

WHAT'S NEXT?

Regie Cao Yiwen

Hong Kong, China | 2025
72 Min. | Ohne Dialog

Buch Cao Yiwen. **Kamera** Cao Yiwen. **Montage** Cao Yiwen.
Musik Cao Yiwen. **Sound Design** Cao Yiwen. **Ton** Cao Yiwen.
Szenenbild Cao Yiwen. **Animation** Cao Yiwen. **Produzent*in** Cao Yiwen.
Executive Producer Cao Yiwen. **Produktionsfirma** Lucky Even Film Company Limited (Hongkong, China).

Synopse

Der Sound: einlullend. Visuell beginnt **WHAT'S NEXT?** mit paradiesischen Zuständen. Sanfte Bilder voll Süße. Figuren schweben mit psychedelisch tanzendem Gemüse in kitschigen Landschaften – bis die KI-generierten Bilder beginnen, Zähne zu zeigen. Sie gleiten ab in finstere Dystopien, füllen sich mit männlichen Dämonen. In einer Montage von Klischees lässt Regisseurin Cao Yiwen die adressierten Verhältnisse – ob Gender, Umwelt oder Kapitalismus – kritisch heißlaufen. Der Film wirft seinen Zuschauer*innen die zu visueller Statistik geronnenen Ansichten zurück und zeigt ihre Konsequenz. Nicht nur in den Darstellungsfehlern der KI-Bilder klaffen Abgründe. Die von Maschinen halluzinierten Fratzen des Bösen und der scheinbare Realismus menschlichen Leids machen die Begrenztheit der Vorstellungskraft des immer schneller kreisenden Mensch-Maschine-Loops sichtbar. Ein opulenter Höllenritt, der Abschied aus jener Welt, in der wir miteinander leben, hin zu Bildern, die wir uns als ästhetische Quersumme von ihr machen. Unübersehbar, wie notwendig es ist, diesem Strom zu entkommen, um sich der Frage, die der Titel aufwirft, zu nähern: What's next? (Fabian Tietke)

Cao Yiwen ist eine Filmmacherin aus China, Hongkong, die nach eigenen Worten „das Publikum heilen und ihm mentale Kraft geben“ möchte. Ihre Kurzfilme wurden u.a. bei den Animation Days in Venedig und in Cannes gezeigt. In ihren Filmen vertritt sie die Ansicht, dass Menschen nicht zum ersten Mal auf dem Planeten existieren und dass frühere Generationen an Selbstsucht und Gier gestorben sind. Heutzutage seien die Menschen von vielen Krisen bedroht: „Um künftige Tragödien zu vermeiden, sollten wir alles für das gemeinsame Wohl der Menschheit tun.“

Filme: 2023: Graduation (Kurzfilm), Invader and Defender (Kurzfilm). 2024: A Normal Life (Kurzfilm), "Release" Nuclear Contaminated Water (Kurzfilm), Invisible War (Kurzfilm). 2025: What's next?.

Kommentar der Regisseurin

Wacht auf, Mädels und Jungs

Ihr werdet kein gewöhnliches Publikum mehr sein

Vor langer, langer Zeit war die Erde wunderbar. Die Geschöpfe aus dem Himmel, vom Land und aus dem Meer lebten in Harmonie.

Doch ein Augenblick des Glücks ist sehr kurz. Vom Bösen verführt, verriet ein fauler Mann die Menschheit und brachte die Teufel in diese Welt.

Gier und Selbstsucht verbreiteten sich wie eine Seuche, böse Mächte gewannen allmählich die Oberhand und legten die Tugend in Ketten.

Die Teufel schufen eine neue Welt voll vulgärer Dinge und die Menschen wurden einer Gehirnwäsche unterzogen. Sie wurden versklavt und führten ein langweiliges, hoffnungsloses Leben, Tag ein, Tag aus.

Aber kann Geld wirklich glücklich machen? Wie können wir unsere wahre Bestimmung finden? Wenn wir weiterhin so abgestumpft bleiben, werden wir zu Komplizen bei der Zerstörung der Erde.

Wacht auf, Mädels und Jungs. Wacht auf, all ihr Geschöpfe mit schönen Herzen. Verachtet euch nicht selbst und unterschätzt nicht eure Energie. Wenn ihr euch angewöhnt, auf dem Boden zu kriechen, werdet ihr die Farbe des Himmels vergessen.

Verbergt eure Verletzlichkeit nicht hinter Sarkasmus. Hört auf, anderen willkürlich Schaden zuzufügen und euch dann in eure von Stacheldraht umrankten Schneckenhäuser zurückzuziehen.

In der Tat, stellt euch vor: Das Universum ist voller Zuneigung für euch, noch viel mehr sogar als die Liebe einer Mutter.

Ab jetzt werdet ihr nicht mehr nur ein gewöhnliches Publikum sein und keine passiven Non-Player-Character im Leben.

Lasst uns Hände halten, bei den kleinen Dingen anfangen, Mitgefühl ansammeln, um die Welt und uns selbst in unserem ursprünglichen Zustand wiederherzustellen.

Cao Yiwen

Interview

My Buddy AI

Christiane Büchner, Yun-hua Chen, Fabian Tietke and Barbara Wurm talk to Cao Yiwen about pros and cons of AI software

DAS INTERVIEW WURDE AUF ENGLISCH GEFÜHRT.

*Fabian Tietke: Since **WHAT'S NEXT?** was realized by you alone with the help of AI software – could you walk us through your workflow, when you were working on the film?*

CAO Yiwen: You're right – I made the film all by myself. I'm its producer, director, screenwriter, and editor. It's very hard for individuals, especially independent young filmmakers to find the necessary funding to realize a film. I had to wait for a way to create something in a cost-effective way. Finally, AI happened and AI saved me. With its help I can just create films in a very small room with my buddy – my computer. As I fulfilled so many roles in the production of the film, I didn't have to coordinate with others. I didn't need to make a storyboard and write loads of material; I simply created an outline in my head. Then I entered prompts into the different AI software programs and waited for them to generate videos. I spent most of my time waiting for the apps to generate videos. Mostly I already had a picture in my mind and needed the software to come up with the perfect videos for me. AI is a very useful tool for individual filmmakers. I made **WHAT'S NEXT?** in only seven days – or rather six and a half days. For the last half day, I just laid down on my chair and waited for my buddy, the computer to output the video.

Yun-hua Chen: You mentioned you used different software in the making of the film. Since AI in the West and in China is fed different data and there are different data regulations: Did you notice any differences when you used them?

CY: I think the usage of AI in China and in Western countries is different. The Chinese have a tradition to use high technologies in entertainment industries, like when they invented gun powder and then used it to make fireworks. Nowadays, we use robots to dance in big festivals. I explored lots of AI platforms, Western and Chinese. Each app has their strengths and weaknesses. But none of them is perfect and meets all the needs that a director has. Some apps are good at generating videos, but some of them can only create videos with a length of four seconds. Some Chinese apps are very good at generating Chinese-style videos, but for example Runway is very good at generating Western characters. Every app has its advantage and disadvantage. Unfortunately, so far AI isn't very good at generating soundtracks, they usually sound too similar.

Christiane Büchner: Yet your images take us into a mostly Western world. Why did you choose that?

CY: Because I believe that though people look different, we do have the same core. I think human is human. I don't distinguish people by their identities. I just want to show that if we insist to be greedy and selfish, the universe will give disasters to the Earth as planet and the universe will not distinguish.

CB: You may not distinguish different people from different parts of the world, but AI does. I understand that AI is a very powerful tool for you as an independent filmmaker, but it's also a very powerful tool in other ways, for example the way that things are fed into it and some are excluded. How did you avoid images that you found critical in the few days it took you to realize the film?

CY: Actually, I just want to use a character to represent human beings. If there is a great video with that character created by a Western app, I will use that video, if there is one of the same character by a Chinese app, I might use a combination of them. This might feel weird to some people: here's a white woman, but now she turns Chinese. In my mind, they all show a woman's life. Though I just spent seven days making the film, I made more than 20,000 videos. I just kept making them until I found what I need. I didn't want there to be a main role in my film since I simply wanted to express the crisis of humanity and if there's any video suitable to build that picture, I used it, no matter which software produced it.

Barbara Wurm: What would you say was the intention of the film?

CY: I think, first of all, it relates back to philosophy of life. When I began to make this film, I wanted to show how we sell out our planet and the future of humans. Because nowadays, we are

suffering from a lot of viruses, from environmental pollution, and from the release of nuclear-contaminated water. But most people still just live their lives. So, I thought that I should make something that can raise awareness to the question how to make sure we even have a future as humans. I wanted to create a movie about how to save planet Earth. But due to the limitations in the AI technology, I couldn't be very specific and detailed, so I used lots of symbols. Hence the film might look very abstract. I think of **WHAT'S NEXT?** as the starting paragraph of a longer argument, that I will develop over a series of films. In my next film, I will be able to get more into detail and be more narrative. In part that's due to the development of AI. As a matter of fact, I already made the next film, and it will talk about the release of nuclear-contaminated water and how it destroys the whole earth. I use this as a jump off to talk about the crisis of human future. I hope the next film is less abstract and bewildering to its audience.

CB: In the context of CHUBBY CAFÉ, an earlier film of yours, I found the sentence that hopelessness can also offer power. This also resonates with your new film. Do you see WHAT'S NEXT? as empowering?

CY: When I was making CHUBBY CAFÉ, I was very young and I saw people all around me that were looking for their Mr. or Mrs. Right. So, I was wondering: Does everyone need to do that? And does love mean everything in people's life? What about kinship and friendship? Do they really matter? I created a world with a young lady that has it all: beautiful love, very good friendship and kinship. But at last, she chooses the wrong thing and loses everything. I think we should turn the little love to big love. We come to this world, and we will leave just by our ourselves. So, do we really need to lead a life that the society wants us to lead? Do we need to pursue love just like other people pursue it? When I was young, I wanted to ask this question. But right now, just 9 or 10 years later, I believe that if we turn this little love to big love, we will feel more satisfied, and we will find more valuable things that we can do.

YHC: Working alone with AI must have been completely different from working with a team. How did that difference affect film aesthetics?

CY: I worked with a big team before, for example in 2017 when I first worked on a feature film. At that time, I was not the director, but supporting actress and screenwriter. I felt very disappointed because I couldn't find a director to understand my script, especially as it was about women's dilemma. Male directors often don't understand this kind of story. In my case he was a good guy, he wanted to understand, but he ultimately didn't. In that moment I decided to become a director. Unfortunately, I was too young at that time. Today, almost ten years later I did not find an investor to finance my film. So, I had to do something by myself. I just couldn't wait any longer for the world to see my films. If you just wait, the chance of becoming a filmmaker is very limited.

FT: There are a few references to pop culture in the film: Stan and Laurel and Disney's SNOW WHITE at the beginning. Later we see images that look like Maisie Williams or Melania Trump on a sofa. Did you ask specifically for these? How specific were your prompts?

CY: For about half of the film, I talk about the big issues. Then later I tried to show more examples. I didn't say show me a woman on the sofa. I wrote a prompt to the AI to show me a rich woman's life or a rich woman's home, a rich woman's maid and so on. Different AI apps will have different thoughts on these images. But I was more interested in the social layers. I wanted to show a glimpse of the life of a rich woman, a middle-class woman and a poor woman. In the very essence their lives are not so different. It's always about chores, about education – even if a rich woman might be able to get higher education, while the

poor girls may be made to marry and work at a very early age. That's what I wanted to express. And although the rich woman's life may look fantastic, it can also be very boring. So, she just lies down and does nothing and feels bored. Even a poor woman might get higher education, but she still will have to do chores and work or get married at a young age. Then they may have a baby, but they still wait, do chores, keep doing chores, and watch their kids get some education and get married. It's like a cycle. When people have boys, they want them to be a hero or have a successful career or bring glory to their families. But if they have baby girls, they just want her to live a simple life and get married with a nice guy. Many girls don't know they have other choices, and they will spend their whole life living in very limited space. So, I use the woman's dilemma to show that should also encourage girls to pursue their dreams.

CB: Your film takes us through various emotions. Could you explain the emotional journey you modeled your film on?

CY: At first, I want to show people what happened in super-ancient times. There are lots of creatures living on earth that scientists have never found. I want to show that they live very harmonious, and that's a very happy planet. Then a change happens. We humans are lazy, but at the same time also greedy. The man in the film doesn't want to do anything, but he wants to have more. He makes a deal with the demon that encourages man's greed and selfishness. The demon rebuilds earth according to its own rules. And the main rule is to let money dominate the planet. And while people focus on making money, they get more and more selfish, and we lose our morals. And now we have wars and artificial viruses and the release of nuclear-contaminated water and all because we are so selfish and greedy. If people can regard all human as a family, I think the planet will be better and we humans can still rescue ourselves from being destroyed in future. But with the way we live today, I am rather pessimistic. Thus, I changed the emotions in the last part of the film. I want to raise the question What's Next? What will happen? What could we do to rescue humanity and the planet?

BW: In your answers so far, AI seems to be a mere tool, a useful one, shortening the production time and saving budget. Yet at the same time, you are an AI artist. And by using AI generated images – which are themselves the result of a lot of human (data) input –, the question seems to be, how much of an impact you have on what images get created – by choosing certain prompts, for example. How did you find the balance between the technological and the human?

CY: I believe that technology should always serve human thoughts rather than let technology dominate human lives. While I was working on the film, I tried to set the outline for the images the AI came up with. But if the software comes up with some good ideas, I will take them. I just regard AI as an old buddy. To me it was as if you work on a set and some actor has an idea for a scene. I treated the software as a partner. I have my outline, but if you come up with good ideas that fit these outlines, I will take your suggestion. Don't let AI lead you. It's very easy to be led by AI.

BW: But was it also part of your intention when you made this film to make us think about how AI works and how those images that are reproduced are repetitions of stereotypes? Was it also part of the idea of your film to make us aware of how AI works, how it helps in some way, but also limits our way of perception and of imagination?

CY: AI has its advantage and disadvantage. When I made **WHAT'S NEXT?** last year, AI wasn't a good storyteller yet. All it could do was come up with videos of a few seconds length without any consistent logic. But today, just one year later, I think AI already make big progress. It can make some consistent videos of about 10 seconds. But I think AI still cannot tell whole stories in

a traditional human way. Maybe it will achieve this goal in the future. But right now, I don't think it can do it.

BW: To wrap up, one last question on the soundtrack, which is quite monotonous, almost like a lullaby. Was that a deliberate choice?

CY: I have to admit that I might not have used the music very well in **WHAT'S NEXT?** because the soundtracks maybe sound too similar. When I made the second film, I already did more adjustment to the sound track. On the other hand, I don't want to pay much more attention on music because to me in a film the story is the main core. So, I will try to enhance the music, but I will not let it be in the lead role. I want my audience to focus on what is happening and what's the core value of this film.