



Die Grenzen digitaler Fantasie **Limits of digital imagination**

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Limits of digital imagination (exerpts)

It is a multiple debut - both for Starnberg and for Marcel Barsotti: the film music composer has written, directed and edited a film for the first time. The twelve-minute science fiction film 'Transformation' is the first film conceived for the cinema to have been made entirely in the district town. The only person involved is Barsotti himself, with computer programmes contributing everything else: This also makes his work one of the first films to be generated exclusively with the help of artificial intelligence (AI).

Barsotti is currently touring from festival to festival with 'Transformation'. On 31 October, the film celebrated its German premiere at the Biberach Film Festival, and last weekend it was screened at the Saxony-Anhalt Film Music Days. It had already caused a stir internationally: it received an honourable mention at the 'International Peace Festival' in Toronto and was named best AI film at the 15th 'Austrian Independent Film Festival' in Vienna. Barsotti will soon be travelling to Italy, where 'Transformation' will be shown in Rome and Naples. After 16 festival appearances, there are still a good 100 applications outstanding: 'I have to follow the same path as a young director,' says the 61-year-old from Starnberg. 'I've only received rejections from Oscar-qualifying festivals so far' - but he is hoping for the "ShortShorts Film Festival & Asia" in Tokyo, which has shortlisted his solo work.

It will be another nine months before Barsotti presents the film to the general public after the festival round via the internet, streaming, television or cinema. However, a 30-second teaser has been online for a few days now and has already reached a five-digit number of views on YouTube. We don't want to spoil too much of the story here - but the theory of evolution, species extinction and wars on Earth are addressed. 'I didn't want to make a classic alien war film, but rather show the decay of our greedy world,' says Barsotti.

Of course, almost 100 years after Fritz Lang's 'Metropolis', it is hard to avoid picking up on ideas and motifs in the utopian film that have already been used in one of its countless predecessors. At the beginning, however, Barsotti all too obviously makes use of genre icons in the plot and images. From Richard Fleischer's 'Soylent Green' to 'Independence Day' and Liu Cixin's Three Suns trilogy: SF connoisseurs will find quite a lot about 'Transformation' familiar. More original ideas emerge in the second part of the short film.

The film reveals its strengths in its visual and acoustic design - but above all in the overwhelming scenarios that follow one another in rapid succession. He initially tried to have Chat GPT write a script based on his ideas, but the result was not acceptable to him. The prompts - i.e. the instructions and inputs to the AI system - were 'incredibly time-consuming': Up to 60 attempts were necessary for individual scenes. After three months of image selection, reworking and editing, 'Transformation' was ready for the first test screenings; Barsotti estimates its production costs at 35,000 euros, including six months of labour. If the film had been shot in the conventional way, 'it would have taken one and a half years and cost seven million'.

The composer, who has also enjoyed great financial success with soundtracks for 'Das Wunder von Bern', 'Deutschland - ein Sommermärchen' and 'Die Päpstin', says that he 'doesn't necessarily want to earn money' with 'Transformation'. His passion, however, has been science fiction since his earliest youth. Barsotti believes that his first work as a filmmaker in this genre also has the potential for a feature-length film. But he already has an idea for a screenplay for another project.

'Transformation' still reveals its digital origins in the details: The movements of the characters are not completely smooth and their imperfect facial expressions are mostly hidden behind masks. Presumably, the next but one version of the paid software will conceal these weaknesses better. However, one fundamental contradiction is more difficult to rectify: The utopian film in particular requires a fair amount of imagination. However, the AI is not capable of this, at least for the time being; it has to orientate itself on existing models. In 'Transformation', its lack of imagination is also evident in the names that Barsotti had the programme create: The AI christened the aliens 'Drakzul' - just like a character in the computer game 'World of Warcraft'.

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