animals and film them, and we also recorded real animal voices for the sounds.

I especially like the choice of a capybara because capybaras do seem to be notably accepting of interspecies companionship. Was that part of the idea? It's even become a bit of an internet meme.

Yeah, that was an inspiration. Because I thought, there are no antagonists in this film, they're all kind of flawed in their own way. That's what makes these characters interesting. They have conflicts between each of them and they have different ways of seeing life, but even throughout all of this conflict, there's one character that seems to be at peace, and that's the capybara. I thought it would be funny, but also profound: that even in the face of this craziness, there's one character who was really peaceful. And I wish I could be like that.



Still from FLOW. Courtesy of Sideshow and Janus Films

Generally I felt the movie took place in a kind of “animal” sense of time. What was the thinking behind that?

In terms of how the time is condensed or stretched? It wasn't a very conscious decision. It was that the whole story takes place in just a few days. And sometimes we need to have the time passing to allow these characters to have enough time to bond, because I think it wouldn't just happen immediately. And I guess when you are in an intense situation, your perception of time does change.

The secretary bird is another expressive choice of character.

In the short film I used a seagull, but in this version, we needed something that felt more majestic and imposing and had more of a presence. It also needed to be much bigger to be able to carry the cat at one point. So I discovered these secretary birds, which really fit. How did you discover them?

How did you discover them?

I just like googled some birds. I don't know.

In terms of the animation style, why did you choose this particular brand of lucid, sort-of realism?

It was a long process to figure out what the film will feel and look like. I was interested in using the camera in a rather active way and following the characters very closely, so that it creates this immersive feeling. Because there's no dialogue, it leaves a void in storytelling, so I think we can be more expressive with everything else. The technique of the camera is influenced mostly by live-action films. I didn't want to use conventional coverage or close-ups or wide shots.

I also wasn't interested in creating something hyper-real, but in making it feel real rather than actually look real. I think that there's a case to be made that if you do a photo-realistic look, it's not as immersive and you can't express as much as when you abstract or stylize certain things. And there's also a lot of storytelling happening within the backgrounds. So we start with the character and then try and figure out what kind of environment would help us to convey this specific emotion.

Did any environments on Earth inspire the backgrounds?

We wanted to create that sense of adventure where you've never seen this before, so that you feel like you're experiencing it at the same time as the cat. So that's why we're not setting it in any specific place. And [that way] we're also not constrained by using real environments. My goal is to create something that feels timeless, so you don't see any modern-day buildings or technology. But yeah, there's some influences from European-looking architecture, from Southeast Asian architecture, or Mayan or Aztec-like temples and bigger structures. There're a few scenes which feel like Latvia. I didn't want it to feel repetitive or claustrophobic, so it's elements from all over the world.



Still from FLOW. Courtesy of Sideshow and Janus Films

Do visual ideas arise organically while making the film, outside of the script, and if so, what's an example?

I make an animatic in 3D instead of storyboards, so we have this three-dimensional environment that's a lot more detailed than most storyboards and I can even see lighting and some effects. The story is pretty much there in the script. But there were some changes, and making the animatic is like another draft of the script. Maybe 20% of the animatic is different from the script. After finishing writing the script, I never even read it. So when I'm visualizing these scenes, I'm kind of going based on my memory of the script. And I think this is important because it allows me to be kind of more loose and make discoveries.

One example is in the beginning of the film we see these statues of the cats, and that wasn't in the script. In the script we had one statue, a human statue, and when I was visualizing this scene I needed to find a way to convey how time passes when the flood rises. It happens over a long time, and I had this idea of an image in my mind where these different cats would be kind of sinking. And these are basically these cat statues, which allowed this sense of anxiety that I needed to convey. And that's like a visual kind of emotional feeling that I had when I was creating these images, but I couldn't imagine that when I was writing it.

What filmmakers have been important influences for you?

I'm more influenced by some live-action filmmakers than animation. With animation, I can clearly say that Miyazaki is an influence in terms of not following a straightforward story structure, and also having these moments of peace and quiet between the more intense parts to have that dynamic range within the tempo of the film, where there's excitement but also a moment of reflection. And also in not having antagonists: there are different characters who have different points of view, but you can kind of see that they're both right. And that makes them more interesting rather than having just some evil character or good character, which I don't feel like real-life really is. But there are also other filmmakers like Alfonso Cuarón, and Kurosawa, and Paul Thomas Anderson.

One question we haven't covered: do you have cats?

Currently, I don't have a cat. But I had a cat growing up, which was the inspiration for this character.

What was the cat's name?

I had two, and maybe the one I had for a longer time was called Josephine.

Like Napoleon and Josephine?

Yeah. This cat [in FLOW] doesn't have really a name. It's not exactly my cat. We call them “the cat” and “the dog” so hopefully everyone can see their own cat and dog in these characters.

Sloan Science and Film is made possible by generous support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

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EXCLUSIVE

Watch the Director of 'Flow' Go Behind the Scenes of the Best Animated Movie of the Year

In an exclusive video from Sideshow and Janus, Gints Zilbalodis explains the guiding philosophy behind his wordless, truly universal animal epic.

BY CHRISTIAN BLAUVELT
DECEMBER 4, 2024 4:00 PM



If you haven't yet seen **"Flow,"** Latvian director **Gints Zilbalodis'** wordless, instant-classic animated **film** about a group of animals dealing with a world-changing flood, you haven't seen the best animated film of the year — and **one of the best movies of 2024, full-stop**. This is a movie that transcends all language and cultural barriers in a uniquely universal way.

And now, in an exclusive video from distributors Sideshow and Janus available only on IndieWire, Zilbalodis talks through his vision and how it came to be, from the **lush CGI virtual environments** he created on his computer-created film sets to his "casting" process for the animals. Watch the video above.

"I just create these sets in 3D and take a virtual camera," Zilbalodis said. "And almost like a live-action location scout, I discover ideas and I can place the camera while still adjusting the set. I do that instead of drawing storyboards. CG animation gives me very complicated camera moves that would be impossible to do in live action."

"I just create these sets in 3D and take a virtual camera," Zilbalodis said. "And almost like a live-action location scout, I discover ideas and I can place the camera while still adjusting the set. I do that instead of drawing storyboards. CG [animation](#) gives me very complicated camera moves that would be impossible to do in live action."

"[Flow](#)" centers on an adorable black cat, whose movements are stunningly naturalistic. He also meets a capybara, a lemur, a secretarybird, and several dogs, who all have to learn to live together in a small boat that's like a mini ark for them after a great flood alters their world.

"It was almost like a casting process," Zilbalodis said of choosing what animals to include. "Where I was looking at different animals and considering how they might interact. It was important that they are both distinct visually and in terms of their voices. But I wanted none of them to be antagonists. I wanted them to be relatable. The characters were chosen thinking about the theme, which is looking for a group where you belong."

"We used real animal voices. It's not humans mimicking animals," the filmmaker said. "The only animal where we did take some artistic liberties is the capybara, because the voice was so high-pitched and unpleasant and this character is very calm and peaceful. We needed something deeper, so the capybara's voice is a baby camel." Read Sarah Shachat's [interview with Zilbalodis and sound designer Gurwal Coïc-Gallas](#) to learn more about the movie's unique aural textures.

Watching the cat in particular, animation aficionados will be reminded of the close study Disney's animators gave to real animals and their movements when they animated the cute critters of "Pinocchio" and "Bambi." The cat's slinky-like stretches call to mind the cat Figaro from "Pinocchio," in particular, which was a high point of animating an animal in an expressive way, but still letting him be an animal and not overly assigning him human characteristics. (Figaro alone is part of the reason IndieWire chose "Pinocchio" as the greatest [Disney Animated Movie of all time](#).)

Zilbalodis doesn't invoke Disney in the video, but his animators clearly used a similar process. "All credit goes to our animators," he said of the animals' realistic movements. "Our approach I'd say is naturalism rather than realism. So we are studying real life. Everything is animated by hand from these artists who studied these animals and interpreted their movement."

"Flow" is now playing in theaters nationwide.

READ MORE:

[ANIMATION](#) | [FILM](#) | [FLOW](#) | [GINTS ZILBALODIS](#)

TOP STORY

Gints Zilbalodis On The Improvisational Filmmaking Style Of “Flow”



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12/04/2024 1 55 pm |

By JOE FORDHAM

At a slender 85-minute running time, the Janus Films/Sideshow release *Flow* is a small miracle of a film. The second feature from Latvian animator Gints Zilbalodis, following his solo-created debut *Away* (<https://www.cartoonbrew.com/feature-film/yes-one-animator-made-the-cg-animated-feature-away-on-his-own-172803.html>) – winner of Annecy Film Festival’s 2019 Contrechamp Award – *Flow* was by design a more collaborative exercise.

Created primarily in Blender (<https://www.blender.org>), with a stylized all-animal cast, *Flow* is a wordless drama set in a dreamlike, post-apocalyptic era. Jungle settings are eerily devoid of humans and, from time to time, succumb to terrifying floods. Protagonists include a small housecat, a boisterous Labrador, an amiable capybara, an acquisitive lemur, and an errant secretary bird, all of whom band together in a struggle for survival.

The project was produced at Dream Well Studio (<https://www.dreamwell.lv>) in Latvia, with 3d character animation created in France and Belgium, as an outgrowth of a short film. “I first started doing animation when I was eight,” Gints Zilbalodis, 30, told *Cartoon Brew*.

“I had Flash software that I used to make silly internet cartoons, and then, when I was 15, I became more serious about it. That’s when I made my first short film, *Rush*. I was interested in any type of filmmaking, but I felt like I had more control over things that I could animate over time, and I could tell fantastical stories. After *Rush*, I made my next film, *Aqua* (<https://www.cartoonbrew.com/student/aqua-by-gints-zilbalodis-56986.html>), which was like the early version of *Flow*.”

Aqua’s images of a small cat in a swirling ocean, which Zilbalodis created while studying painting and drawing at Janis Rozentāls Art School, in Riga, offered hints at *Flow*’s themes. Zilbalodis gravitated toward 3d animation, which he expanded upon in *Away*. *Away*’s success on the festival circuit paved the way for *Flow*.

Cartoon Brew caught up last week with Zilbalodis, who was on a press tour in New York City, to discuss his new film. Since the interview, *Flow* went on to win the New York Film Critics Circle award (<https://www.cartoonbrew.com/awards/new-york-film-critics-circle-name-flow-best-animated-film-of-2024-244082.html>) for best animated feature of 2024.

Cartoon Brew: Take us through your creative process on *Flow*. Did you and your co-writer Matiss Kaža start with a traditional screenplay?

Gints Zilbalodis: In my previous films, I just had an outline. In this case, we had a bigger budget, and to get the funding, we needed a script. We wrote many drafts, and it kept evolving. After finishing the script, I did not read it again. Even when I was making the animatic, that was based on my memory of the script. I made the animatic chronologically. I created the environment, then I explored it with the camera. I like the freedom of exploring the space with the camera. And this was necessary because the camera moves so much. It was impossible to draw that.

The film is full of imagery of flowing water, but the camera also flows through this landscape. How did you do that?



That happened in the animatic process. I move the camera and the character simultaneously. It’s like a choreographed dance between them and it’s a very spontaneous, organic process. I tried using an app on my phone that allows you to record like a camera as you walk around, but I found that to be imprecise.

Gintz Zilbalodis.

Instead, I keyframed the camera. I'd place it in the first position, and then add the next. I then added layers of handheld movement. I had multiple types of movements, for standing still, walking, and running. That gave me control, and I could add imperfections, which helped the tension of the film. It also made it feel more grounded as if the camera was not catching everything perfectly, like a real person trying to react to events. I wanted it to feel like we were inside this world, not observing from a distance. I went between the shots. That took a year and a half. I was doing other things at the same time, setting up our studio, hiring people, and creating the workflow.



The opening is a great setup, revealing the cat's home abandoned but surrounded by strange feline sculptures. How did you build that?

That's a good example of how ideas were discovered during the animatic process. In the script, we didn't have the cat statues. There was just a single statue of a human figure. During the animatic, I decided to add more statues and make them cats, instead of humans.

But then I took that human statue and I put it in a later scene. The reason why I changed the statues into cats was that I needed to show time passing when the water rises, flooding the home. And I thought the image of the cat statues drowning created a sense of anxiety for the cat.

I then had to reverse-engineer the logic of why the statues were there. We knew this was a house that the cat lived in, but after adding the statues, we changed it to an artist's workshop. Maybe this was the owner of the cat, and the cat was this artist's muse?

Tell us how you got into the animals' heads, especially that curious, frightened, little feline – is he, or she a kitten?

We didn't consider the age or gender of the animals. Hopefully, you can see your own pet in them. We animated all the animals by hand. Of course, we couldn't put cats in motion capture suits and drop them into water. Also, cats don't do what you ask them to do. We did look at a lot of references. We studied our own pets, and videos on Youtube, and we went to the zoo. I would describe our approach as naturalism rather than realism. The difference is that we were studying real life, not copying it. We were observing and telling a story.



As we get to know the animals, they do slightly magical things, like using the tiller of a boat to steer their way down a river. How did you gauge those moments?

It was important that these characters have agency. We started very grounded and gradually went to more of a magical realism approach later. It happens gradually, and we have some setups, so it doesn't happen out of thin air. But even in these moments, we looked for animal behaviors that we could use.

The animals are unnamed in the film, but there are photos of a Labrador retriever on your Instagram that resemble the dog in the film – what is his name, and how did he inform that Chaplin-esque canine?

I have two dogs, Audrey and Taira (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BVwV7Ezgvno/?hl=en>). I think, even though the dog is a funny character, we didn't sprinkle jokes on top of the story. Its behavior is driven by its character. The dog is the opposite of the cat. The cat ends up learning to trust others, but the dog starts at that place and ends up more independent. I wanted to show that there are positives and negatives to both of those ideas.



Concept art for the secretary birds

There is geographical mix among the animals – lemurs are native to Madagascar, capybaras are from South America, and secretary birds are from Africa. Were they mixed up by this flood?

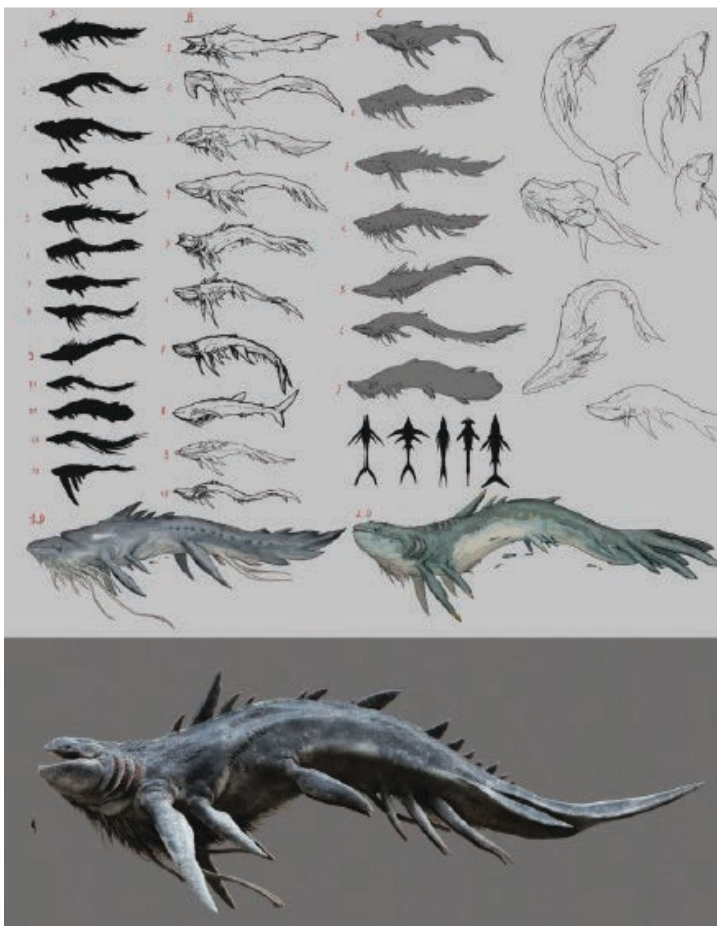
I wanted a variety of animals, and I wanted them to be visually distinctive, but I didn't think about the logic too much. Maybe there was a zoo that they all escaped? Or, maybe they were movie-set animals and they were shooting a film somewhere?

One of the most mysterious creatures is a whale-like cetacean who feels like he has a deeper, mythical feeling. What were your concepts for that?

During development, it was a whale, but it needed to represent the cat's anxieties and fears of the unknown. We as humans know that whales are peaceful, and I wanted to put the audience in the cat's perspective and make it afraid of the whale, so we changed the design to make it more of a mythical creature. It feels scary, but later – I don't want to spoil it – the cat overcomes those fears.

How did you design your natural environments?

A large part of the story takes place on a boat, and we didn't want that to feel claustrophobic. They visit a variety of places, with different moods. And through the environments, we get an understanding of what happens within the character's heads. We wanted it to feel timeless. There are no modern-day buildings. And we combined different influences, to create a sense of adventure.



They travel toward a mysterious sunken city, which takes on great significance for the cat in its friendship with the bird. What were your concepts there?

The city was meant to evoke a maze and an obstacle. The cat feels helpless on its own, but with the bird, it manages to overcome those challenges. That environment needed to be imposing, but I didn't want it to feel like any real place. They are not canals that they are navigating, they are flooded streets, where we see trees submerged with fish swimming through. Even though it feels post-apocalyptic, I wanted it to feel like this was maybe a new beginning. Nature is reclaiming these places.

Concept art for the whale-like cetacean in

There is a cosmic element with what looks like aurora borealis beckoning the cat, leading to a moment of epiphany. How did you design those visuals?

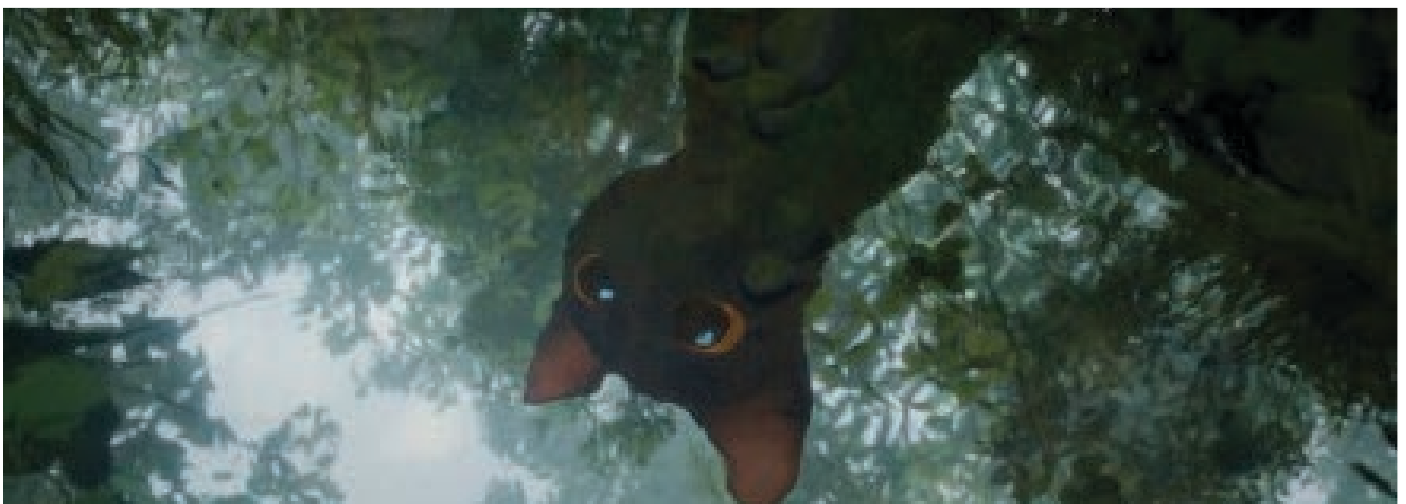
I knew the characters should have a goal, and the cat, who is always trying to climb up high to escape from the flood, becomes obsessed with reaching these distant towers. So, I knew that they were going there, but I couldn't figure out what would happen once they reached this place. As we wrote the script, I also wrote the music, and that unlocked ideas. I used some electronic instruments that evoked this cosmic imagery. That guided the scene. I wanted it to have enough time to develop. There was a pretty extended climbing [sequence] that I wanted to create a sense of an arduous journey. And when they reach their goal, there is a big climax. We created these abstract, surreal sequences to understand what the characters are feeling, and that is conveyed in a very expressionistic way.

You've spoken about what Flow represented for you in finding your way as a team leader. To give your team a shout-out – how many worked on this?

We did preproduction, modeling, texturing, music, and color grading, all in Latvia. But in Latvia, we have traditions of hand-drawn and stop-motion animation, but we don't have many cg animators. So in France and Belgium, we did character animation, particularly in France where there is a huge industry. We worked together, which fitted well with the theme of the film. We had about 20 character animators. Animation took about half a year. The whole production was five years. In Latvia, we were a very small team, me and two or three other people. We all fit in a single room. Some worked on the film for a week or two, others worked for a year. Altogether, we had about 45 people.

What's next for you?

I am going to try to maintain this independence. On a smaller budget, we have more freedom to tell personal stories, to explore techniques, and take bigger swings. It is exciting that films can be made in places without a big industry, with different perspectives and different types of stories. And, because it's animation, it can reach a global audience. We're not bound by any specific culture.





Interview: 'Flow' director Gints Zilbalodis - 5 décembre 2024

DEC 05, 2024

FEATURES , FILM , INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW: 'FLOW' DIRECTOR GINTS ZILBALODIS

"PEOPLE ARE SEEKING SOMETHING NEW."

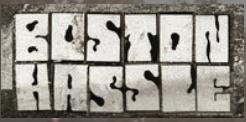
BY KYLE AMATO



Fresh off a spate of Best Animated Feature awards from critics groups, Flow director Gints Zilbalodis made time for a Hassle chat, discussing his incredible story of a brave little cat in an unknowable world. (This interview has been lightly edited for, uh, flow).

GINTSBOSTON HASSLE: How has the world tour been? I've noticed it's been at essentially every festival, which is exciting.

GINTS ZILBALODIS: Yeah, it's pretty intense. Basically, I finished the film right before Cannes in May, which was very stressful. And since Cannes, it's been almost non-stop going from festival to festival. I haven't even counted, but I think it's more than twenty that I've attended so far, and I still have many more to go. But it's great, after spending years and years working on the film with a small team, actually going out and seeing how audiences respond. In many festivals we're the only animated film shown, so it's nice to see these boundaries being blurred with animation— not just being set on the sidelines, being considered as equal to any film.



BH: Yeah, I'm a big animation person, so I was seeking it out because I saw it on the TIFF list. I'm always really interested to see anything outside of the studio system be animated because it's always– I don't have to tell you, but it seems extremely time consuming and very perfectionist- based, and it always has to be a labor of love. So I'm always excited to see how these things develop.

What is the animation process for Flow? It's 3D animated, but is it being painted each frame? Because it looks very watercolor-y to me. I assume there was some sort of technique you had been using, but I wasn't sure what.

GZ: Without going too much into technical detail, it's not exactly painted, but every frame is really designed. It's not just random. Every light, we use all kinds of lights and different textures. It's quite complicated when the camera is moving a lot. It's a lot easier when you have static close-up shots, but you have these wide angle shots, which are sometimes very long. It's quite tricky to paint that graphic look. It was important that it has that graphic look, because this more realistic style we've seen so much, I think I'm getting tired of it. People are seeking something new. It's cool to see that there's multiple different styles being explored in bigger films. But I think in a smaller film, a more independent film like Flow, we have more freedom to do that, more flexibility. And I wanted to have these imperfections, where even though it's made in the computer, we see some brush strokes. We only put detail where it's really necessary. GZ: It's like another tool to kind of guide the audience where they should look at, almost like focus with a camera, where some things are more abstracted than others. We're designing a bunch of tools and textures and shaders. Compared to my previous film, I think this is somewhat more detailed. You see the grass, all these different plants and the water, which was really hard to do. Water animation is one of the hardest things. We had to develop all kinds of new tools for that. I wanted the characters to feel almost undrawn in some way.





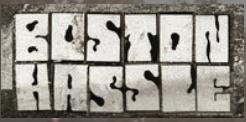
We don't render every hair on them. We create this kind of stylized silhouette, which suggests the foreground. And this allows us, I think, to be more expressive with the designs and the performances.

BH: There was such a physicality and it's always interesting to see. These characters don't have thumbs, but they have to work on this boat together. How did you strike the balance with the characters– the cat, the capybara, the dog and everyone– between them acting like animals and letting them sort of make more active choices? Because it seems like they're sort of in between, like the cat freaks out of water and it's just kind of getting into trouble, but then seems to sort of understand the danger and the need to be on the boat. And I mean, none of them understand what's going on, but it just feels like it goes back and forth of just like when they are able to overcome their own instincts and not. And I just wasn't sure how you approach that.

GZ: There wasn't a concrete guideline. It was a case by case kind of matter, where I wanted them to feel as grounded as possible, but we're not making a documentary. I'm not interested in that. We're telling a story, but all these personalities, they're based on the core characteristics of these animals, how the cat is independent and the dog is friendly. So we're not adding some random personality on them, but everything's built around that. But then we're kind of creating these situations where they behave almost contradictory to their instincts. We create these archetypes, but then we push them and challenge them to behave in unconventional ways, which I find interesting and break these stereotypes. Maybe in the beginning of the film, it's more grounded, but once they get in the boat and we need to show how they behave, we can't use dialogue. We have to do that through the behavior, the decisions they make. And so it was important that these characters have agency, that they have decisions, they're also difficult, there's no easy answer to them. And we see some of them respond differently to them. So we have to push some of this behavior, but because our goal is to do that gradually, where it starts out really being grounded, and then we push the behavior a little bit more.

BH: That makes sense. It starts out very grounded because the cat is in his empty house, but then you sit with him more and you're just like, what happened here? And then the water comes, and he's like, oh no, there's a flood. But then the flood is above the trees, and you're just like, okay, this is not normal, and the world really builds that way. What was your inspiration for the setup of this world? It really reminded me of *Shadow of the Colossus*, where you're kind of just dropped into this space that feels empty, but is so full of just like something's going on, where you're just like, where am I right now?

GZ: Yeah, I think it's fun to start in the middle of something and let the audience kind of figure out what happens. And not with words, but through environments and leaving a bunch of clues for them to pick up. They have to actively participate in the storytelling. They have to pay attention. And maybe they will not catch everything on the first watch, which is fine. They should focus on the character. But if you rewatch it, you might figure out what happened before the story began and what happens after. But you're kind of experiencing this from the cat's point of view, so the cat doesn't really understand this, and so the audience also isn't told what happened. But I wanted this world to feel kind of timeless.



There's no modern day technology or skyscrapers or cell phones. And it's not really set in the real world. It's kind of two preferences for three places to kind of combine them and make something new to help us [understand the] story and help us understand these characters. The world isn't as important to me as the characters. So it's all there for a reason. I didn't write a long history of what happened; it's all there to help us convey what the cat is feeling, and to challenge it and to create these obstacles, which they need to either work together to overcome or which creates conflict between them to kind of set them apart. I start with the idea of the emotion that I need to convey, and then I try to reverse engineer it and figure out a reason why a thing like that or a place like that would exist.

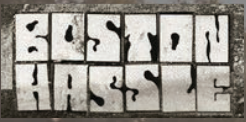


BH: The setting really serves to amplify what the cat is feeling, where the cat is like, "I'm alone, I'm in danger, but I can't trust anyone, but maybe I can a little bit, but also I shouldn't." I'm just really impressed with how it looks and how everything came together. Is there anything you really learned while making Flow that you think you'll carry into your next film?

GZ: For Flow, we had to actually establish a studio and figure out the whole pipeline and everything, so the next one should be a lot easier and faster because we have that. I think I will focus more on the storytelling rather than spending a lot of time doing a bunch of technical things. I learned a lot, but I think I will trust others to do that. I'll try to delegate more on the next project.

BH: Just like the cat.

GZ: My first feature I made myself, and now I'm trying to delegate more and more with each of the films. I've kind of learned how to trust others and how to communicate, convey my ideas to others, and let them translate that.



And because we work with so many people who are much better than me, I understand the basics of sound, but I can't do what the sound designer does. It's helpful that I've kind of done it. I know the basics, and I think it's good for directors to actually try doing all these different things. It's pretty fast to learn the basics, but to become an expert, it takes a long time. My first film, *Away*, was my unofficial film school where I learned everything. And this film as well, only after finishing it, I think I understand how to do it because we're really learning all this stuff. I never worked with a team, and my producer had never done animation, and many of the crew members, it was their first experience of working in a team like this. Many of them had worked independently. Now I feel like only after finishing do we know what we're doing.

BH: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So what sort of animation really inspired you when you were either first starting out or when you were a kid? Where did you decide, I'm going to do that? Because I'm always interested because everyone has different first times.

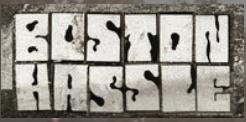
GZ: I don't have one single experience, but there's a bunch of films inspired by Miyazaki and Ghibli. I couldn't name a single film because it's all part of a bigger body of work. But it's actually more live action films than animation. Maybe the way the filmmakers use the camera to tell the story, not just do conventional coverage of close-ups and wide shots. Have each shot be very specifically designed and be very expressive with the camera and the editing. And I feel like with a film like this, without dialogue, you can be more expressive. I have to think about some examples. There's Alfonso Cuarón, Kurosawa, Sergio Leone, Scorsese, Paul Thomas Anderson, Hitchcock. All kinds of filmmakers. I think a film like this could only be done in animation because they're animals and they're in water and you can't really ask a cat to do certain things. It does what it wants.

BH: I was very stressed out for the cat because I didn't know what was going to happen. So I am excited to watch it again to know the cat's going to be fine. Whatever's going on with the world, not my problem. But I'm just like, the cat's okay. I can focus more on just how everything looks. Like you said, water is the hardest thing to animate, so it's so impressive that this movie takes place during a flood.

GZ: Because we understand the cat's fear of water. We don't have to explain it. Before our premiere in Latvia, we had a big flood. Our studio was flooded as well. It was just in Spain for a festival and there was a big flood as well.

BH: It's following you.

GZ: It's kind of scary. But it also allows us to tell the story without antagonists. It's really nature that's creating all this conflict. I want these animals, these characters to be kind of flawed in their way, but they're relatable as well. I didn't want just good characters and bad characters. So I think that's more interesting.



BH: I was thinking about that with the dog. The dog really feels like he has the most conflict because he wants to help everyone but his buddies are just kind of like... they're dogs. He pulls a couple of faces when they mess up the lemur's stuff. He's just like, "Sorry, guys. You know how my buddies are." I just found it so funny and interesting. It felt like a much more pro-cat movie than pro-dog movie in that way.

GZ: I love both cats and dogs. Because maybe this is a story told from the cat's point of view. The story is kind of guiding how we portray these characters. Maybe I will do a dog movie next to have an opposite point of view. But let me say this one dog doesn't follow just the group— it thinks for itself. So that was important. Showing that the cat is on this journey from being independent to working together and the dog is actually learning the opposite thing. It becomes more independent to kind of show the good and the bad of both of these things.

F l o w

2024 dir. Gints Zilbalodis 84 min.

Opens Friday, 12/6 @ Coolidge Corner Theatre, Capitol Theatre (Arlington), Alamo Drafthouse Seaport, and AMC Boston Common

T A G S F L O W , G I N T S Z I L B A L O D I S

B O S T O N H A S S L E

The Boston Hassle is brought to you by the musicians, artists, writers, and enthusiasts of the Boston area. Your daily guide, since 2011, focusing on, but not strictly so, the independent & (sub)cultural music /art / lm scenes and communities in Greater Boston and New England at large, and the often marginalized cultures that comprise and support them. We foster a community of writers and citizen journalists who uncover vital elements of our city routinely ignored by mainstream media, and allow up-and-coming writers a platform for their work. [Read More](#)

Movie Review: A wordless Latvian cat parable about climate change is the year's best animated movie



BY JAKE COYLE

Updated 6:42 PM UTC+1, December 6, 2024

Of all the post-apocalyptic landscapes we've been treated to over the years, none is as beautiful nor peaceful as that of "Flow."

In Gints Zilbalodis' wondrously shimmering animated fable, a solitary black cat, after escaping a cataclysmic flood, navigates a water world. What brought things to this point is never explained. We're left to look upon this strange, verdant and overgrown landscape through the amber eyes of our unnamed feline protagonist. Humans are completely absent, and it's part of this beguilingly meditative film to wonder not just about what role we played in the flood, but to ponder the grace of the animal life left to inherit the Earth.

As much as I didn't have a wordless Latvian animated movie on my 2024 bingo card, "Flow" — an expected Oscar contender currently in theaters — is quite easily the best animated movie of the year and one of the most poetic ecological parables in recent memory. It's an all-audiences movie, and by that, I'm tempted to include not just young and old, but cats and dogs, too.

When the waters rise, the cat encounters a friendly Labrador, a long-legged secretary bird, a dozing capybara and a bauble-hoarding ring-tailed lemur. Cute as they are, they aren't quite your typical animated animals. Part of the allure of "Flow" is seeing animal characters that would normally be anthropomorphized and voiced by celebrity actors — the lemur, in particular, has until now been ruled by Sacha Baron Cohen's King Julian of "Madagascar" — move and sound authentically.

Well, mostly. Circumstances bring these five together aboard a small sailboat, an ark sans Noah. And while “Flow” doesn’t exactly go for realism — the secretary bird, for instance, proves an especially adept captain in steering the rudder — it is most decidedly drawn in closer harmony to the natural world than your average animation. Together they sail through mountain tops-turned-islands and an abandoned city with rivers for streets.

That “Flow” is made with computer generated animation adds to its dreamy, curiously real surrealism. Zilbalodis created “Flow” with Blender, the free, open-source graphics software tool. His camera moves less with the prescribed, storyboarded form of traditional animation than as a nimble, roving perspective within a virtual world. That such a natural and sensory movie is made possible by cutting-edge technology is one reason why the dystopic world of “Flow” always feels more hopeful than it ought to.

Another reason is the animals. Though they come from different species and have little means of communication, they together form an odd partnership. The cat is initially wary of each, but they slowly form an evident bond. Their survival hinges on their cooperation, which is occasionally threatened by the self-interest of others (there’s a pack of less community-minded dogs) or the cat’s own timid reluctance. Staying to face a problem or trust another animal, rather than scampering away, goes against its nature.

In that way, these two- and four-legged creatures, digitally rendered in a human-less future, are both worthy heirs to the planet and furry figures of inspiration for today. Reflections run through “Flow” — in a mirror clutched by the lemur, in the water the cat peers into — but none more so than the image of ourselves gazing back at it.

“Flow,” a Sideshow and Janus Films release is rated PG by the Motion Picture Association for peril and thematic elements. Running time: 84 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four.

**JAKE COYLE**

Film writer and critic



Go with the 'Flow' on a magical, wordless animated adventure

From Latvia, a four-star, epic tale of five animals surviving a flood.
December 6, 2024



🔊 4 min 🔗 📌 💬 10



Review by Ty Burr ★★★★★ (4 stars)

A cat, a dog, a ring-tailed lemur, a capybara and a secretary bird walk onto a boat.

Stop me if you've heard this one before.

If “Flow” were coming out of one of Hollywood’s major animation studios, you know what you’d be getting: talking animals making wisecracks in the celebrity voices of Kevin Hart, Sofia Vergara and Jon Hamm. Pop-culture references and yesterday’s slang to keep the TikTok kiddies from staring at their phones. Snark. Lots and lots of snark.

“Flow” is from Latvia — yes, Latvia — and it has none of that. It is dreamy, epic, perilous and very beautiful. Best of all, the animals are animals, wordless and concerned mostly with their own safety and their next meal. Yet, forced to get along, they get along and become something more than the sum of their furry, feathery parts. There’s a message here, and the great good grace of “Flow” is that it trusts us enough not to spell it out. Even adults will figure out what’s going on; the kids will be way ahead of them, as they usually are.

"Flow" opens on a cat, whom we will call Cat, a becoming shade of dark gray and apparently quite young. He prowls a landscape of verdant green, distant mountains, deep forest; on the evidence of several giant wooden cat statues and an abandoned workshop, human beings have lived here recently but have vanished with no explanation. Perhaps they were expecting what Cat does not: a giant tsunami that swamps the opening minutes of "Flow" and turns its earthly vistas into a rising sea.

Remember the mid-1990s computer game "Myst"? The world of "Flow" has the same vaguely mythical, untouched sense of visual grandeur — ancient temples, ruined sluiceways, immense stone pillars looming on the far horizon. The animals, by contrast, lack the finely detailed textures of big-studio pixel work; they're engagingly low-fi, not hyperreal but real. Cat, learning by frightened necessity to swim, finds itself on a wooden boat already colonized by a grunting but accommodating capybara, and they're soon joined by a trinket-hoarding lemur, a congenitally happy golden retriever and, finally, that secretary bird — a kind of African eagle with the legs of a crane and the attitude of a pharaoh.

These five embark on a water-bound journey that isn't so much incredible — they're not returning home to any humans, and, besides, what does "home" even mean when you lack the concept of property? — as it is open-ended, exploratory, bonding. You might quibble with the fact that the animals figure out how to work a rudder and point the boat in the general direction of where they'd like to go, but other than that, the adventure is simply an adventure, one that exerts the kind of spell necessary for rapture. I'm not sure I exhaled once during the entire 84 minutes.

There's a goal, I guess — those distant pillars — and moments of high-flying drama and underwater danger, many of them experienced by Cat, who goes places in "Flow" that few felines have the luck, bad or good, to go. In the process, Cat becomes bolder, Dog becomes more cautious, Lemur learns to share its trinkets. Capybara stays a capybara, phlegmatic and slightly Zen.

Toward the end, there's a transfiguration, which remains mystical and which I will not spoil, but I imagine certain children may hold on to it like a riddle waiting to be solved. Finally, there's the spectacle of different species making room for one another in the eternal Now in which animals exist, taking each disaster and bit of luck as they come. Going with the flow of not just the flood but the rush of life itself, wonder and peril around every corner and all of it richer for not being experienced alone.

The director and co-writer of this magical fable is Gints Zilbalodis, a 30-year-old Latvian animator making his second feature. (The first, 2019's "Away," can be rented on Prime Video.) He's found a talented crew with which to realize his visions — the percussive, melodic score by Zilbalodis and Rihards Zalupe is a special treat — and is clearly following no one's drummer but his own. May Hollywood never woo him with offers of riches and sequels, and may you experience "Flow" on the biggest screen you can find, with the smallest human of your acquaintance. You both stand to be enchanted.

PG. At area theaters. Contains peril and thematic elements. 84 minutes.

Ty Burr is the author of the movie recommendation newsletter Ty Burr's Watch List at tyburrowswatchlist.com.



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How 'Flow' brings 'small cat, big world' story to Ragtag Cinema

James Owen | Columbia Daily Tribune

Starting this Friday at Ragtag Cinema, Gints Zilbalodis' "Flow" will dazzle you with its unique animation as well as its compelling story about survival and self-discovery.

Deceptively simple, the film is about a solitary — and unnamed — cat who has to navigate a presumed post-apocalyptic world with no people to be seen.

Unlike a lot of animated films, there's no humanizing of the animals. "Flow" is free from dialogue and tells its story entirely through visuals. It is a challenging but enriching experience. I had the chance to speak with Zilbalodis about how his visual style matched the film's story, eschewing conventions of animation, and why the film should be seen on a big screen. The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

More: Who is Missouri's greatest living actor? Help set the bracket

Owen: The animation in "Flow" is incredibly vivid. How did you choose this style?

The camera is very active in the film. More so than in traditional animated films. It participates in the action and adds to the story. Sustained shots going up to five minutes were a part of that immersive intent.

JO: I noticed that some of the shots were incredibly long. Was that hard to shoot?

GZ: Technically, we had to figure it out. Doing these shots required lighting tricks and camera angles to bring the audience into the action. The technique is designed to get in the characters' heads since there is no dialogue.

JO: About that. So many animated films use dialogue, even for animals. Why not go the classical approach?

GZ: When something is done so often, we don't want the audience to get bored. While the film is free of dialogue, the characters speak through actions and noises. We strove to give them a real voice like animals who are interesting, smart, funny, and entertaining without anthropomorphizing them.

More: Add these Christmas movies to your holiday streaming watchlist

JO: Since there is no dialogue, how did you develop the film in terms of fleshing out the story? The film could be read as a message on climate change. Or it could be something seen as even Biblical.

GZ: I don't start with the message. I start with the characters and their emotions. This is a film about the experience of the characters; about working together and being a part of a larger effort. There isn't a simple answer to solving their problems. The cat becomes more brave even though the fears are still there.

The film being free from dialogue helps the audience ask questions and allows them to see all sorts of things in the story. Like the cat learns to work with other animals; the dog learns about independence. There are positive and negative aspects to each character. It's about the truth of the situation.

JO: What's the experience been of screening the film for audiences around the world?

GZ: While making the film, we didn't get to watch it with a regular audience. We finished it right before the Cannes Film Festival. There was the first time I saw it with people who didn't know the story. They laughed in the right places and there was an emotional reaction from the audience. It is a personal for me and there's a lot of me in these characters. So when an audience connects with the film, I feel like there's a connection with me.

I am glad there's a film like this. For independent, animated films. We can share the stage with gigantic studio films. Animation can transcend traditional film. We've found audience members who say they don't normally like animated films connected to ("Flow").

JO: Did you film this in hopes to have this shown in cinemas? Its look is so grand and epic.

GZ: We're very lucky to have a distributor where this is going to be seen on the big screen. That's not a given in this environment. But you have to pay attention to this film and that's easier in a theater. The visuals are scaled-up and making you feel like you are a small cat in a big world. Some of that is going to be lost on a small screen.

I hope people will find this with all of the competition out there. I hope if they give this a shot and find it a rewarding experience.

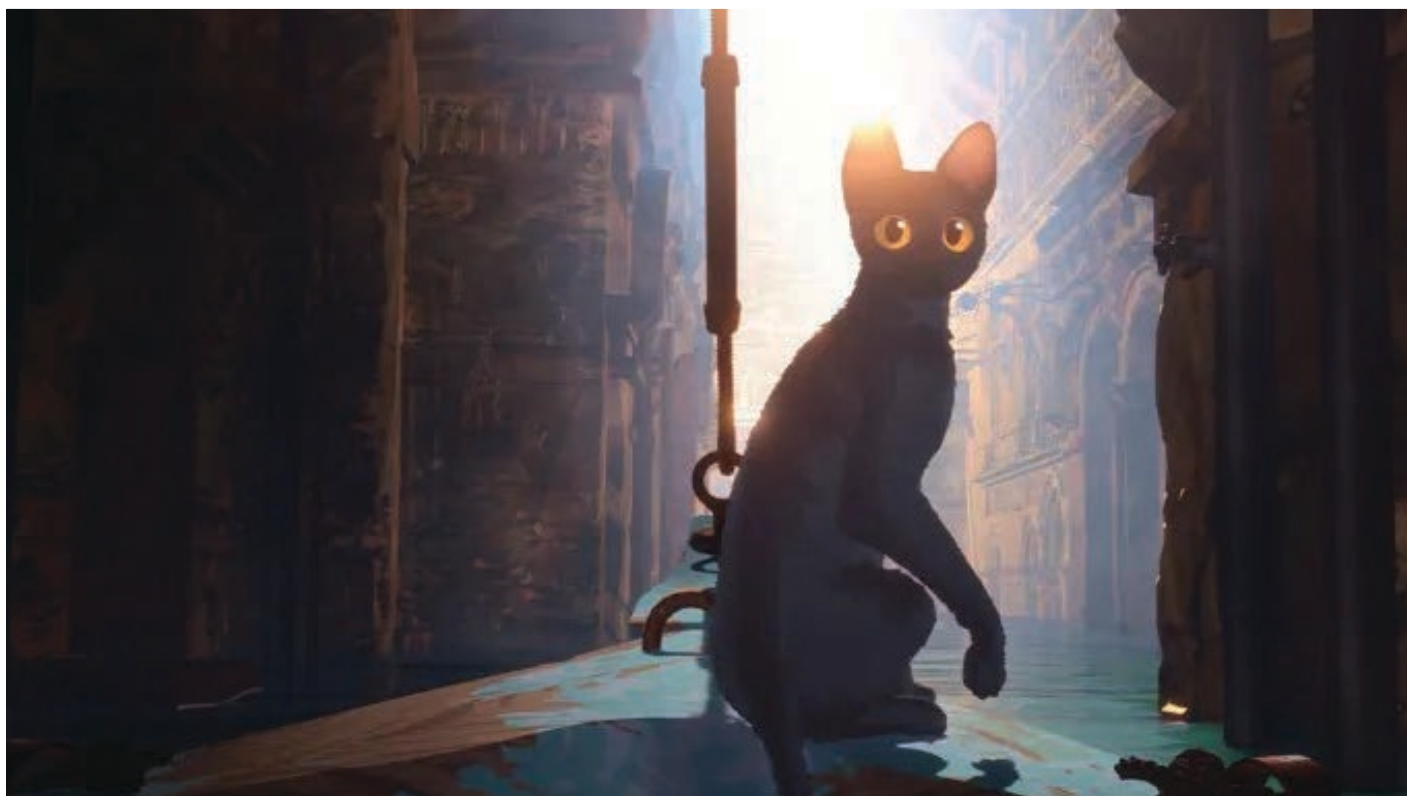
James Owen is the Tribune's film columnist. In real life, he is a lawyer and executive director of energy policy group Renew Missouri. A graduate of Drury University and the University of Kansas, he created Filmsnobs.com, where he co-hosts a podcast. He enjoyed an extended stint as an on-air film critic for KY3, the NBC affiliate in Springfield, and now regularly guests on Columbia radio station KFRU.

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'Flow' Review: Latvia's International Film Oscar Entry Is Animation Perfection

By [Pete Hammond](#)

December 6, 2024 10:17am



'Flow'

Sideshow and Janus Films

Somehow I missed *Flow* when it premiered in Un Certain Regard in May at the Cannes Film Festival. Now having seen it just as it is about to open nationwide, it exceeds the various pockets of praise I had heard. It is a magical mystery tour into a sinking world, a wondrous, haunting, mystical and beautiful motion picture, something so unique it almost feels like a dream. How about *that*?

Now it is not only becoming a genuine contender in a very competitive Animated Feature Oscar race, it is also Latvia's official entry for Best International Feature. This week it just won Animated Feature from both the New York Film Critics and the National Board Of Review, and no question this is just the beginning for a movie that is like no other this year.

Coming from Latvian animation filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis *Flow* represents only his second feature film, the first being *Away*, and in between he has done seven shorts, and in that time has only one of them that had dialogue. *Flow* joins the legion of his films that don't talk, and it is a pleasure to encounter an animated film featuring animals not attempting to stand in place of

This is a world unto itself and takes place as a catastrophic flood has buried most of the environment, now seemingly populated by just a few creatures left on this earth, most notably a cat who is trying to deal with its home having been devastated by this act of Mother Nature, the signs of a life lived with a human no longer there but just remnants of drawings left behind and of pure emptiness.

As is a cat's nature this one is simply trying to adjust, to survive, to climb up as high as what is left here will let him. Soon he latches on to a boat, and other animals appear. There is a very big, and proud, bird attempting to lead the journey. There is a lovable but rather dumb dog whose sweetness overcomes his intellect. There is a lemur out to collect whatever objects he can find and becomes especially fascinated with a mirror he discovers and can't look away from. And there is also a capybara, a very chill type who gets along with everyone. Many things happen as the boat flows through the rising waters, engulfing trees, sailing past mysterious statues and towers which are daunting high goals for a cat who seems to be our guide in taking in all of this. None of them talk. There is no narration. The sound work and musical score by Rihards Zalupe and the director help define the mood as these living breathing creatures seek dry land and adjust to a very new way of living on this water logged place in the sun.

Flow in its sheer simpleness is one of the more profound experiences I have had in some time with a movie. Ultimately as this quintet continues on an unexpected adventure it becomes about a lot of things, but mostly community. This is now a world where nature has taken a calamitous course and in order to stay alive we have to adjust, but still find a way to do it together. Does this independent cat learn to join with others? Will the lemur stop being a hoarder? Does the dog grow wiser?

In a truly mystical sequence the bird appears to be heading higher towards a beyond not quite defined, and the cat follows jumping up the towers, but are they on the same life's path at this point?

There is so much human beings, young and old, will find to relate to themselves in this gorgeously animated movie that does not ever once announce what it is about, what message it is trying to send, but instead just simply flows along to its own fascinating rhythms of life. We search for answers. Maybe we will find them. Like the cat, it is up to us to make the most of it all.

Producers are Zilbalodis, Matiss Kaza, Ron Dyens and Gregory Zalcmán.

Title: *Flow*

Distributor: Sideshow and Janus Films

Release date: December 6, 2024

Director: Gints Zilbalodis

Screenwriters: Gints Zilbalodis and Matiss Kaza

Rating: PG

Running time: 1 hr 24 mins

ANIMATION / FLOW / GINTS ZILBALODIS / LATVIA / OSCARS



michaelzendejas72

Exclusive Interview with Flow (2024) Director Gints Zilbalodis

With many notable wins on the festival circuit complimenting a Best International Feature nomination, *Flow* has quickly become one of the must-see films of this year! Centered around a cat taking refuge on a boat alongside various species after their homes are destroyed by floods, it's a warm yet urgent testament to the power of cooperation. I was lucky enough to recently speak with director Gints Zilbalodis about his artistic process, the power of animation and more. Many thanks to him and his team for taking the time, and I hope you enjoy the conversation!

This was your first time working with a team, but what lessons from your solo projects were you able to bring to this new film?

With each of the films I learn something new, and I learned with *Flow* as well. I've never storyboarded because I'm not really good at drawing and I don't have an ability to imagine the scene in my head. Some people can imagine stuff, but I need to discover things and explore the set. So even though we had more resources and could hire storyboard artists, I decided to work the same way I always have by creating a 3D environment and exploring it with a virtual camera. This allows me to make some happy accidents, but it's also important because I want to do long takes where the camera follows characters and gets very close to them, which is hard to draw. Speaking about my previous films, it's kind of embarrassing that you can still see the films I made as a teenager and compare those to what I'm doing now with bigger budgets, but I think it's important to show that there's been growth and improvement. Maybe other people can see that everyone starts from somewhere and improves.

You've mentioned how important that process of discovery is for you, using the animatic to explore, but I'm curious how much of the visual language was found in the script writing process?

With *Flow*, it was basically the first time there was a proper script writing process. With my previous films I would just write a simple outline and go directly to making the animatic and improvise the film. But because the budget was much bigger, we needed to have a script. It's really difficult for me to write—at least, it was. I think it's gotten a little bit easier, but it was very useful to spend time writing so many drafts of the script which kept evolving. The first draft is very different from what you see on the screen. I would recommend people write scripts, it's a good idea [laughs].





You leaned into the expressive movements of the characters, and have spoken about how much time was spent animating their eyes to be expressive. How does the lack of dialogue push you as a storyteller to communicate the emotions in a scene?

I had to use everything else to communicate what the characters are feeling. The environment isn't just decoration, it's there to convey what the characters feel. I start with the emotion and build everything around that, especially for the main character, the cat. How characters are framed makes a difference. If we see the cat from a profile or a wide- shot, making it a small lonely figure in the frame, that helps us convey the feeling. It forces you to come up with original methods, you can't rely on the characters speaking. I think it's a good exercise for any filmmaker to do a few scenes without dialogue. That's how I feel about my favorite films, the ones I tend to remember. I don't remember the famous lines of dialogue, but I remember the emotion and images, the editing patterns. That excites me, that's why I want to make films.

*I'm curious how the sound design process was for you, because there's also a lot of emotion brought that way as well. That's a huge part. This isn't a silent film, it's a dialogue-free film. I considered sound quite early while writing the script, how we could use certain moments to build tension and have a variety of sounds. If they're on this road movie, it shouldn't feel repetitive. They visit all kinds of places. There's a lot of water, but we use water in different ways. It can be terrifying, it can be very peaceful. Often, sound is done at the end, but our sound designer started working very early, before the animation was even started. We had to imagine how it would work and later fix certain things to fit with the finished images. I wanted some long scenes with just the sound effects, no music. Often, especially in animated films, the studio or producers or whoever push for music to always tell you what to feel. In *Flow*, music is a big part, but there are very long sequences without it. I wanted to have moments where you can immerse yourself in this world, sense all the textures. I thought our sound designer would be excited about this, but he said he was actually very anxious to have all this responsibility. He couldn't hide behind the dialogue or the music, he was afraid to bore people or be repetitive, but I think he managed to do something amazing where you don't think about the sound. You think about these things existing as real places and real animals.*

You mentioned it's kind of a road movie, but it's not a traditional road movie. The ending is very open. How much of that comes from editing the script? Was that present in the early drafts?

I think there is a goal. The cat sees these giant cliff towers and gets obsessed with reaching them. The bird as well. They think they will go there and escape from the flood, but like other road films once you reach the destination it's not that simple. It's often more about the journey than the destination. It was important that these characters have agency and make decisions, and through their decisions we understand who they are. It's set mostly in this boat but I didn't want it to feel claustrophobic. I wanted the visuals to have a huge variety. It evolves. Two of my first films are kind of like a road film. It's good to have guidelines, some sense of movement, but also to trap these characters on a boat. It allows us to have conflict. The road film is a good storytelling device.

You've spoken about embracing this handmade quality to the animation. Can you speak about your process of getting to that point?



There are so many live-action adaptations of animated films being released. I'm curious if you can speak to the specific benefits of animation.

still be animated, but in a more realistic way, which would lose a lot of its appeal and expressiveness. With animation we can push things somewhat further to be more emotional than if we did live-action. But it all depends on the story. I consider myself a filmmaker rather than an animator. If the right story comes along I'd love to do a live-action film, but so far what I've been interested in is very suited for animation. It's really a tool for storytelling. The technique isn't that important, but it allows me to convey things I otherwise couldn't do. There are certain things I can't explain or articulate, but with animation I can go into a more emotional place and explain my feelings through images and music. That's why I make films, to express myself. I don't know if I could do this any other way. With animation I have the control to do that. I have the freedom to do that. I'm not confined by a specific place or character, I can imagine whatever I want.

Flow is in theaters this weekend, and I hope you make time to watch it on the big screen!

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Cat Person: Flow's Gints Zilbalodis on 2024's feline favorite and the joy of doing it yourself



ELLA KEMP • 12 DEC 2024



One cat to take on the world in *Flow* (2024).

As *Flow* continues to delight audiences, filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis joins Ella Kemp to chat cats, comparisons to the video game *Stray* and the greatest joys of doing it all yourself.

"Sometimes, it is easier to communicate some things with images or music, rather than trying to do that with words." —
Gints Zilbalodis

The world is ending, and a cat needs to seek shelter: the story of *Flow*, the second animated feature from Latvian director Gints Zilbalodis, trusts that a simple concept can hold great peril, joy and imagination all in one. The waters rise in an unnamed place (where don't they?) as dogs, birds, a lemur and a capybara join the black cat to find safety.

Flow opened in the final days of this year's Cannes Film Festival—a perfect tale for weary heads that whisks you away from the chaos of those buzzy moments, with a whole different set of stakes. “I will suck the ocean dry with a straw for that cat,” threatens Nat, while Carley does her best to hold it together: “I bring a kind of crying throughout vibe to the screening of *Flow* that my fellow moviegoers don't really appreciate.” The film already sits at a 4.0 average rating, after screening at Cannes, Annecy (where it won three awards, including from both the jury and audience), Ottawa, Melbourne, New Zealand, Toronto, Busan, London and more.

With a recent release in US theaters (it's coming to the UK in March of next year), *Flow* has already won Best Animated Film at both the NYFCC Awards and the National Board of Review. The accolades are countless, but the intentions remain the same: multihyphenate cat person Zilbalodis stops by to break it all down for Letterboxd.

The story of this cat and his friends is seemingly straightforward, but could you talk through the distinction between “simple” and “simplistic” in your filmmaking? Gints Zilbalodis: Because there's no dialogue, it's important to have clarity to everything. We must understand the motivation of the characters, their goals and fears. Because it's a cat, the fear of water is something that you don't need to explain. What was challenging was having this ensemble of five main characters, and having each of them go on a journey. They're all there to support or challenge the cat, but I wanted all the other ones also to be interesting enough, too. But it's like with music: if you have too many notes, it gets too busy and noisy.

My favorite type of music is very minimalistic. There's a sparseness to that; you don't have anything unnecessary there. I didn't want to waste time on something that doesn't really impact the character. We're not explaining what happens to the humans, and where this flood comes from, because we're experiencing it from the cat's point of view. We don't explain it with words, but tried to leave some clues for the audience to figure it out for themselves, which I think is more interesting: to pay attention, and not just spoon-feed this information.

Because you don't have dialogue, the cat's different meows convey everything. How do you determine the ways that emotions and thoughts manifest-and then how do you research and record that?

All the animal voices are real animals. They're not humans mimicking animals, and that was important to have that grounded quality. When I discovered that different cats sound differently, we mostly had to use one cat. There's no voice actor, so the sound designer is basically like an actor. Then, it's not just technical things you consider: it's the motivation, the psychology of these characters.

The sounds play a big part, but, of course, it's also the movements themselves, which for the cat, are quite complicated, because they don't follow any rules. They're very flexible and almost like liquid. They can squash and stretch, and they're very expressive with their tails and ears, especially. What I discovered is that cats don't really look around with their eyes. They tend to look around with their heads. Sometimes, when you see animated films where they look around with their eyes, they feel more cartoony. Luckily, there's an endless library of cat videos that we could study!



An actual, individual cat provided the dialogue for *Flow*'s main character.

When I saw *Flow* in Cannes, I'd just started playing the video game *Stray*, in which you're a stray cat navigating a post-apocalyptic civilization. I'm interested in the similarities narratively, but also the immersive video game-type qualities *Flow* has when you're watching and actively moving through it.

I played Stray, too, but our story was already finished and we were going into production. I'm not sure it influenced Flow, but I'm definitely a fan of the game—it's beautiful. In terms of the look and style of the film, we're trying to stay close to the characters. We're not observing from a distance; the camera is an active storyteller. I wanted to use these long takes: some shots are almost five minutes long, and it creates this subjective feeling, almost like you are the cat, jumping around these different places. Animation is the only way you can do that. You can play the game, but the cat in that game is like an observer. It's the audience's point of view. In Flow, the cat is more like an emotive character. I really don't mind video game comparisons: it's usually not a nice thing to say, but in this case, I think it is. Games are a part of our lives. I don't play as much anymore as I used to, but I'm influenced by films and games and music, and so it's all meshed together in Flow.



Where to, captain?

The camera was more influenced by live-action films with these long, long shots and wide-angle lenses, which you also see in video games. You don't see conventional coverage with close-ups and wide shots—you see this wide-angle lens following the characters, and this allows the audience to look around themselves and decide what to look at within the frame. I wanted to do that: you can look at the main story, you can look at the cat, but there are certain things hidden in the backgrounds. I also wanted to have this graphic style where it's more abstract, where you don't render every strand of hair. It's more like a hand-drawn image, and that, again, you see in some indie video games, which allow themselves to be deliberate with detail. If you have too much detail, it can take you out of the experience. It's not just some random cats!

What are some of the more unexpected live-action films *Flow* was influenced by?

I'm a fan of Alfonso Cuarón, his long takes, and how there are multiple stories within the frame. I love *Children of Men*. I like Akira Kurosawa and the way he uses elements, like wind and rain, visually but also with the sounds. There's dynamic movement, but moments of calm in nature. Japanese filmmakers like Hayao Miyazaki film nature in a way where you can reflect on what you just saw—there are no wall-to-wall jokes, because by having the slower parts it makes the action more intense in that contrast. I also love the way Sergio Leone worked with Ennio Morricone in pre-production, and had the music played on set. I write the music while I'm writing the script as well, and it influences not just the atmosphere and rhythm but even how the story develops.



Everyone's invited.

You wear a lot of hats on this film—writing, directing, composing, so many more—where have you found unexpected joy in all these different skills you've taught yourself? Which job on *Flow* felt the most fulfilling?

I made my first feature, *Away*, by myself, and that was a conscious decision to do all these different tasks, so that, eventually, if I would have a chance to work with a team, I could understand them much better. I think a filmmaker should understand the basics of all these different departments. Of course, you're not going to become an expert, but the basics are pretty fast to learn. Music is the most fun for me. I do it at the same time as writing the script, because writing is the most difficult part.

It's the time where I tend to procrastinate the most. I can't write for a long time. My way of procrastinating is to work on the music—it's very fun and fast. Animation takes months and months, but we can make a piece of music in a few hours. With each of my films, I try to delegate a little bit more, but I also do these things because I enjoy them. I don't have to do the same thing every day, so it's always interesting to me. Sometimes, I don't even know what I want. I was told the director should know what they want, but I don't know when I begin the process. I need to go through this process of discovery to understand these things better. Sometimes, it is easier to communicate some things with images or music, rather than trying to do that with words.

**ELLA KEMP****Ella on Letterboxd >****FURTHER READING**

- [Explore the expanded world of feature animation—a list by Max](#)
- [48th Annecy International Animation Film Festival Line-Up](#)
- [Letterboxd 100: Animation—a list by Rahat](#)
- [Letterboxd's Top 100 Silent Films—a list by Brsan](#)
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Jan 8, 2025 7:57am PT

No 'Flow' Sequel Plans for Director Gints Zilbalodis, Despite Golden Globe Win: 'I Don't Want to Get Typecast' as the 'Cat Guy'

By Jamie Lang



Latvian director [Gints Zilbalodis made history](#) on Sunday when his independent film “Flow” won the Golden Globe for best animated feature.

The dialogue-free film with a modest \$3.7 million was going up against Hollywood heavyweights from Disney, Pixar and Netflix. Still, it topped them all for one of the biggest U.S. animation prizes during awards season.

In the film, a catastrophic flood submerges everything in its path, including Cat’s home. There are no humans to be found anywhere, although their material legacy remains. Luckily for “Flow’s” feline protagonist, it finds refuge on a boat full of other displaced animals. Together, the group sets sail on the flood waters for a journey into the unknown.

Variety caught up with Zilbalodis during his “Flow” promotional tour to discuss the film’s modest origins, his first time working with a team, his all-inclusive filmmaking process and what it means that a Golden Globe-winning animated feature was made using free, open-source software.

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Variety caught up with Zilbalodis during his “Flow” promotional tour to discuss the film’s modest origins, his first time working with a team, his all-inclusive filmmaking process and what it means that a Golden Globe-winning animated feature was made using free, open-source software.

I'd always hoped to work with a team, but I didn't feel like going through the traditional way that an animation director would usually start out, maybe first being a story artist or an animator and slowly, gradually rising up the ranks before getting an opportunity to direct. I don't think this would be the right path for me because I'm not especially good at any one thing. I'm not specialized in one area, and I think in the industry, that's often necessary for young artists. So, instead, I decided to do it my own way. I made my first feature film, "Away," which was kind of my unofficial film school where I learned all these different things just by trying them out. By following that plan, when I actually got the opportunity to work with a team, I understood a bit about what everyone does, and I could better communicate with them.

Because of the budget, many of the animators were very young and straight out of school. The whole team was young, and mostly only the department heads had much experience. But it was kind of nice for me because I maybe felt less intimidated than I would have trying to tell veteran industry pros what to do. It also felt like an advantage because the young artists had great energy and worked like they had something to prove. This was a big project for all of us.

Although you shared the workload on this film, you were still involved in writing, set building, visual development, and you even composed the score, among numerous other roles. Why is it important for you to be so integrated in all these parts of production?

For me, it's all part of one big process. I don't tend to separate them, except when we have to list the tasks in the end credits of the film. When I design a scene, I build the 3D environment and explore it with a virtual camera. I've already placed the lights, and I move the camera around the space. On traditional productions, art direction, animation, lighting, they're all different people. But I do all those jobs at the same time, and it's really impossible to separate them because the way shadows and light are cast will influence where I put the camera, and I'm always adjusting.

Even the music. I need to have it early, and it needs to be integrated into the film. It's not something I add at the end of the process. Instead, it needs to guide the process. I start writing the music when I start the script, when the clay hasn't hardened yet and it's still moldable and the music can influence how the story develops. For example, in the climactic scene with the cat and bird on the towers, I knew they would go up there, but I couldn't figure out what would actually happen when they arrived. But once the piece of music I'd written while working on the script was playing, I suddenly had all these ideas. If I hadn't written that music, the whole story would be different. If I'd scored the film afterward, the whole meaning and the fates of these characters would be different.

That's also why it's important for me to do these things myself. I'm not saying I can do any of them better than someone else, but for me, it's all a part of a process of discovery. I don't know what the film is going to be before I make it, so I can't describe these things until I find them. Of course, in many of these cases, I'm really a co-writer or co-composer, where I may come up with the first drafts, but then I'll bring on someone else to work with me. With the music, for example, we brought on another composer, Rihards Zaļupe, who is much more experienced than me and who could add more depth and layers to the piece. Matīss Kaža did the same with our screenplay.

**This film is set in a fantasy world, but one that is very similar to our own.
How much context did you want to provide the audience, and how much did you want to leave unexplained?**

The important thing for us to do was to explain and define the relationship between the characters on this journey of overcoming obstacles. For me, the main focus was on telling the story from the cat's point of view, and the cat doesn't know where the humans went, where the flood is coming from or who built all these places. So, it was important for me not to answer those things to create a sense of immersion in a film told from the cat's point of view. We tried to eliminate everything that wasn't essential for the story. We didn't want to waste any time on exposition, which, for me, is not interesting. So, the worldbuilding in this film was truly character-driven. I started with the journey and the characters' emotions and then built the world around them.

It stands out that these animal protagonists not only don't engage in exposition but they also aren't anthropomorphized. They act like real animals and are beholden to the same limitations as real animals.

That was always the intention because I think they're so interesting, funny and emotionally engaging. We didn't need to change them, and by leaving them the way we know them in our world, it makes the stakes bigger. We feel more intensely what cat is going through than we would if it was a cat character that was basically just a human on two legs that looks like a cat and tells jokes. We wouldn't care as much. For scale, it also makes everything seem bigger because it's this small cat in a huge world. Our characters started as the archetypes of what we think a cat or a dog would be. The cat is grumpy, stubborn and does things its own way. The dog is friendly and cheerful. So we start with these archetypes, but then we can slowly break them down and have the characters act in surprising and unexpected ways. I think this makes for interesting characters, when there is a kind of contradiction in them.

One of the many milestones that this film has established is being the first animated feature made using the free, open-source software Blender to win a Golden Globe. Can you talk about the significance of these tools being available for all artists?

Yeah, it's not just the tools, but all the resources that are available now. I learned just by watching YouTube videos. There are so many tutorials for Blender, even more than for the big traditional tools. There is no one way to make a film, and you can make very different types of films with Blender. It is a tool, but it's really all about how it is used.

It's wonderful to see people having access to this, where they might not have had this opportunity in the past. We're gonna see people with different types of experiences and different stories to share. I think that when you do like a smaller independent film, you have more freedom to kind of push the boundaries in some ways. Having these free tools really helps.

That's what I'm excited about: different types of stories being told, but also different techniques, different looks for the film and ways of expressing yourself and cinematic language in the way that films are edited and in the visuals. I think we can push a lot further in the independent field.

How important is it for filmmakers to stick with their films after they've debuted? To promote them and do the full awards season circuit?

Especially for smaller independent films, you really need to put in the effort to promote them because we don't have big stars promoting them for us on Instagram and Facebook. We're going to these red carpets, and we're up against that whole system. It's also really important to me that people see the film. [When I direct], I am making something for myself, a film that I would like to see, but I'm also interested in finding a connection with others. I want them to respond to something that I made. I also want to encourage and share my experience of working independently because I want more people to do this, so hopefully, we'll see more films like this in the future.

The Variety logo, featuring the word "VARIETY" in a stylized, serif font with a decorative flourish above the letters.

Making Flow – Interview with director Gints Zilbalodis

Flow, the animated feature film following the mystical journey of a dark grey cat and his companions, is the manifestation of Blender's mission, where a small, independent team with a limited budget is able to create a story that moves audiences worldwide, and achieve recognition with over 60 awards, including a Golden Globe for Best Animation and two Oscar nominations.

In this interview, Gints Zilbalodis, writer and director (and more!) of the film, shares how Blender was instrumental in the creation of the film.

Gints: I've done animation, all kinds of animation. I started doing hand drawn, 2D, digital animation. But after making a few shorts, I realized that I'm not good at drawing, and I switched to 3D because I could model things, and move the camera. And so at first, I used Maya, which was taught at our school at that time.

After finishing my first feature *Away*, I decided to switch to Blender in 2019, mainly because of EEVEE. I started using the 2.8 beta or even alpha release. It took a while to learn some of the stuff, but it was actually pretty straightforward. Many of the animators in *Flow* took less than a week to switch to Blender.

EEVEE was interesting to me because, even my first feature *Away*, it was all playblasted, which is not like proper rendering, rather it's like previews

I was excited to find that workflow in Blender, but in a more advanced way that gave me greater control. Speed is really important to me—not just in rendering but also in working with files, setting up lighting, and creating the overall look. I like to work on multiple aspects at the same time; for example, when setting up the camera, I also need lights in place because lighting influences camera placement and how the scene looks. That's why EEVEE was so appealing to me.

I briefly experimented with some game engines, but at least back then, it was really difficult to figure out a workflow for making films in them.

And Blender was ideal: it had all the tools I needed.



Can you talk about the production timeline of the project?

The entire project took about five and a half years. In the first year, I was writing the script, learning Blender, and looking for funding as Dream Well Studio. That was in 2019.

In 2020, we secured some funding, and I moved into a co-working studio space with other artists and developers who were using Blender. That's where I connected with Mārtiņš Upītis and Konstantīns Višņevskis.

Mārtiņš was one of the first people I approached—not specifically for water simulation, but just to see how he could contribute. However, it quickly became clear that he had a deep expertise in water, unlike anyone else.

We were fortunate that, in the early stages, it was just me, so the pandemic didn't affect us much. By the time we moved into full production in 2023, things had stabilized.

I created a short pilot for Flow –about a minute and a half long– where I went through the entire workflow. It was technically basic, but it was useful to test the process. That led to our first teaser, which I never showed publicly. Later, we made another, entirely new teaser, which we used for pitching.

In 2021, we started hiring concept artists and building the team. We brought in riggers and developers to create custom scripts that helped streamline the workflow while I was working on the animatic.

The Latvian studio was relatively small, it all fit in one room. In total, we had around 15 to 20 people, but at any given time, there were usually only three to five people working, since different teams handled pre-production and post-production.

We had a set-dressing team. I would design the initial scene in previz, and they would refine it by adding more plants, props, and environmental details. Concept artists sketched out buildings and figured out their construction, incorporating storytelling elements into the environments.

Other team members focused on developing tools. Water was a huge part of the film, but only two people handled all the water effects. Mārtiņš had already been researching water simulations and posting his findings on YouTube, but he hadn't yet put everything together. He eventually developed a Blender add-on for water effects.

Meanwhile, Konstantīns handled smaller simulations, such as splashes. He also researched techniques for stylized fur and feathers, working on shaders. In addition to that, he did rigging, and character modeling along with other team members.

In 2022, Belgian and French co-producers Take Five and Sacrabieu Productions joined the project to work on sound, character animation and additional aspects of the film. Expanding the team with experienced character and pipeline TDs, as well as animators working in a well-structured process, was essential to handle the complexity required by the film. This was a truly international coproduction. The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in the "Un Certain Regard" selection in 2024.

How did you learn Blender?

I learned a lot online, but it was great to have someone with more experience next to me (Konstantīns). He did a lot of rigging and was much more technical than me, so I could ask him for advice.

Sometimes, I needed something specific in the animatic, like the deer moving in a spiral, and he would write a script to automate it. This was before Geometry Nodes.

I can't write scripts myself, so having someone in the studio to help was invaluable. But learning never really stops. I still feel like there's so much I don't know about Blender or anything else. And with these long projects, you sometimes forget things you learned five years ago.

Flow was made entirely with Blender and rendered with EEVEE. Each frame took from about 0.5 – 10 seconds to render in 4k. We didn't use a renderfarm. The final render was done on my PC. There was no compositing, all the colors were tweaked and adjusted using shaders.

How does the previz process work?

When creating the previz or animatic, I just try to get things done as quickly as possible. This approach helps me explore ideas efficiently. I'm not great at drawing, so previz works better for me. It's faster, and I like to move the camera a lot. Sometimes, I roughly sketch out a building, but it's often very basic.



I then hand these files over to a concept artist. Many environmental concept artists use Blender as well, so they can import my files. While they usually rebuild everything from scratch, my files at least provide the correct proportions. Sometimes, they paint over my models, but in other cases, they design everything directly in 3D.

When they send the files back, I ask them to leave assets in place rather than moving them to the center of the scene. That way, I can easily import everything back, and it aligns perfectly.

What about the creation of sequences and shots?

The animation teams in France and Belgium brought a great deal of organization to the process. They developed further tools and rigs to deliver character animation, they had to optimize the scenes, removing everything except the assets the characters interacted with and cleaning them up thoroughly. However, I didn't use these optimized assets directly, I would import their animations back into my heavier scenes.

For lighting, it was just me. We had other people handling different tasks, but I was solely responsible for lighting. This setup made things easier.

Since I handled a lot of tasks myself, it was simpler to work with large files where everything was imported. In each file, I made extensive adjustments to assets. For example, when setting up lighting, I tweaked materials for the assets in each shot, making them slightly lighter or darker to get the right look. I know this could be done with library overrides, but I was also working across different computers: my desktop PC and my MacBook.

Switching between operating systems sometimes caused issues with linked assets, even when using relative file paths. To avoid breaking links, I found it easier to keep everything within the file itself. Some of the smaller scenes were around 300 MB compressed, while a few of the largest ones reached nearly 2 GB compressed.

Maybe I could have figured out a better way to link assets, but during production, speed was the priority. The production timeline required me to move fast, so I opted for the most efficient workflow rather than experimenting with alternatives.

The animation of Flow - Blender Conference 2024

Learn more about the animation of Flow in this Blender Conference presentation by Animation Supervisor Léo Silly-Pélissier.



A glimpse into the water surface system used in *Flow*

As an early adopter of Blender 2.8, did you upgrade as new releases became available?

I started with Blender 2.8 alpha while it was still in development, and I was constantly updating things. I think when the team joined, we were using 2.9 or maybe 3.0.

With each major version, we decided to update since there were only a few of us at the time, and we weren't sharing files. That made it safer because everyone was working on their own files independently, without links. The last version we used was 3.6. Eevee definitely improved over time, but it wasn't just Eevee. Geometry Nodes and other features made upgrading worthwhile.

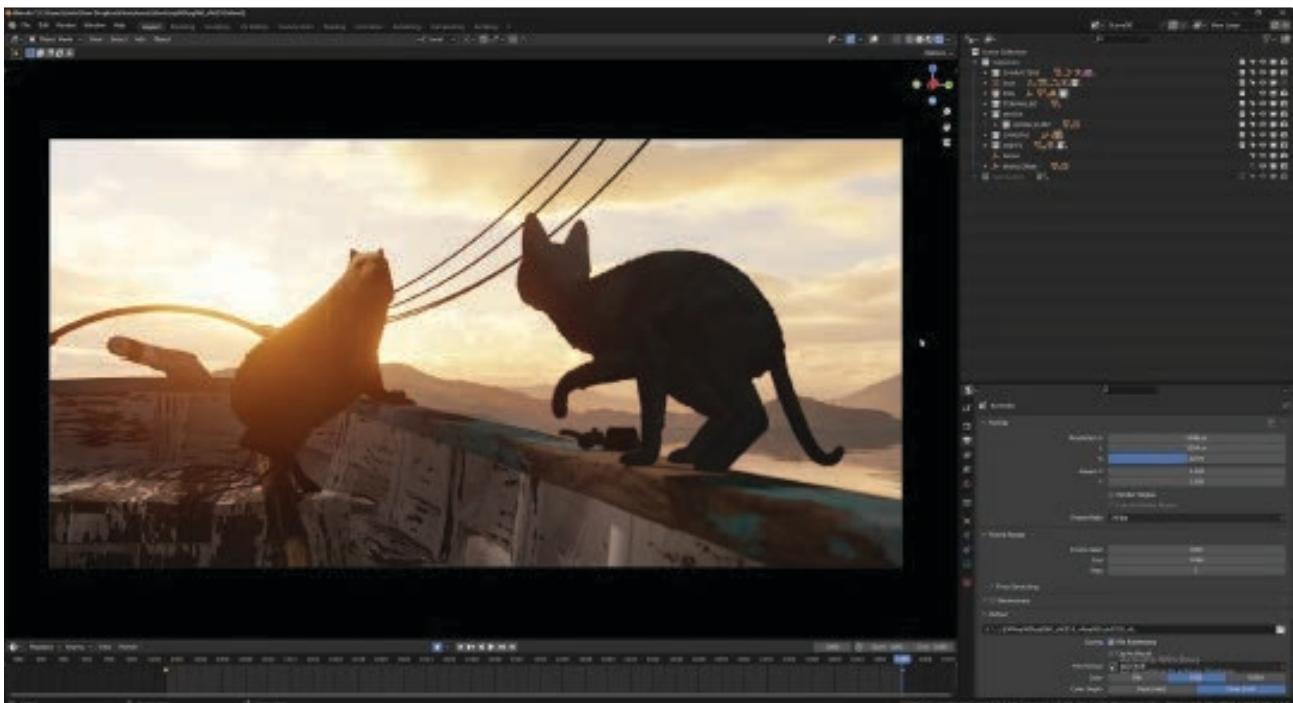
Of course, before each update, we ran a lot of tests, opening different files to check for issues. Some things did break, but overall, our workflow remained stable.

Early on, when the team was small, updating wasn't a big deal. But once all the animators started in 2023, they worked in 3.3 and stuck with it throughout production. After they finished animation and I moved on to lighting, I imported everything into 3.6, which wasn't a problem.

Which add-ons were part of your workflow?

We used a few. One of them was GeoScatter, a popular scattering add-on for distributing plants and other environmental elements. We also used Animation Layers, not for character animation, but for the camera, specifically to create handheld, shaky camera movements.

I created separate layers for a standstill shot, for walking in place, and for running. This allowed me to mix and adjust them as needed. I believe some add-ons have been developed since then specifically for this kind of workflow. To generate camera motion, I also tested VirtuCamera. I experimented with recording live camera movements by walking around, but I found it too imprecise. Instead, I preferred keyframing and layering different types of motion.

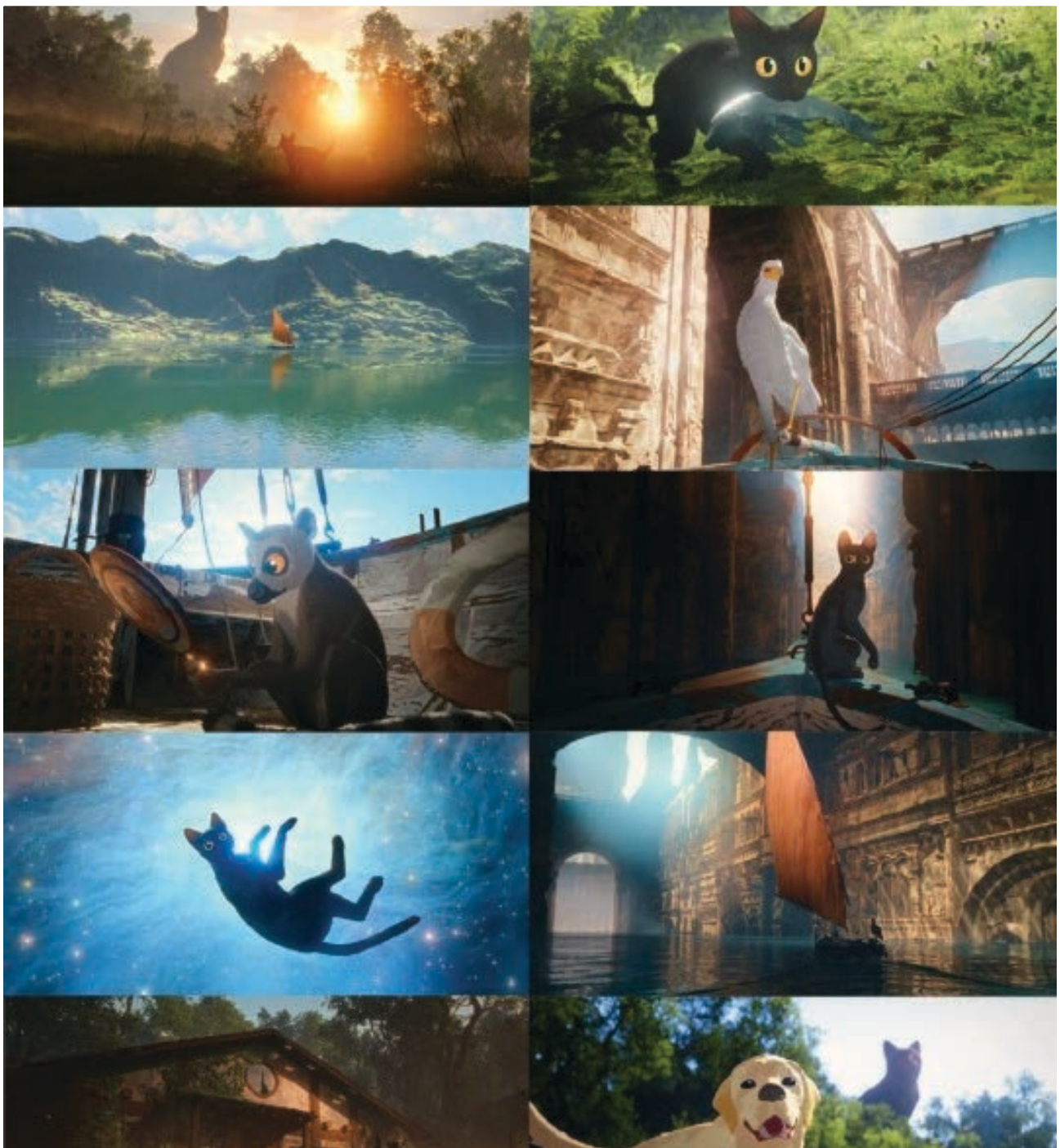


For fluid simulations, we sometimes combined different techniques, starting with large-scale waves using Cell Fluids and then adding details with FLIP Fluids. Other tools we used included Bagapie Vegetation Generator, Bagapie Rain Generator, and Copy Global Transform.

What did you love about Blender?

What I love is how fast the files open. It might seem like a small thing, but it actually saves a lot of time and frustration.

EEVEE is great. Also, I love how customizable everything is. I created a lot of custom keyboard shortcuts, which worked really well when I was working alone. However, once we started working in the studio, it caused some issues, especially when I had to demonstrate something on someone else's computer. But we figured it out.



I also love the amount of resources available online. There are so many tutorials and tools, and I can quickly find answers to almost anything.

What could improve in Blender for indie filmmakers?

Well, there were some challenges with using Blender, but we solved them.

Sometimes things weren't clear at first, but once you actually put your mind into it, you can figure it out. That's often the case with Blender: you encounter obstacles, but with enough effort, you find a way through.

What I'd love to see –and I think it's already happening– is more focus on NPR (non-photorealistic rendering) workflows, which is great. Further improvements to interactive and real-time rendering would also be a huge benefit.

I haven't worked much in Blender over the past six months, but I'm already working on my next project, and I plan to use Blender for it.

Final thoughts?

I've never worked in a big studio, so I don't really know exactly how they operate. But I think that if you're working on a smaller indie-scale project, you shouldn't try to copy what big studios do. Instead, you should develop a workflow that best suits you and your smaller team.

In our case, we didn't rely heavily on concept art. We modeled the characters directly in 3D and found ways to skip certain steps. Many of us wore multiple hats, figuring out how to streamline tasks rather than having separate departments for everything.

For me, it's also easier to handle the camera and lighting simultaneously rather than treating them as separate stages. Having a smaller team made the process more flexible and efficient.

When developing my first feature, I structured the story around elements that were relatively easy to animate. I avoided large crowds and complex effects because, in the end, most viewers don't think about how difficult something was to create. I think it's valuable for filmmakers to collaborate with tool developers early on to understand which things are challenging and which are easy. This can actually spark creative ideas rather than feeling like a limitation.

Storytelling offers infinite possibilities, but sometimes constraints can be beneficial. For example, deciding to use only four characters and a handful of locations can lead to stronger creative choices. Some of my favorite films take this approach. They don't need an epic scope to be powerful.

*That said, I think a certain level of naivety is necessary when starting a project. If I had known how difficult it would be, I might never have started. But because I didn't fully grasp the challenges ahead, I just dove in and figured things out along the way.

