

Abendzeitung

December 31, 2024, Abendzeitung (Evening News)
An interview with Marcel Barsotti. By Adrian Prechtel

When a film is made entirely by AI: 'Transformation' triggers controversy

Marcel Barsotti has created the dystopian sci-fi 'Transformation' and isn't just making friends with it. A look into the future of film. The film will be shown at Munich's HFF at the end of January. You can't buy high-quality programmes that offer artificial intelligence, you can only rent them. Munich-based film composer Marcel Barsotti had several of these elaborate high-performance programmes work on his film idea for six months. The result is the 13-minute, AI-generated film 'Transformation', in which a species from another planet seeks a new home, chooses our already devastated Earth for it and brings along a special red substance to solve problems. 'Transformation' has caused controversy at many international festivals, but has also already won seven awards.

Born in Lucerne, the 61-year-old studied composition at the Richard Strauss Conservatory, among others, and completed his pop music training with Harold Faltermeyer. He has released cinema and television films, commercials, numerous records, DVDs and pop albums. His works include the film scores for 'Die Päpstin', 'Das Wunder von Bern' and 'Deutschland. A Summer's Fairytale.'

AZ: Mr Barsotti, when you show your film, what are the reactions?

MARCEL BARSOTTI: It depends on whether people have seen something like this before or not. Some are completely irritated, others are flashed and others are critical.

AZ: What is the main criticism then?

Well, if someone is a cameraman and says after the screening: 'I don't think I'd get a job with you then?' Then I say: 'Yes, unfortunately not.' I'm not being cynical, it's just the technical way of things.



Marcel Barsotti, Director © Tunesformovies film production

AZ: After decades of film music, you suddenly have your own film: that sounds like a midlife crisis.

No, because I'm happy. But I wanted a new challenge. I've been making music professionally for so long that my debut in a different genre should be perfect.

AZ: Otherwise people would have said: 'Cobbler stick to your last!'

Exactly, so I studied AI programmes for a year, then stopped accepting music commissions and just created 'Transformation' for six months.

AZ: What did you leave to artificial intelligence?

Everything and nothing. I didn't shoot real footage and then use AI to create digital effects and additions. Instead, I prescribed everything to the AI via text, 'prompted' it - except for what I usually work on: the music.

AZ: Why?

AI music can do a lot, but it can't really respond to the plot and the cuts. You can only set style guidelines and say when the music should change dynamically. I grew up with electronic music - Kraftwerk, Jean-Michel Jarre, Tangerine Dream - and now I'm doing that again after all the orchestral stuff has been exhausted. That takes some getting used to for many directors who have worked with me. But with 'Transformation' I made my own film completely autonomously and was completely free. And because I had key experiences in the cinema with 'Star Wars' at the end of the 70s, I wanted to make a sci-fi - a genre that is virtually non-existent in Germany: too expensive and not

supported. And that's when I thought of AI, a technology that has accelerated incredibly. But the script was also written in analogue form.



Red as a complementary colour to nature, in which green would predominate: Humanoid aliens bring 'transformation' to our devastated Earth. © Tunesformovies film production

AZ: A picture is worth a thousand words: Why didn't you feed the AI with image specifications? It's easier than describing everything in a complicated way.

But if you feed in photos and use them as templates, the result is always a similar look to the original. This is more plagiarism than reinvention. Basically, the AI just spits out what you've fed it, even if it's constantly learning. Aliens then often look like the cliché from the 80s with the black eyes in the white bubble head or the spaceships like from 'Star Wars'. The trick is to communicate with the AI until it is at the level of your own artistic imagination. If you simply specify 'apocalyptic world', it usually becomes visually old-fashioned and completely outdated. You won't get very far.

AZ: What is the solution?

To 'talk' to the AI as if I were describing my visual vision to a friend for an entire evening. I may have had to 'prompt' individual scenes 50 times, just like a director says thirty times to actors and camerawoman: 'New take please. We need to talk again!' Only the AI is more patient.

AZ: And moody?

Yes, in the sense that when it offers you a version, you're often surprised. Then you say: Interesting, but the journey is going in the wrong direction. AI first offers you an image in four to six variants for every 'prompt'. You then choose one, make a few more changes and then describe the movements you want to happen. And that is usually unnatural at first, something is illogical. And I didn't make a three-minute film, but a 13-minute one. Movements of 10 seconds were a Herculean task at the beginning, but now the technology can also manage longer distances.



In 'Transformation', yellow is a colour of devastation like in 'Mad Max', but the AI has also developed and coloured food and robotic animals in this way. © Tunesformovies film production

AZ: With films, there are takes. How is it with AI?

Exactly the same. I had maybe 5,000 scenes, and 300 went into the film. Others were faulty or suddenly completely different in terms of look or perspective. The surprising thing is: AI has a certain independence and also does things that you didn't even enter. For example, because the AI comes across something that someone else may have already tried in a similar way. But you can now work with 'double prompt' programmes, where you not only enter what you want positively, but also what you definitely don't want - such as: 'Don't make the character laugh!' This is very similar to real filming. And it gets even better if you work with different software providers at the same time, i.e. if you commission several different AI programmes to do the same thing at the same time.

AZ: You submitted 'Transformation' to umpteen festivals. You won a prize at seven of them.

There have only been pure AI festivals for two years - for nerds. But I think AI films should be competing at film festivals as normal. The invitation to Toronto for the film festival with all genres was of course a hit for me. And the film also won an award that evening. Short films are always a calling card and I was there from Rome to Tokyo and won six prizes. But whenever there were too many actresses or actors on the juries, it became difficult.

AZ: Why is that?

Because nobody likes the idea of being replaced. And the question is very topical: what will be generated by AI in film? Certainly: music. The narrator's voice is already AI. The camera will also become superfluous because I can tell the AI from which perspective and with which movement it should show a scene. AI is basically set design and camera. It will still take some time for actors, even though I don't have any anymore. It's still difficult to make faces speak a text in synchronisation with the entered text, but it's possible. But it's difficult to explain to an AI how a character acts and speaks emotionally. But someone like Marilyn Monroe could soon be the first AI reincarnated character to appear in a major film.

AZ: They did without dialogue.

But not because it wasn't technically feasible, but because I originally wanted the special species in the future to communicate almost telepathically.

Films are made as a team, which is being emphasised more and more. But now you're going on an ego trip by taking on all the trades yourself. So 'Transformation' is a kind of modern auteur film.

Of course that's dangerous because you have no outside control. But I didn't want to be influenced by anyone in my first film, I wanted to show my strengths and weaknesses. But I already have offers to do other projects with others.

AZ: When will your film 'look old'?

Soon, because AI development is racing ahead. Paramount, for example, already has an AI department. I'm still one of the pioneers because there aren't many pure AI films out there yet. Most of them are only short attempts of one or two minutes. My 'Transformation' was usually the only one to get into competitions. But I'm going to keep at it and tackle a feature-length AI film at the cutting edge of technology. And the sniggering of the classic makers will stop when really big, long films are made that are good.