



***Straume (Flow)* is an Oscar®-winning feature animation from Latvia, Belgium, and France. Below is Kino Ken's review of its Criterion Collection dvd release.**

**18 of a possible 20 points = \*\*\*\*1/2 = a minor classic**

**Latvia / France / Belgium 2024 color 85 minutes wordless feature animation  
Dream Well Studio (Latvia) / Sacrebleu Productions (France) / Take Five  
(Belgium) / Arte France Cinema / Canal + (France)**

**Producers: Ron Dyens, Matiss Kaza, Gregory Zalzman, Gints Zilbalodis**

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance**

**Points:**

**2 Direction: Gint Zilbalodis\***

**1 Editing: Gints Zilbalodis**

**2 Cinematography: Gints Zilbalodis\***

**Visual Effects: Angie Boos\*, Arturs Gore\*, Daniels Gulbis\*, Tino Reghe\*,  
Kristina Revziha\*, Konstantins Visnevskis\***

**2 Animation**

**Animation Supervision: Pierre Mousquet\***

**Animation Direction: Léo Silly Pélissier\***

**Lead Animation: Thibault Delahaye\***

**1 Screenplay: Gints Zilbalodis and Matīss Kaža, adapted by Ron Dyens**

**2 Music: Rihards Zalupe\* and Gints Zilbalodis\***

- Music Engineer: Normunds Sne  
Music Mixing: Mikko Raita
- 2 Art Direction: Gints Zilbalodis\*  
Graphic Design: Paula Bobrova
- 2 Sound  
Sound Design / Sound Editing Supervision: Gurwal Coïc-Gallas\*  
Sound Effects: Nicolas Auert\*, Bertrand Boudaud\*, Clément Danion\*,  
David Davister\*, Nathan Foucray-Bretonnière\*  
Sound Recording: David Davister\*  
Dialogue Editing: Patrick Komar  
Rerecording Mixing: Philippe Charbonnel
- 2 Voices Cast: Gint Zilbalodis (Flow, the cat), Maxime Gondeo  
(Golden Retriever), Billy Clancsen (Lemur), Kellia Metúx  
(Secretary Bird)
- 2 Creativity  
18 total points

*Straume (Flow)* was the first independently-produced foreign feature animation to win an Oscar® for Best Feature Animation. Though sound recording was done partly in Belgium and France, animation came from a studio in Latvia. *Flow* was the second feature animation of director Gints Zilbalodis. It was the first feature animation of his to be created by a team.

What is doubly unusual about this work is complete shunning of dialogue and human characters. Relying simply on sound effects, occasional music accompaniment, and rather vague characters that displayed true animal behaviors and vocalizations, *Flow* unfolds without narration. Audiences can draw their own conclusions, a far cry from the babblings attached to mainstream studio releases. With a runtime of eighty-five minutes, this animation challenges viewers to stay visually alert, foregoing popcorn and lobby breaks. Too intense for younger audiences inexperienced at decoding more than an hour's worth of wordless actions, Zilbalodis's floodtime epic is geared more to teen and adult attention levels. Mature interpretive skills are essential in understanding its sometimes ambiguous events.

For a point-of-view character, the director chose a cat that seemed to belong to a departed sculptor. The cat has a home base in a two-story cottage, the second floor of which comprises a studio workshop.

As the film opens, a cat is staring at its reflection in a puddle. It's disturbed by other animals passing through the forest, one of them splashing the feline as it dashes by.

The cat roams through verdant countryside eventually arriving at a clearing dotted by sculptures of itself or relatives. A friendly retriever shows up, wanting to play. No dice. Instead, the cat, employing a succession of leaps, enters its cottage refuge, curling up on a bed inside for a nap.

Sometime later, this cat reemerges outside. It becomes fascinated by a landed fish five dogs are wrangling over. When one of them is compelled to drop its desirable meal in order to bark and fend off rivals, the observant mog close by mouths it and runs off. Close pursuit forces kitty to surrender the tempting prize. Only a diversion created inadvertently by one puzzled hare saves opportunistic cat from standoff with hungry pooches.

Soon the situation changes radically. While puss is temporarily left alone, birds fly overhead, followed by a pack of speeding dogs headed the same direction. Then stampeding deer burst out from nearby shrubbery. Why the rush?

Seconds later the answer becomes menacingly obvious: a tsunami storms through the woods. It nearly drowns the unprepared mouser, which quickly retreats from rising waters.

So begins an adventure odyssey that will take it, a capybara afloat in drifting felucca, one collection-minded lemur, and the amiable retriever that previously intruded into unlucky black cat territory on an unanticipated voyage more or less together. Along the way they'll meet up with a protective secretary bird and a flock of hostile members of its same species intent on keeping outsiders away from their nesting area. An additional novelty is a prehistoric whale-like creature with multiple fins and flippers which periodically leaps out of the water entirely too close for comfort. Even once providing Puss-in-Flood with a brief free ride on its back.

How these assorted boatmates learn to get along with one another constitutes the core of Zilbalodis's production. Obviously if they don't

cooperate, all will probably perish. Except perhaps one survivor, the most adaptable.

*FLOW*'s plot seems identical to its theme. Live together or die. Director Zilbalodis eschews in interviews any attempts at treating animals or events as symbols. Thus bypassing all references to religious allegory. Still, he hints at an overall cyclical pattern as the film's conclusion suggests imminent replay of what has just transpired as once again panicked deer can be observed running away from grazing grounds.

Highlights are concentric circles of racing deer, an apotheosis scene involving the cat's secretary bird defender, appearances of a fantastic whale-like anachronism, onset of a tsunami, architectural ruins combining motifs from multiple ancient civilizations, and last-minute rescue of stranded capybara whose boat is perched precariously over a chasm created by receding water.

Art direction splendidly recreates a frequently transforming countryside thanks to mechanics of the Blender™ computer program, one which allow layers of overlays to be positioned by the user at virtually any angle. Coloration and shading options are equally abundant. So much so that the director's computer frequently crashed due to image overload problems.

Animation is masterful, with character movement thoroughly realistic and credible.

Sound recording captures every nuance of animal utterances with total fidelity. Except for a baby camel's vocalizations substituting for those of the capybara.

Emotional intensity and suspense, developed and maintained with great craftsmanship, aid in guaranteeing audience involvement. Immersive camera cinematography effectively links audience to onscreen events and characters.

Though story plot is quite meager and tenuous, so much specific characterization and background detail is present in each scene that its lack of complexity seems unimportant.

Music themes created by the director and orchestrated by Rihards Zalupe intermittently undergird action. Discreet silences are intelligently inserted whenever movement becomes secondary to characterization.

Plenty of individuation is present in animal utterances and motions. Each mammal in a group can be easily distinguished by color, shape, size, or ornamentation. No two lemurs, for example, have the same design of headgear.

Even without discernible villain or blatant hero, this drama is utterly emotionally compelling.

Tautly effective editing creates optimal suspense through jolting buildups, while lingering pleasantly on pastoral moments.

Generous doses of humor provide oases of calm. These include a foolishly imitative cat falling backwards overboard attempting to double as towering secretary bird, loopy golden retriever copying puss's stretching and yawning gestures, and capybara's annexing a shocked lemur's basket of treasured collectables.

Highly original in concept and generally adept in execution, *FLOW* marks arrival of a major new talent in the field of animation. Anyone interested in that specialized art should make it a point to view this masterwork.

The double dvd release from the Criterion Collection is now available to borrow from the Hugh Stoupe Library of the Heritage Methodist Church in Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

Bonuses include the following:

1. *Away*, Gints Zilboladis's feature animation debut, reviewed separately at this web site
2. a 2019 Proof-of-Concept Teaser with a runtime of one minute, twenty seconds
3. an eighty-one minute animatic version of *Flow*
4. nine minutes and forty nine seconds of unused shots from *Flow* with director audio commentary
5. a 2012 short dialogue-free animation directed by Gints Zilbalodis titled *Aqua* (reviewed below)
6. an essay on *Flow* by Nicolas Rapold
7. collectable animal stickers of *Flow* characters
8. a 2025 Making of *Flow* documentary titled *Dream Cat* having a runtime of fifty-seven minutes and 54 seconds
9. a three minute, fifty-five second For Your Consideration Reel
10. a thirty-two second Awards Spot
11. a United States trailer for *Flow* with a runtime of two minutes, ten seconds
12. an International Trailer for *Flow* with a runtime of one minute, forty-two seconds

13. a thirteen minute, twenty second Meet the Filmmakers interview with director Gints Zilbalodis

14. a ten minute, forty-six second Feline Phenomenon interview with *Flow* co-producer and co-writer Matīss Kaža

15. a 2014 nine minute short animation directed by Gints Zilbalodis titled *Priortety (Priorities)*, which is reviewed below

### *Aqua*

Latvia 2012 color 7 minutes wordless short animation

Bilibaba (Latvia)

11 of 20 points = \*\*1/2 = slightly better than average film

Key: \*designates an outstanding technical achievement

Points:

- 1 Direction: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 0 Editing: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 1 Cinematography: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 1 Lighting: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 1 Story: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 2 Art Direction: Gints Zilbalodis\*
  - 1 Music: Bertram Pauls Perviskis
  - 1 Animation: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 1 Ambience
  - 2 Creativity
- 11 total points

*Aqua* is an early short animation created by Gints Zilboladis during his early teen high school years. It's very primitive, with each character heavily outlined, rather murky lighting, spasmodic editing, and no discernible plot. Bertram Pauls Perviskis supplies an adequate, though unexceptional minimalist percussive score, with Gints handling all other functions of the production. The film does show promise, however. Here tsunami wave, bird, boat, cat, storm, and fish make prototype appearances. All those elements will be returned to action in *Flow*. Pastels and dark violets predominate in backgrounds. Notably missing are deer, capybara, dogs, secretary birds, lemurs, statuary, city ruins, and mythological whale-like creature. Note rescue of cat by bird midway through

the short. Also significant is the predilection of Zilbalodis for employing rounded forms for characters.

This short is suitable viewing for all ages.

### *Priorytety (Priorities)*

Latvia 2014 color nine minutes JRRMV short adventure animation

16 of 20 points = \*\*\*\* = an exceptional film

Key: \*designates an outstanding technical achievement

Points:

- 2 Direction: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 0 Editing: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 2 Cinematography: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 1 Lighting: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 1 Story: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 2 Music: Bertram Pauls Perviskis
  - 2 Art Direction: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 2 Animation: Gints Zilbalodis
  - Creative Advisor: Dzintars Krūminš
  - 2 Sound: Gints Zilbalodis
  - 2 Creativity
- 16 total points

Two years later Gints Zilbalodis completed another short animation. This one was once again dialogue-free. However, gone were heavy object outlines of his previous film. Textures in *Priorytety* feel weightier, look denser. Color contrast is more in evidence. There's a simple story plot this time. A young pilot and his dog have become stranded on what seems to be a deserted island. Initially, the youth focuses solely on chopping down trees to construct a raft. Hindered by barking pet, he picks up a branch and flings it out from cave mouth height to sea level beach. That temporarily removes the distraction, as playful canine quickly returns with recovered stick. Forcing a repeat of the process.

Eventually, after a plane passing nearby fails to spot flares from his gun, the aviator changes plans and devotes attention chiefly to the dog. This brings them both greater satisfaction.

When noise of a second plane is heard, the human character once again fires a flare gun. Four times. Then he gives up.

However, the seaplane operator detects the castaway's signals and lands in a tidal pool. Rescue is at hand! Man and beast race joyfully downhill towards waiting "bird."

In this second outing, Zilbalodis shows considerably more artistry in depicting character forms, elongating where necessary for purposes of realistic simulation. Music is more dramatic, heightened for setbacks and climax. Wave motion shows greater detail, though backgrounds remain sketchy and ill-defined. Animation displays plenty of flexibility. Faces reveal far more variety of expression than in *Aqua*.

This film relates chiefly to *Away* rather than *Flow*, though the latter film's golden retriever makes its debut here. The problem of a downed plane recurs in Gilbalodis's first feature, where a boy parachutes to safety on an island. He, sole survivor of a crash, must stave off survivor guilt, thirst, and hunger to make his way to a coastal settlement, encountering a succession of obstacles. These mostly arise from whims of nature. At one point, when death by dehydration seems imminent, one helpful cat leads him to a geyser well. Both *Away* and *Priorities* conclude with human triumphs over vicissitudes sent by nature.

Gints' handling of sound effects and sound recording in this short demonstrate considerable maturation over his work in *Aqua*. Barks of dog, firings of flare gun, and propeller whirrings are captured in full fidelity to original sonic sources.

*Priorytety* is quite suitable viewing for all ages.

Note: Both the above short animations can be played with or without director audio commentary.