

WHAT'S NEXT?

Director Cao Yiwen

Hong Kong, China | 2025
72 min. | Without dialogue

Screenplay Cao Yiwen. Cinematography Cao Yiwen. Editing Cao Yiwen. Music Cao Yiwen. Sound Design Cao Yiwen. Sound Cao Yiwen. Production Design Cao Yiwen. Animation Cao Yiwen. Producer Cao Yiwen. Executive Producer Cao Yiwen. Production company Lucky Even Film Company Limited (Hongkong, China).

Synopsis

While the soundscape soothingly lulls the brain, **WHAT'S NEXT?** begins in a paradisaical visual state. Soft images full of sweetness. Figures luxuriate in kitsch landscapes with psychedelic dancing vegetables – until the AI-generated images begin to show their teeth. They drift into dark dystopias, filled with male demons. In her montage of clichés, director Cao Yiwen allows whatever's being addressed – whether gender, the environment or capitalism – to run hot in critical terms. The film confronts the audience with congealed visual statistics of its own visual expectations and takes them to their logical consequence. Dark depths don't just yawn forth in the glitches in how the AI-images are displayed. The hideous face of evil hallucinated by machines and the pseudo realism of human suffering make the limits of our imagination visible while the human-machine loop circulates ever quicker. An opulent ride through hell that carries us from the world we inhabit together towards images of the world we collectively have produced. There's no overlooking the need to escape this flow in order to grapple with the question the title has raised: what's next? (Fabian Tietke)

Cao Yiwen is a female filmmaker from China Hong Kong, who in her own words "wants to heal the audience and give them mental power". Her previous short films were selected, amongst others, by Venice and Cannes' Animation Days. In her films, she proposes that it is not the first time that humans exist on the planet and that previous generations died from selfishness and greed. Nowadays, she suggests, people are threatened by many crises: "Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you. To avoid future tragedies, we should do everything for human's common profits."

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

Director's Statement

Wake Up, Girls and Boys

You will no longer be an ordinary audience

Long, long ago, the earth was wonderful. And the creatures from sky, land and sea lived in harmony.

However, a happy moment is very short. Lured by evil, a lazy man betrayed human beings and brought the devils into this world.

Greed and selfishness spread like a plague, evil forces gradually gained the upper hand, and imprisoned virtue.

The devils redefined the world with vulgar things, and people were brainwashed and enslaved, living a boring and hopeless life, day after day.

But can money really bring happiness? How can we find our real missions? If we keep being numb, we will be accomplices in destroying the earth.

Wake up, girls and boys. Wake up, every creature with a beautiful heart. Don't look down on yourself and neglect your energy. If you get used to crawling on the ground, you will forget the colour of the sky.

Also don't use sarcasm to cover up your vulnerability. Don't harm others indiscriminately and then shrink into your thorny shell.

In fact, you can't imagine: The universe cares about you so much, even much more than motherly love.

From now on, you will no longer be just an ordinary audience, nor a non-player character in life.

Let us hold hands, start from small things, gather kindness, to restore the world and ourselves to their original appearances.

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

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 apps, 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 kindness. 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.