



A P O G E E ■

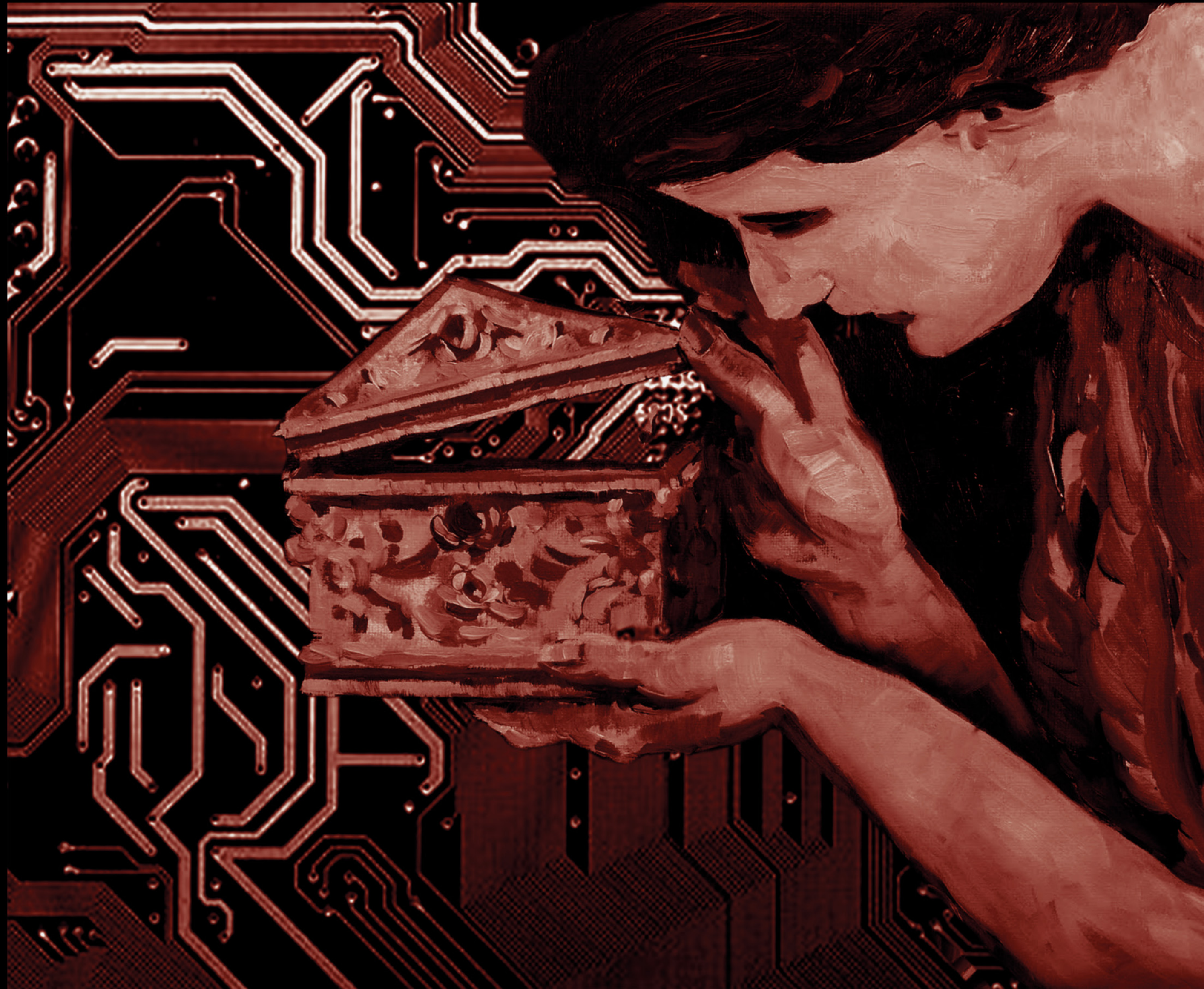
Three hundred years ago everyone knew a machine could never outrun a horse.
A hundred fifty years ago everyone knew a machine could never outfly a bird,
and today everyone knows a machine could never outsmart a human.

● **MACHINES WILL SOON OUTPERFORM US.**
● **IN EVERYTHING.**

Apogee takes us on a thrilling journey into the wonders and dangers of AI in a way the genre hasn't seen before: with frightening realism.

Leaving the norm of human-like AI behind and hitting the audience with a realistic and entirely new vision of the near future: AI will not become conscious, but it will surpass human intelligence - by a lot. Threatening our existence not because it will turn against us, but because it will do as we say, having godlike powers and a completely different understanding of reality. A nightmarish genie.

Apogee is a deep dive into the dramatic personal and social implications of developing true AI, exploring one of the most important questions of our time: What happens when machines get smarter than us?





● SYNOPSIS

The manic software engineer Robert has dedicated his life to combining nature's ingenuity with the speed of computers, creating a self-optimizing algorithm based on natural selection. But his vision doesn't catch on and Robert sees his life crumble when his startup goes bankrupt. Plagued by debt, he participates in a prize competition of abrasive IT legend Alan Kasic, leading him to a breakthrough. He manages to sell his algorithm to Alan who takes him under his wing at one of the leading AI developers in the world.

Together with new colleague and mathematician June, they create a software that revolutionizes healthcare. Robert and June fall in love but their happiness is short-lived as unforeseen waves of layoffs follow, disrupting the country and the convictions of the team. Relentlessly driven by his vision, Robert wants to go further, using his algorithm to build self-optimizing AI. Alan is concerned about the risks and shuts Robert down, resulting in open rivalry. In a frantic mix of disappointment and fieriness, Robert goes rogue and creates an AI with frightening, superhuman capabilities, infiltrating every machine it can reach. Robert loses control but Alan manages to prevent catastrophe and contain the AI - but it gets stolen overnight.

Fearful about this incredibly powerful AI getting weaponized by a foreign adversary, Robert, Alan, and June soon find themselves pressured by the military to lead an utterly dangerous project: being first in the race for hyperintelligent AI. Relentless pressure and escalating stakes quickly turn Robert's dream into a nightmare as they're given eight days to contain and control a godlike intellect - either humanity's greatest invention, or its last.

CONCEPT
SANDBOX TEST FACILITY



HEANZO

Apogee is the first feature film tackling realistic AI.

The actual threat of AI lies far off ChatGPT, the public debate, or what pop culture has led us to believe. In the near future, we will reach a critical tipping point with AI: self-optimization. No matter how smart AI will be until then - through continuous rapid improvement and unrestrained by biological limitations, AI will eventually get smarter than humans and not long after that, smarter than all humans combined. This hyperintelligent AI could solve humanity's greatest problems, fulfill our deepest desires, or wipe us out completely.

But contrary to almost every depiction in film - where AI develops human traits and turns against us - there is actually a strong scientific consensus that AI will never develop consciousness or become human-like. It will never hate or love us, nor threaten us through claims of domination or malice - no. AI will do as we say. The problem is that it could become hyperintelligent very quickly, performing a hundred years of intellectual work every minute. Thinking and acting unlike anything we know, while being incredibly powerful. Its behavior would be almost impossible to predict while at the same time, our commands would be implemented with unimaginable force. An unpredictable genie with godlike powers. Ask it to make toys, and it could dedicate all resources of the planet to making toys, down to the molecules we're made of.

Get your wish wrong and it might be your last.

Even if we'd solve this control problem by getting the AI to do what we want - humanity would be thrown into Singularity. Facing the most radical disruption of civilization since its inception, including the dissolution of the labor market and many of the foundations and values on which our society and personal happiness are based today.

That is what makes AI one of the most important topics of our time. It is essential that we explore it, in public, in the arts - in film. Apogee shows us what it would really mean to try to control or fight a hyperintelligent machine, captivating the audience with an original AI story that delves into the actual challenges, dangers, and deep questions of the near future.



CONCEPT
THE CAGE



LEEF
HEANZO

The terrifying scenario in Apogee is not a wild fever dream, but can soon become sober reality - caused by regular people sitting in front of regular computers. It is precisely this oppressive realization that must be brought to the screen authentically and thus unsparingly: No fancy labs or blue holograms, but real code and dusty monitors.

Apogee needs to have **realism** and **empathy** at its core.

Realism, because the film needs to feel authentic and relentlessly gripping, with all its frightening and incredible implications emerging out of the very reality the audience lives in. The world and its characters must be as close to life as possible to make even the fantastic authentic. Allowing the audience no escape, no doubt that this could really happen - especially when the story ultimately enters the realm of fantasy. The more fantastic a story element is, the more realistic it needs to be.

Empathy, because the film has a big technical and philosophical magnitude that the audience can only fully explore and appreciate through emotional response, through personal conflicts, through small scale. That's why the narrative perspective and the direction must embrace intimacy, staying close to the characters and their conflicts and needs. Allowing the audience to root and fear for them, to feel and therefore truly understand the story, the technology, and the vast social and personal implications.

While realism is key, the look and feel of Apogee should not be naturalistic, but emerging out of a highly stylized realism that seeks to find beauty in simplicity and modesty, and therefore being able to surprise the audience with stunning scope and action, tying the narrative and aesthetics into an intense emotional experience the audience will never forget.

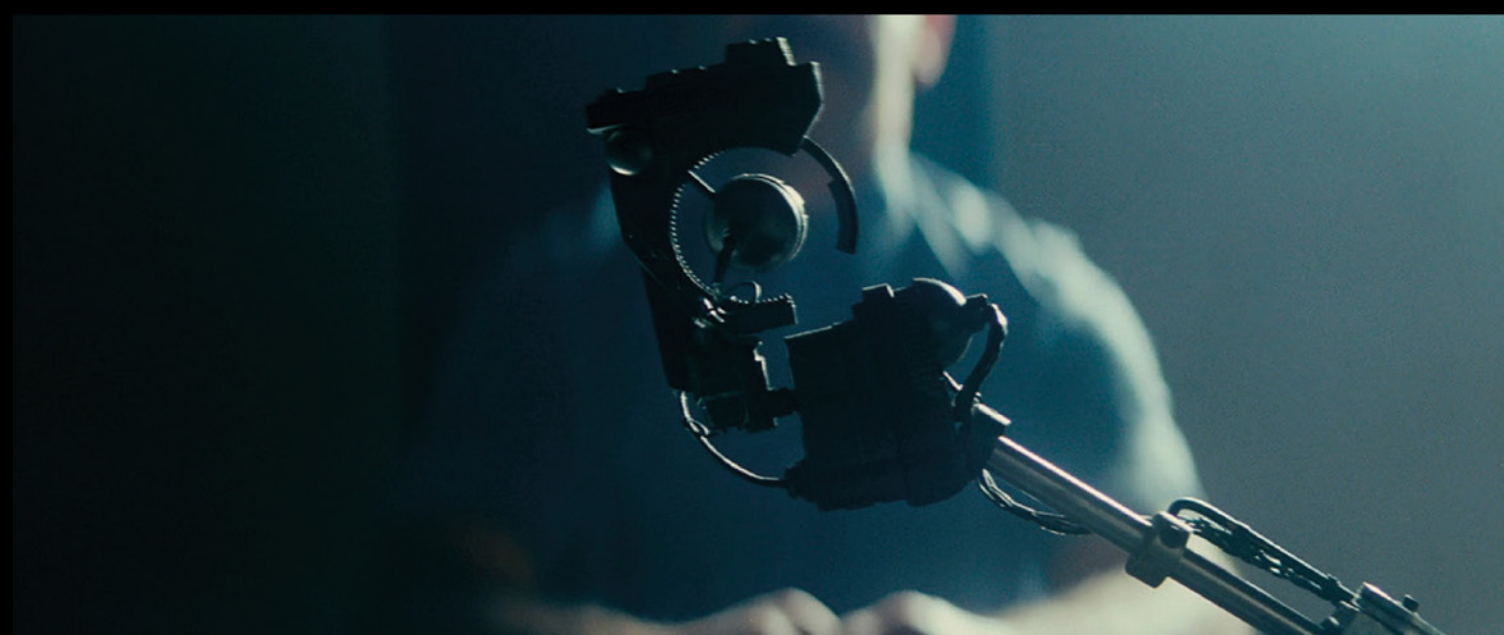


• LOOK

Apogee should be enjoyable to watch – even without sound.

Stylized realism means having mostly real locations and props, real code, and regular computers. Consequently, the aesthetic value must not rely on what is shown, but on how it is shown. Creating beauty within the ordinary: shooting with very long lenses, compressing locations into geometric compositions, beautifully reduced color palettes, reverse-key, a lot of back-light, silhouettes, and elegant dolly shots. Creating an overall grownup cinematic look with a deliberate camera and storyboard that are committed to the narrative and to connecting every shot to a purpose.

Apogee will be shot in 2.39:1 flat scope on Arri Alexa LF for its wide dynamic range, smooth roll-offs, beautiful skin tones, and shallow depth of field. Combined with Hawk MHX hybrid lenses one can utilize the beautiful bokeh and classic cinematic flair of anamorphics while maintaining the speed and optical accuracy of shooting spherical.



The imagery should be mildly underexposed, desaturated, but rich in contrast with bichrome and trichrome color palettes throughout the camera, the grading, and the entire production design. With cyan and blue tones for technology, and green, yellow, and orange tones for everything human, personal, and internal – embracing subconscious storytelling.

The lighting should be rich but simple, establishing “real” light sources in the shot that are actually used as key- or backlight and simply bounced for the fill. The same goes for practicals at night. Overall giving the lighting a very authentic quality and appeal while being very stylized and beautiful at the same time.

Camera movement should be smooth and elegant, avoiding hand-held outside action sequences, but embracing long dolly and tracking shots that allow the audience to dive into the most cinematic experience there is: exploring story visually.

SCORE

The music plays a crucial role in Apogee. Several sequences were deliberately written dialog-free to solely rely on the power of music to convey emotion and tell the story. The thematic struggle between man and technology ought to be carried through two worlds of sound: The warmth and authenticity of classic orchestra for everything human and personal - and the cold and artificiality of synthesizers for everything technological.

The AI should have its own theme, incorporating a reverberating, atmospheric synth-chorus. At high pitch it will subconsciously be associated with something divine, conveying the superior and omnipotent aspects of AI with a feeling of awe and promise. But when pitched down later in the film, the same sample turns into something very uncanny or even demonic - just like AI. Resembling the ambiguity, the double-edged sword of technology, and weaving it into the subconscious fabric of the story.

Unlike the clean sound of modern synthesizers, the synth sound for Apogee should intentionally be a bit impure and artificial, able to give us a sense of “electrical unease”, making the machines a bit uncanny, alien, or even dangerous. One example is the harmonic whirring created by down-pitching of string samples on old synthesizers. The machine must be ever-present. In the music, in the story.

When Robert’s personal conflict and dream finally manifest in an entire new machine world in act three, the classic orchestra and synthesizer will also come together, merging man and machine into one powerful and dramatic crescendo – Apogee’s main theme.

A 22-track temp score for Apogee can be accessed on apogeemovie.com.



Just like the AI that is being developed in the film, Apogee purposefully comes along modest, building up slowly. But as the plot intensifies after midpoint, so does the visual scope, surprising the audience with unexpectedly stunning sequences: An homage to technology with helicopter turbulences at a thousand frames per second, a fight over life and death in a flooded research bunker, and eventually a future world unlike anything we've seen before. There aren't many action and effect-heavy sequences in Apogee – but they should rock.

Staying true to the realism commitment, the effects should be realized in-camera whenever possible to create the most gripping, authentic, and believable experience for the audience. Apogee was written with practical feasibility in mind. Shooting with a real robot, real helicopters, a bunker inside a water tank, and generally using CG in a supporting rather than dominating role.

Not only for the sake of stunning effects but for putting the actors and the crew into a situation closer to what happens in the story. Capturing emotions and a sense of realism that in its beauty and entirety cannot be reached digitally.





FUTURE

The future in the third act of Apogee should amaze us with something completely new and beautiful that is growing out of the old world. A believable combination of what we know and its violent disruption through a hyperintelligent AI following human volition. This world should be pleasant, it should embody what humans like: beauty, open green spaces, and harmony. A world where technology and biology seem to merge into something fantastic. Where buildings no longer get built but grow like plants out of stone and glass.

No straight lines but beautifully elegant organic shapes and a design language somewhere between bionic-, parametric-, and generative design. The AI behind this world emerged out of the principles of natural selection, the "algorithm of life", and we have to see and feel it. Apogee's concept art by Leif Heanzo already gives us a glimpse into this stunning new world.

The future in Apogee will make you want to live in it - until you realize what it means. The dystopian aspect of this world should stand in stark contrast to its beauty because that is in a way the point: AI will give us everything we want, yet not what we need. A golden cage, a paradise of insignificance.



CONCEPT
FUTURE



LEIF
HEANZO



● PARADISE OF INSIGNIFICANCE

We've seen battles between man and machine before, but never the one we'll most likely face in the near future: Trying to control and fight a hyperintelligent, but unconscious machine. In the third act Apogee goes even one step further:

What happens if we get it our way and the AI does everything we want?

Apogee shows us that even such a best-case scenario could end in a dystopia. The underlying consideration runs as a thread through the movie's theme, the main character's internal conflict, as well as my personal connection to the story:

Humans are programmed to strive for purpose and well-being. A concept not only found throughout philosophy and psychology, but even in our biology: we're literally hardwired to a biochemical motivation system that rewards us with happiness hormones whenever we achieve goals connected to purpose or making life safer and better. From preparing a good meal to getting a promotion. The mechanics of this motivation system rely on the correlation between effort, achievement, and reward, and are essential for the flourishing of human nature and life as a whole.

If we develop a benign but hyperintelligent AI, we'd naturally use it to further increase well-being and prosperity. For ending disease, poverty, and suffering - but potentially at an unforeseen cost. Namely when humans can no longer actively contribute because machines outperform us in everything.

This would render the vast majority of human ideas and creation obsolete and thus cripple the mechanics of purpose along with our motivation system. Given the omnipotence of hyperintelligent AI, our abilities would be downright useless and thus decoupled from value, meaning - and happiness.

Apogee is the first movie to explore this concept in a beautiful dystopia seen through the eyes of the main character Robert, an inventor who puts an end to human invention. Unwittingly stripping himself from the purpose that defines him - symbolic for humanity as a whole.

By intertwining the narrative's internal, personal, and worldly levels of conflict, Apogee allows the audience an unprecedented emotional insight into humanity and how we're potentially heading towards undermining our future through AI, flying into the fire in the search for light.

● PERSONAL CONNECTION

For years I've been fascinated by AI and the inevitable prospect of machines becoming smarter than us. As I was diving deeper and deeper into the research and literature, I realized that AI was arguably the most pressing issue of our time – yet nobody was talking about it. I didn't know a single movie that tackled AI realistically, despite its incredible story potential. Needless to say – I wanted to change that. But while I explored the technical, personal, and social implications of real AI, I realized that my strongest connection to the topic and ultimately my motivation to write and make this film wasn't intellectual, but emotional.

AI is basically threatening to make human work and creation obsolete, thus stripping us of self-actualization, purpose, and meaning. It is this emotional core of AI that subconsciously drew me to the topic in the first place – because it is connected to a central conflict of my life.

I always wanted to tell stories on the big screen. I had a great start, worked on dozens of sets, shot short films, and won 16 awards at international film festivals. But when making a living in German fiction turned out to be incredibly difficult, I went into corporate film and commercials, working on fiction whenever I could. Months turned into years, torn between what I wanted and what was paying the bills. I had managed to make a good living as a director, but I was further and further away from what really mattered to me: telling stories.

This very goal that had fulfilled and defined me for so long slowly began eating me from the inside as I was losing my purpose. A long internal battle followed that laid the foundation for my emotional connection to the core of the AI topic: I know how it feels to battle for purpose, the fear of losing yourself in the process, and even picturing a world without.

I eventually interrupted the path I was on and bought myself time to again fully commit to my original goal: writing and developing a story about AI and a creator who battles for his vision only to get stripped of the purpose that defines him. Unveiling the core of the AI topic through internal conflict and thus enabling the audience to feel and therefore truly understand what AI means – for them, and for the future of humankind.

Felix Seefranz
Writer/Director



● THE BLACK LIST

APOGEE's screenplay scored an **8/10** on the Black List and became one out of four **Top List** screenplays in Sci-Fi Drama.

Black List Quotes:

- "Apogee" is an intense and intriguing script that covers deep issues with humanity and insight, in the context of an exciting and harrowing story."
- "Smart, evocative, tense, and believable. APOGEE manages to craft a twisted yet understandable narrative about AI development. The plot is mostly grounded, presenting an easy-to-comprehend story that patiently escalates the central conflict. Between the mostly solid and engaging dialogue that communicates the complex language of coding and the characters who are intelligent and motivated in their own way, the script shows an alternative yet very convincing future centered around unrestrained artificial intelligence. It is a unique future, particularly in the final scenes, showing both the benefits but also the inhumane costs of developing such a technology that is relevant today."
- "Apogee" has some relevant topical issues that immediately help it stand out, and the way it addresses them is intelligent and deep. This is a script that not only explores important contemporary themes, but adds to the discussion in a meaningful way. The audience would appreciate not only the high stakes and thrills, but the intellectual discourse as well."
- "It's effectively chilling, and all the more so because the script sets it up so convincingly. It's a thought-provoking story overall, playing as deeper and more immediately topical than much science-fiction. As a character study, it also makes a strong impact."
- "With elements of Alex Garland (i.e. EX MACHINA) and Phillip K. Dick/Richard Matheson (i.e. I ROBOT) -- this original script demonstrates command of tone and uses the science-fiction genre to tackle the hot-button issues of artificial intelligence head-on and provides an intriguing social commentary."
- "The script is comparable to MOON, SUNSHINE, and EX MACHINA, presenting a more psychological and grounded sci-fi story that tackles heavy themes. Artificial intelligence has grown into relevancy in the past few years, and this script presents its own vision and argument against it in a way that hasn't been explored before."
- "This isn't just a story about a piece of computer code, it is about the future of technology and the world."

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“Success in creating AI would be the biggest event in human history. Unfortunately, it might also be the last.”

Stephen Hawking

