

Designing Non-Human Centered Narratives in Film

Directing “Beyond the City Park”

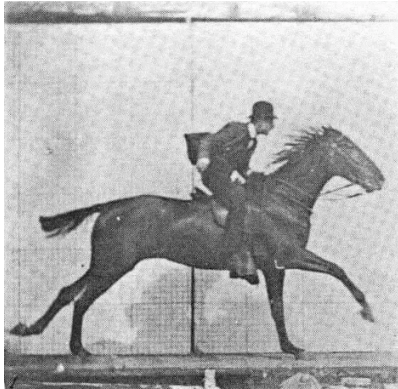
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1. Introduction



One of the first motion pictures ever created is a man riding a horse. (DeMello, 2012) In 1877 a zealous racehorse breeder hired the photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, to capture a series of photographs and prove that the breeder's horse lifts all four hooves off the ground when galloping. (Cook & Sklar, 1998) Muybridge managed to capture the horse's motion, thus paving the way for the creation of moving images. The representation of animals in various film forms, from the early motion pictures to contemporary film and television, closely resembles their portrayal in literature, wherein they are predominantly depicted as human-like characters, symbolic substitutes, or merely secondary characters. (DeMello, 2012)

The way we portray animals in film not only reveals our relationship with animals but also shapes our attitudes towards them (DeMello, 2012; Burt, 2002; Małecki et al., 2019). In 2019 Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński published a description of studies involving more than 3,000 participants who were randomly divided into either an experimental group, which read a narrative containing animal content, or a control group, which read a narrative that did not mention animals. The results indicated that reading an animal-centred story can positively affect human attitudes towards animals. (Małecki et al., 2019)

In recent years, a new wave of films focusing on animals as their main protagonists have made their way into cinemas. Filmmakers are now trying to tell stories with the non-human perspective as the leading narrative both in documentary and fiction. The film "Gunda" (2020) by Viktor Kosakovskiy documents the daily life of a pig mother living on a farm with two cows and a one-legged chicken, while "EO" (2022) by Jerzy Skolimowski presents the perspective of a donkey who, through his escapes encounters good and bad people, experiences joy and pain, becoming a dramatic character faced with the reality of being an animal in an anthropocentric world. The main characters of these films do not use human language. In the film "Gunda," the absence of human dialogue still manages to convey a powerful narrative, whereas in "EO," humans are relegated to secondary characters, their narratives peripheral to the central animal-driven storyline. These developments suggest an increasing interest in exploring non-human centred narratives in film. They could reflect the global west's increasingly nuanced understanding of animal consciousness, intellect, and emotional capacity or a reaction to the urgency of reassessing human's relationship with animals.

This paper aims to contribute to this evolving discourse while informing the development and production process of my graduation film "Beyond the City Park". During my inquiry into

reimagining the human-animal relationship, I found that transhumance - a type of pastoralism or nomadism where the movement of livestock is coordinated between mountain pastures in the warmer seasons, and lowland pastures during the rest of the year, is a perfect example of a multispecies event for reassessing our relationship with domesticated animals. (Kulpiński, 2023) After being in contact with multiple shepherds across France and Spain, I decided to tell the story of a herd of sheep embarking on transhumance from their winter pastures in the Casa de Campo park in Madrid to the summer pastures in the Guadarrama mountains. This herd caught my interest because of the unusual nature of their journey. The transition from urban topography to rural landscapes perfectly captures the entangled relationship between humans, domesticated animals and the land.

The research question driving this investigation is: “How can I construct non-human-centered narratives in film, particularly focusing on the experiences and perspectives of domesticated animals, and what are the challenges and techniques associated with this type of filmmaking?” To answer this question, this paper will analyze a range of sources, conduct practice-based research, and apply the findings to the creative decisions behind the film “Beyond the City Park”. This explorative journey will provide valuable insights into the realm of non-human-centered narratives in film, contributing to our understanding of our relationship with animals and potentially influencing our attitudes towards them.

In conducting this research, I will draw on theoretical and practical insights from human-animal studies, psychology, and filmmaking to inform the development and production of my film. In the following sections, the paper will delve deeper into the methodological approaches associated with human-animal studies, the potential of multispecies ethnography and kinesthetic empathy as methods for capturing non-human experiences, the challenges posed by anthropocentric perspectives and how that applies to filmmaking.

2. Human-Animal Studies - methodological problems

In order to construct a film narrative that focuses on a domesticated non-human animal, I have to understand better the intricate dynamics of their relationship with humans and their role within the human-centred world. Animals are everywhere. They are in our homes, in the zoos, in *the wild*, on our plates, in the media, in languages and in traditions. They are entrenched in the fabric of human societies. We are also animals. This bond is the focus of Human-Animal Studies (HAS), or anthrozoology, an interdisciplinary field investigating our interactions with animals and the spaces animals occupy within human sociocultural contexts. (DeMello, 2012) While understanding the human side of this relationship can be achieved through conventional methods, such as participant observation or surveys, one of the significant challenges in HAS is understanding the non-human side of our relationship with other animals. How can we learn about other animals' emotions, attitudes, and experiences? Building upon research from disciplines that focus on the behaviour of non-human animals provides one strategy, yet this approach comes with its own challenges.

Most animal studies, like zoology or behavioural sciences, aim to create an understanding of animals by classifying and structuring them exclusively based on their anatomy, their interactions with each other or with their ecosystems. (DeMello, 2012) To avoid participant observation bias, scientists are expected to focus on objective, quantitative observations, aiming to minimize their subjectivity. (DeMello, 2012) This approach often results in the use of impersonal language and passive voice, which can further objectify the studied animals and exclude their agency from the findings.

HAS is not constrained by a particular methodology or theoretical paradigm, instead, It employs diverse theoretical approaches which depend on the discipline it intersects with. (DeMello, 2012) HAS aims to enrich our understanding of human-animal interactions by building upon findings from animal-focused disciplines and combining them with methods from human-focused disciplines like anthropology, history, sociology, or psychology. (DeMello, 2012) However, to avoid **anthropomorphism** (projecting human characteristics onto animals), researchers in Human-Animal Studies must remember that there are multiple different ways of experiencing and being in the world. DeMello notices the challenge that comes with those differences: "That we do not share a common language with non-human animals—although we can certainly communicate with them—makes it even harder to access their minds." (2012, p. 21)

While trying to construct a non-human narrative in my film, I am facing similar problems. What does the sheep's perspective look like? How to translate the experiences of non-humans into a story for humans? Although it may not be possible to answer these questions fully, I will attempt to follow two methodologies used by HAS researchers, as a guide for researching and capturing the experiences of sheep in transhumance.

2.1 Multispecies Ethnography

Ethnography, defined as the recording and analysis of a culture based on participant observation, is the foundational method in social anthropology. (Howell, 2018) It constructs an understanding of human societies based on empirical knowledge acquired through fieldwork and interprets it in written accounts. **Multispecies ethnography** is an extension of sociocultural anthropology that emphasizes the interconnectedness between human and non-human species, advocating for their integrated understanding within environments shared and shaped by both. (Locke, 2018) It uses ethnographic research methods, such as participant observation and immersion, but extends them to include non-human species, acknowledging their agency and considering their social, historical, and ecological roles. Hence, multispecies ethnography not only provides a method for researching but also challenges the separation between humans and animals, along with the divide between nature and culture. (DeMello, 2012) Because I can only spend two weeks with the sheep, due to time restrictions related to graduation deadlines, I will have to research the historical and ecological roles of sheep in transhumance through desktop research beforehand.

I will approach the filming of “Beyond the City Park” as if I am conducting multispecies ethnographic fieldwork. Of course, with the goal of interpreting the fieldwork in a film form rather than interpreting it in a written account. In ethnographic documentary films, the filmmaker immerses themselves in the culture they are studying, using detailed observation and participation to explore the non-verbal and performative aspects of the culture in order to provide an accurate depiction that combines cultural analysis with a claim to faithfully represent the world’s everyday realities. (Henley, 2013)

During the participant observation, this method will require me to be more sensitive towards the nuances and narratives that demonstrate the ways human and non-human lives intersect. For instance, the film might explore how human activities influence the herd’s behaviours or how the sheep adapt to urban landscapes.

However, to create a genuinely non-human centered narrative and gain insights from the perspective of the sheep, another method is required in addition to participant observation. This method will require a sort of “sensory ethnography” to attempt to capture the sensory experiences and subjective perspectives of non-human species.

2.2 Kinesthetic Empathy

Kinesthetic empathy is a concept proposed by Kenneth Shapiro as a means to better understand the experiences of other species. This method involves a deep understanding of another’s experiences, emotions, and intentions not by speculation or analogy but through directly sensing their bodily experiences, potentially facilitated by mirroring the physical movements and gestures of the observed. (Shapiro, 1990) This method involves knowing an animal’s personal history and understanding both its individuality and its relationship to humans, which deepens our empathy while avoiding attributing human characteristics to the animals. (DeMello, 2012) Shapiro claims that assuming the perspective of the animal in this way allows for “general access to the intended world of the other”. (1990, p.191)

3. How to achieve Kinesthetic Empathy with a herd of sheep in 3 steps

Kinesthetic empathy involves three key components: empathy through observing the animal's bodily movements and behaviours (kinesthesia), the influence of societal constructs on how we perceive and interact with different animal species (social construction), and the individual life experiences of the specific animal under study (personal history). (Shapiro, 2019) I will tackle each component and translate it into a research method helpful in creating a non-human centered narrative in my film.

3.1 A form of empathy

Empathy here means understanding another's perspective, but when trying to empathize with a non-human, it is limited by one's own human perspective. (Shapiro, 2019) Researchers use sensitivity to the animal's bodily posture, gesture, and movement to overcome this limitation. This approach, often referred to as kinesthesia, complements our existing paralinguistic communication skills (tone of voice, facial expressions), which are less effective in studying non-human animals. (Shapiro, 2019) Kinesthetic empathy goes beyond merely observing an animal's body as if it was a text to be read, it involves embodying the lived experience of another individual.

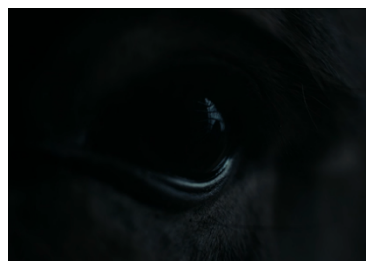
In "Understanding Dogs Through Kinesthetic Empathy", Kenneth Shapiro attempts to understand his dog Sabaka through kinesthetic empathy by observing and participating in their shared play rituals, intuitively understanding and responding to Sabaka's moves and incipient intentions by mirroring his bodily postures and attitudes. (Shapiro, 1990) As they play their game of keep-away and chase, the author immerses himself in Sabaka's world, becoming attuned to the subtleties of Sabaka's physicality – the tilt of his head, the wag of his tail, the particular stance or shuffle of his paws – that signal potential actions. This intuitive understanding seems to be more than a cognitive process; it is an embodied experience where Shapiro mirrors Sabaka's bodily postures and attitudes. By going down on all fours and noticing the motivations for Sabaka's movements, the author experiences a sort of kinesthetic empathy by feeling the dynamics of Sabaka's actions in his own body. This imitation is not merely physical but an attempt to understand the 'why' behind the 'what' of Sabaka's actions. (Shapiro, 1990) The author's intuitive response to Sabaka's intentions is a result of his active participation in shared experiences, his attentive observation of Sabaka's physical cues, and his empathetic embodiment of the dog's postures and attitudes, allowing for a deep and immediate comprehension of Sabaka's lived experience.

Empathy plays a crucial role in cinema by enabling viewers to connect emotionally with characters, facilitating an immersive experience that intertwines affective response and meaning, which can ultimately persuade viewers to align with the values and ideologies presented, thereby amplifying the film's political and social impact. (Alexa & Monani, 2014) The challenge is how representations of nature, while fostering human empathy and connection, often simultaneously obscure the true distinctiveness of non-human existence. (Alexa & Whitley, 2014)

In “EO” (2022), Skolimowski utilized cinematographic techniques like sudden cuts to close-ups of the donkey’s eyes followed by shots revealing the donkey’s gaze, thereby establishing the animal’s point of view and transforming the viewer’s perception of the scene. This shift from an objective to a subjective lens, executed through inventive cinematography, serves as an ‘extrasensory commentary’, offering viewers a unique opportunity to understand the situation from the animal’s perspective, thereby fostering empathy towards the donkey. (Mańkowski & Skolimowski, 2023) Even though, as a viewer, this method evoked a significant emotional response in me, it often overshadowed the uniqueness of non-human life. In the scene where EO, the donkey, is forcibly taken away on a lorry from his caring circus caretaker, the film’s focus is not on the donkey’s embodied experiences, such as the discomfort of being forced onto a dark, tightly packed animal transport truck. The emotional impact is generated through intercutting close-ups of the donkey’s teary eye and loud cries with shots of his human companion being left behind, suggesting the two will never see each other again.

“Ingresso Animali Vivi” (2023), an experimental film by Igor Grubic, successfully employs non-human empathy as we observe a dog investigating an eerily deserted meat production plant. The film cleverly conveys the facility’s chilling past through static shots of its stark, hook-lined interiors juxtaposed with the reactions of the dog, attentively inspecting the area, sniffing drainage holes potentially used for blood, or expressing distress and barking in response to the eerie void. The film demands from the viewer a similar level of attentiveness to the dog’s reactions as Shapiro described in his text.

In my film, I will employ kinesthetic empathy both in the filming process and in the editing room. By immersing myself and the camera within the flock and mirroring the sheep’s movements and perspective, I hope to get a better sense of how they experience the transhumance. At the same time, I will attempt to capture their environment to create an understanding of how it affects their bodily experiences by combining the two in the edit. For instance, I can capture how their bodies interact and adapt to changing terrain. I will aim to prioritize the non-human perspective and invite the audience to engage with the animals’ experiences on a visceral level.



3.2 Social Construction

Examining how animals are socially constructed is an integral component of the research within the domain of Human-Animal Studies. (DeMello, 2012) Social construction significantly influences our perceptions and interactions with different animal groups, being shaped by institutional structures such as labs, zoos, farms, and homes, as well as the language we use to describe them. (Shapiro, 2019) In examining an individual animal or a human-animal relationship, it is crucial to discern which aspects of social construction potentially skew our understanding and hence require deconstruction - a fitting example being the symbolic associations of a black cat with witchcraft, bad luck, gender, and race. (Shapiro, 2019)

Probing the social construction of animals will enrich my understanding of the historical relationship between humans and sheep. Delving into how social constructs encapsulate society's attitudes and beliefs towards sheep can significantly influence my understanding of their behaviours and interactions with them.

In Western society, sheep are constructed as being a domesticated farm animal, referred to as livestock (rather than, for example, a pet or wild animal). What does it mean to be a domesticated farm animal? In her book "A Brief History of the World According to Sheep" (2020), Sally Coulthard offers a unique and engaging look into the role of sheep throughout human history, shedding light on our complex relationship with these gentle creatures. The book takes the reader on a journey through time, beginning with the domestication of sheep and ending with the current state of the global wool industry. According to Coulthard, the process of domesticating sheep began by limiting their mobility, reorganizing their communities, and controlling their reproductive lives to make them more beneficial for humans. She describes how sheep were selectively bred for wool, meat, and milk production over centuries, becoming utterly dependent on human intervention. Today, sheep require frequent shearing due to their never-ending wool growth, which can hinder their movement and vision, a characteristic shaped by years of human control. (Coulthard, 2020) The impact of domestication is evident in their behaviour, too; unlike their wild counterparts that form smaller clusters, domestic sheep exhibit a strong inclination to remain within a larger, cohesive flock even when not directly forced by the shepherd's stick or the shepherding dogs. (Coulthard, 2020)

In her critical film "On the Domestication of Sheep" (2019), Jill Godmilow suggests that such measures enabled their transformation into entities whose only purpose is to serve human interests, including providing food, wool, and being useful for trade. Godmilow further argues, that this process has contributed significantly to shaping societal norms even beyond the human-animal relationship, such as the large-scale exploitation of human individuals, reflected in historical instances of slavery and the sexual subjugation of women. (Godmilow, 2019)

Even though it is not my intention to include a description of the social construction or the history of sheep in my film directly (I present my reasons behind this choice in Chapter 4), It is fundamental to keep this research in mind when conducting the multispecies ethnography fieldwork and when attempting to empathize with the sheep. For instance, In the context of Western culture, where sheep are often perceived as unintelligent creatures that mindlessly conform to the group (Coulthard, 2020), I need to highlight each sheep's unique character and individuality rather than portraying them solely as a collective flock.

3.3 Personal History

Shapiro explains that personal history - an understanding of the individual's past experiences - significantly shapes kinesthetic empathy. (Shapiro, 1990) In the case of the author's dog Sabaka, knowledge of his past experiences, like his early abandonment, informs and guides the author's empathetic approach.

Indeed, knowing and appreciating an individual's experiences is a crucial factor in forming empathetic connections. In a similar vein, though not through my personal experience, the intricate relationship between shepherds and their sheep, as outlined in "Cosmoecological Sheep and the Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet", serves as a model of kinesthetic empathy at work in a non-human context. Here, through a deep understanding of the flock's history, the transhumant shepherds become part of the herd, acquiring an intimate understanding of their experiences (Despret & Meuret, 2023). Just like Shapiro's (1990) concept of personal history, shepherds develop a profound knowledge of the sheep's past experiences, such as their journeys through various landscapes, patterns of grazing, and interactions within the flock. (Despret & Meuret, 2023) This understanding of the sheep's history allows shepherds to guide the flock with care and empathy, often anticipating the animals' needs even before they manifest. Furthermore, the shepherd's kinesthetic empathy is not one-sided; it also influences the behaviour of the sheep, creating a feedback loop that results in the collective memory of the flock, where human and animal experiences become intertwined (Despret & Meuret, 2023).

This aligns with my previous research, during which I interviewed two young shepherds from France, who both reported that by having to adapt to the daily cycles and needs of the sheep, they got to learn from their collective knowledge; for example: when are the correct times for eating, resting or sleeping, how to navigate the uneven terrain or where to find good pastures. (Kulpiński, 2023) In the absence of personal experiences with sheep, these accounts provide me with a valuable lens through which to comprehend the depth of kinesthetic empathy in human-sheep interactions. Understanding this dynamic can produce critical insights into the ways in which empathy is embodied, enacted, and experienced across species boundaries.

4. How do human minds react to animal stories?

While the approaches outlined in the earlier sections of my research equip me with a basis for investigating the topic of sheep in transhumance and documenting this multispecies phenomenon from the perspective of the sheep, I am yet to establish the exact process for structuring the film's narrative or articulating the story. Does it really matter if the story is true and how the narrative is told?

These questions were answered in the 2019 studies conducted by Wojciech Małecki, Piotr Sorokowski, Bogusław Pawłowski, and Marcin Cieński and published in "Human Minds, Animal Stories". In one of their studies, Małecki et al. aimed to discern the impact of perceived text fictionality on the attitudes of students towards animal welfare. They conducted an experiment in which 114 students read a text concerning illegal activities in the American meat industry, but the introductory paratext led one group to believe it was a fictional account from a novel, while another group understood it to be a factual, journalistic report. The authors then compared the responses of these two groups to a control group who read a neutral story unrelated to animal welfare. The results showed that both versions of the meat industry story significantly improved pro-animal welfare attitudes in comparison to the control group. The researchers were surprised to find out that there was no substantial difference between the impact on attitudes in the group that read the story as fiction and the group that believed it to be non-fiction.

In another part of the study, Małecki et al. (2019) investigated whether narrative or argumentative elements in stories substantially affected people's attitudes towards animals. They used the essay "Am I Blue?" by Alice Walker and designed two variants of the text: one version containing only the narrative elements and another containing only the arguments. The authors compared the impact of three different versions of the text on a group of 220 participants. Their results showed that none of these versions significantly changed the participants' attitudes towards animal welfare.

In a different phase of their research, Małecki et al. (2019) investigated whether stories representing animal welfare or accounts of animal plight had a stronger effect on people's attitudes towards animals. One group read a narrative depicting a positive human-animal relationship, focusing on topics related to moral welfare and empathy, while the other group read an excerpt depicting animal slaughter, focusing on animal abuse. The researchers hypothesized that the slaughterhouse story would have a stronger impact on the readers than the welfare tale. However, in the results, both narratives had no significant influence on attitudes compared to one another.

These studies prove that it does not matter if the narrative I create will be perceived as fictional. I will be documenting a real-life event and building my story on actual facts coming from multispecies ethnographic fieldwork and my research into the social construction of sheep. However, I choose to approach this film as a documentary as a way of documenting the sheep's experiences - creating an embodied experience of transhumance for the audience rather than aiming to educate the audience through facts. Therefore, certain narrative elements might be altered to fit that purpose. Furthermore, I will refrain from presenting a subjective judgment on the practice of shepherding as positive or negative. Instead, I will provide an opportunity for the viewers to empathize with the experiences of the sheep and determine their own position

5. Practice

In this concluding chapter, I delve into the practical application of theoretical insights explored in the earlier sections of my paper, to filming the transhumance of a flock of around 460 sheep in Spain. The film plan was devised with flexibility in mind, given the unpredictable nature of working with animals and my lack of experience with transhumance. It consisted of a brief description of the phases of the sheep's journey (transition from city to mountains) which provided the basic outline of the story.

Upon arriving in Spain, I joined Julia and Alvaro from the cooperative Los Apisquillos, a group of young shepherds who chose an alternative way of living in the face of a systemic crisis. They reside in a shared farm in the mountain village of Puebla de la Sierra, caring for a mixed breed flock of sheep, mostly Rubia del Molar, primarily used for meat and milk production. Their wool is considered as waste, due to the extremely high standards of the wool market. The journey began in the Casa de Campo Park in Madrid and led towards the village. However, this year's journey was particularly challenging due to an unprecedented early heatwave, causing record-breaking temperatures in April and a drought. The shepherds practice extensive farming, relying entirely on wild grazing for food and natural sources of water, making the scarcity of green pastures and water, along with the exhaustion from high temperatures, significant obstacles.

The first day of the transhumance coincided with the first day of shooting, providing no opportunity for pre-planning. The decisions about the journey's daily distance depended on multiple factors such as the terrain, weather, and the well-being of the sheep. Despite the initial challenges of making spontaneous creative decisions on how to set up the shots, my cinematographer and I gradually adapted to the rhythm of the herd and the shepherds. By observing and learning from the shepherds, we started anticipating the sheep's behaviour in different situations, such as their reactions on a busy road, or in various types of pastures, as well as their responses to the heatwave. This allowed us to build an understanding of the flock.

Through achieving kinesthetic empathy with the flock of sheep, I aimed to study and capture the world according to the the bodily experiences of the sheep. This ambition required me to engage deeply with the subjects of my film as well as with the environment. The methodology of multispecies ethnography informed my interaction with the flock, encouraging a respectful and attentive stance towards the sheep.

Thanks to that, we were accepted within the herd, which allowed us to capture intimate perspectives of specific sheep, thus accentuating their individuality within the collective. One such individual was a distinctive white sheep with a scar on her ear. Much of the journey was filmed from her perspective, providing a unique and engaging narrative for the audience.

We employed a variety of filming techniques, including the use of cameras placed at the eye level of the sheep, to immerse the audience in their viewpoint. The auditory landscape of the film was crafted with equal care, incorporating sounds that were significant from the sheep's perspective, thereby enhancing the kinesthetic empathy I aimed to evoke.

The journey of creating "Beyond the City Park" has been both a challenge and a revelation, offering a profound insight into the dynamics of human-animal relationships and the concept of embodied empathy. This project not only enhanced my grasp on the nuanced

relationships between shepherds and their flock but also underscored the importance of embodied empathy across species. Through the lens of transhumance, this project allowed me to delve deep into the lives of sheep and shepherds, enriching my perspective on interspecies interactions. The process was a balancing act of adapting research methodologies "on the go," which in turn, shaped a narrative that highlights the nuances of non-human experiences.

Acknowledging the difficulty of completely escaping the human gaze due to our inherent biases, I embarked on this project as a necessary exploration towards a cinema that goes beyond human-centric stories. This venture into non-human narratives serves as a stepping stone, challenging and questioning our perceptions and biases, and aiming to authentically represent the experiences and perspectives of non-human subjects. It's an ongoing process of learning and unlearning, pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling in film.

Reflecting on this journey, I am immensely grateful for the insights gained and the relationships forged. This film is a culmination of theory and practice, a narrative woven from the threads of interdisciplinary research, artistic experimentation, and a deep commitment to ethical storytelling. It is my hope that "Beyond the City Park" serves as both a reflection and a catalyst, inspiring others to explore the rich tapestry of non-human centered narratives that await our attention and appreciation.

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