

Flow: We Are, Therefore I Am

'Flow' is about the importance of recognizing ourselves through the other

[Lady Horatia](#)



Credit: Baltic Content Media / UFO Distribution / Le Parc Distribution

'Flow' is set in a diluvian world. This is a flood of Biblical proportions. As we watch the waters rise up and engulf the giant cat statue — and almost take our nameless cat protagonist — we can practically imagine Noah crashing through those waves with his ark. This doesn't happen in the film, but something similar does.

As the cat looks out against the rising waves, they spot a boat coming closer and closer — hope appears. It's not God's prophet which has come to save them but a capybara on a boat. Thus begins the journey of 'Flow' and the journey of the cat. From isolation and fear, to community and recognition.

Recognition — and its twin, reflection — is the central theme of 'Flow'. The film is full of moments of physical reflection, and consequently recognition of said reflection. Throughout the film, the cat sees themselves reflected back at them. Whether it be their reflection in the water or the cat statues or the cat drawing at the start of the film, the cat recognizes themselves through *themselves*.

The film includes two key moments of reflection and recognition. The first is the lemur and the mirror, and the second is the final shot of the film.

Throughout the film the lemur is obsessed with collecting objects and putting them into a basket. At a certain point they find a mirror. The lemur connects with it and holds onto it tight. After the flood dissipates, the lemur sits on an (almost) throne with their fellow lemurs. They all look into the mirror at their own reflection. The cat finds them and calls out to their lemur friend to come with them. At first the lemur ignores the cat and refuses to look away from their mirrored reflection. But then they think on it for a moment and they change their mind and decide to follow the cat.

The second key moment of reflection comes after they rescue their friends from the boat that is dangling precariously over a cliff edge, about to fall. After the whole gang is safe, the cat finds the mythical whale stranded and dying. The whale was a recurring character in the film, even saving the cat at some point.

At the end of the film, the cat watches as the whale dies. In a moment of deep grief the cat sits alone and looks into a puddle of water, as if trying to process the loss. At first, all we can see is the cat's own reflection looking back at them but then, all of a sudden, their friends join them. The capybara, the lemur, and the dog all lean into the cat and the film cuts to credits.



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It's easy to recognize that the film has a motif of reflection, one might even call it the theme of recognition, but what does it mean? 'Flow' is about recognition through reflection; in short, we are humans because we recognize each other. 'Flow' fully embodies the Bantu philosophy of ubuntu: "I am because we are".

Ubuntu sees recognition of the self not through the self but through the other. Consequently, because of this recognition of the self through the other, the self has a responsibility of care to the other. For if the other ceases to exist the self ceases to exist.

Ubuntu is in direct conflict with the accepted western *dogma* established by René Descartes: 'dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum' — latin for: "I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am". Descartes' idea is that we can't trust our senses; they could be lying to us. And so if we can't trust them, how can we know we are

real and not just dreaming? Descartes argues that since we can doubt our senses we are therefore capable of thought, and if we are capable of thought, we therefore are. It's a pretty straightforward philosophy.

'Flow' challenges the very notion of 'dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum'. 'Flow' is about the power of recognition, and consequently of becoming through recognition. The film agrees with most philosophy in saying that the self is only found in recognition. What 'Flow' argues is that the Cartesian conception of the recognition of the self through the self is shallow. It argues that it is simply a reflection of the self; a shallow, flat, cracked reflection of nothing.

'Flow' challenges Descartes' premise through the use of its main character: the cat. Cats are usually imagined as solitary creatures, so it is powerful that the cat finds themself in the recognition of the other. Allow me to tell you how.

What's the fundamental problem with 'dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum'? To answer this we need to understand what the problem with the self is.



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The self that you are can only exist because of another. An individual is not born by itself. An individual doesn't grow by itself. Therefore an individual cannot form thoughts by itself. The words that Descartes used to define himself came from somewhere. The concepts came from somewhere.

His food, his water, his air, the land on which he walked, it all came from somewhere. The shoes that he wore, the clothes that he wore, they came from somewhere. The cutlery that he used to eat, the teeth that he ate with, the acid in his stomach to digest, it all came from somewhere. It is all connected to the world around us. We cannot separate ourselves from this world.

Descartes is the original simulation theorist. Much like Zhuangzi and his 'Butterfly Dream' story, Descartes believed that one could not tell if one was dreaming in that very moment.

Descartes believed that the senses were deceiving us, therefore we could not trust them to understand — let alone perceive — reality. And so if the senses could not be trusted, nothing could be trusted. Everything could be false, and nothing could be real.

Simulation theory scares us but its sharpness is an illusion. It has permeated the philosophical playgrounds of the philosophically dull. It is neo-nihilism taking a new form, filtered through techno-deism to create a new understanding of reality; a shallow reality filled with nothing, saying nothing.

Simulation theory has a lot of permutations, from the most radically pessimistic to the slightly life affirming. But they all fail because of one key problem. Simulation theorists like to think that we are separate from the world. They believe that the self exists separately from the material reality.



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This externalizing of the self is a lie, though. It is an illusion. We like to think that because we can externalize our thought (and extend it beyond the current moment in which we exist) that we are somehow separate from the world in which we exist. The thought goes that because you are able to do this than how can you know that the world does in fact exist?

To challenge this axiom of the unknowability of reality, you don't have to explain how butterflies cannot dream. This won't answer the question for them because they will simply rebut it from the idea of simulation or from the Cartesian idea of our senses being impossible to trust.

Instead, the way in which you challenge the axiom of the untrustworthiness of the senses is by saying that there is no way to know which is true: dreams or reality. Or, in other words, because our senses are untrustworthy why then do we trust that they are fake?

Zhuangzi argues that the distinction between dreams and reality is a false dichotomy, therefore one cannot know which is true. He is right, but if it is a false dichotomy than that makes both premises

equally invalid. Why is the rejection of the senses more valid than the embracing of the senses?

I propose that the solution to simulation theory is the Bantu philosophy of ubuntu: "I am because we are".

Ubuntu does not reject the Cartesian position of the untrustworthiness of the senses. Rather, it argues that we can trust the senses because there are other people there to confirm what our senses tell us. We know that they are true because we do not live alone. There cannot be an existence without a grounded connection to the world and the others.

First, one must realize that they can only exist in the moment in which they are. You can only feel the ground beneath you right now. You can only feel the water that is rising up right now, and only touch said water in that moment. You can only see the fish that are in front of you. And if you want to catch them you need to be there with them.

Only by seeing the world as it is, and recognizing that you can't exist anywhere else but in the very moment in which you are, can you then begin to recognize the other within you. The bones that are within us, the muscles that wrap around the bones, the skin that wraps around the flesh, the clothes around the skin and then the air around that. The sounds that we hear and the smells we smell. They are all a part of us. We are all connected.

We like to think that we are separate. That somehow we aren't connected to the whole, to the other. But that's not true.



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We are all particles and all of these particles are constantly connected. Let's consider the nature of the water in 'Flow'. We like to think that water is isolating, that it divides us, that it separates us from the land and from the world in which we live. We have this idea that water divides but in 'Flow' the water does the opposite of that. The water is what connects everything and everyone in 'Flow'.

Not only does the water textually connect our cast of animal characters by bringing them together and forcing them to bond on a boat, but it also connects everything by its very nature. For if you are touching water you are touching everything that that water touches. The water is what forces these animals together and forces them to connect with each other, to find each other.

Before finding each other, the animals were alone. The cat lost its owner and had no one. The capybara began its journey alone. The lemur searched for recognition within the mirror and thought that — like Descartes — they found it in the self. But they found nothing but a hollow copy of themselves. The lemur only found true connection within the other. The dog was abandoned by the other dogs and then realized that they were more concerned with themselves, like Descartes. And finally, we have the secretarybird.

The secretarybird character tried to recognize itself within the other animals and not within itself. It rejected the Cartesian idea of 'dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum', and embraced the Bantu philosophy of ubuntu. The secretarybird recognized the other, the different. And in this recognition of the other it found itself. This act caused the other secretarybirds to reject it and cast it out from the group.

The secretarybird character encapsulates the insularity of Cartesian philosophy, and the challenge of the Bantu philosophy of ubuntu. The point of ubuntu isn't that you are supposed to find in-groups in which you can relate. Rather, ubuntu challenges us to relate to everyone around us. There is no "you and your group" or "you and yourself" but rather there is "you and everyone". For ubuntu, the 'I' only exists because there is an other.

Without this other, this 'we', there can be no 'I'. We owe it to ourselves to recognize the other, and in recognizing the other and their role in our recognition (and construction) of ourselves we undertake a responsibility of care towards them. In short, since the 'I' can only exist with the other, you must ensure that the other lives. For if the other stops existing you stop existing as well.



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The secretarybird relates to the cat and the cat finds themselves by relating to the secretarybird. At a certain point the secretarybird flies off and the cat follows them. The cat scales a mountain and finds the secretarybird at the top of the mountain. The two look at each other as gravity becomes inverted and they slowly rise up to the sky. Around them we can see balls of water floating.

The secretarybird keeps rising but the cat remains. At a certain point the secretarybird disappears and the cat drops down, left alone. This is an essential moment because it is here where the cat learns to reject Cartesian philosophy and embrace the Bantu philosophy of ubuntu. The secretarybird had to leave to teach the cat this lesson.

We have water as a symbol of that which connects everyone, and the secretarybird as an embodiment of a rejection of Cartesian philosophy. The secretarybird is taken and it is this act which reverses the flood. Not because the waters need a sacrifice, or even because the waters are no longer a threat because the water was never a threat. The waters came to teach the cat a lesson about connection and recognition.

Consider the only dream that the cat has. They dream about a herd of deer circling them and closing in on them before the water comes crashing in, sweeping everything away, and waking the cat up. The dream represents the insularity of Cartesian philosophy. It is symbolically represented as an in-group perpetually circling each other for no purpose but the self-repeating recognition of the self.

The water is ubuntu coming to destroy this Cartesian insularity, and consequently destroy any certainty the cat thought they had. The cat needs to learn to connect and to recognize, and he needs to do so through a flood.

This is why the humans are missing from the world of the film (and from the film itself). This is also why the cat statues were built. The humans are missing because this is the end state of a Cartesian vision of the world. A world where individuals are so fragmented and atomized that we cannot even see each other anymore.

We do not even exist anymore. We have disappeared from each other. And so the waters have to come to connect us all. Once the secretarybird rejects Descartes and embraces the ubuntu philosophy, he is taken, for connection has returned.



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The cat statues were an attempt by humans to find connection. The cat — and their statues — are symbolic of this search for connection. The cat is traditionally thought to be a solitary animal. And the cat in 'Flow' thought that they could only relate to themselves but in so doing they found only themselves. At the start of the film the cat found the world that they thought they knew being swallowed by water. Connection was knocking at the door of the cat but the cat couldn't see it.

The water came and destroyed the recognition that they thought they had. At the start, the dog tries to drag them out of their Cartesian hole but the cat rejects it and only insulates themselves further into themselves. The cat eventually climbs up a massive statue of itself hoping that this enormous representation of itself will save them.

The cat believes that a complete recognition of itself will save them from the destruction that is coming but their hope is futile. They cannot save themselves. They cannot just recognize themselves and hope that it is enough to save themselves. The waters keep rising and they try to run from it and reject it. But the waters keep rising until they cannot run away anymore. The cat can't run from recognition; they can't run from connection, from the other.

'Flow' forces the cat to connect with others, and it does the same with us. It forces us to understand the other. It forces us to see the other. It forces us to see that we need recognition and connection through the other. We are not ourselves because we can know ourselves. We are ourselves because we know the other. I am because we are. We are because we are.



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And this is where we need to talk about the whale. The whale is a deeply communal creature. Much like the cat, there's this idea that whales are somehow solitary creatures. In fact, whales' sense of connection with the other is profound and deep.

It is unscientific and unfounded to claim this, but I wouldn't be surprised if whales had their own religion. Even if it isn't empirically true that whales have faith, we like to believe that they do. Maybe it isn't even in some great creature beyond themselves. Maybe their belief is in each other. And maybe that's why they sing. They sing about their faith for each other.

Water in film is also frequently used as a symbol for connection and *faith*. Much like it was in Terrence Malick's masterpiece 'The Tree of Life' so it is here in 'Flow'. For how is water nothing but life, and what is faith but the embodiment of life? And what then is the meaning of this life and faith but the belief in the living other which we choose to recognize day in and day out perpetually?



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And it is this water of life, this water of faith, which is so powerful about 'Flow'. Upon seeing the dead whale at the end of the film we can't help but think of the death of a god. We think that with the death of God — like with the Enlightenment, like with Descartes and Sartre — that because God is dead we can only relate to ourselves, but this is not true. We look into the waters of faith and at first we

see only ourselves. But what then do we find coming up behind us?
The other.

And in a beautiful moment, after the credits of the film, we see a shot of the ocean. And what do we see rising out of it? The whale. God is not dead. Faith is not dead. And we revive faith not with individual belief, but with our belief in each other, with our recognition of each other.

I am, because we are.