

Interview: Jia Zhangke plans virtual reality romance

19 June 2016, by Louise Watt



In this March 17, 2016 file photo, Chinese director Jia Zhangke poses after winning the Best Screenplay award of the Asian Film Awards in Macau. The director says he will make a virtual reality film next year with a romantic story as he and viewers get used to the new medium. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung, File)

Critically acclaimed Chinese director Jia Zhangke says he will make a virtual reality film next year with a romantic story as he and viewers get used to the new medium, and declared: "I think VR is going to be the next big thing."

The director, better known for [films](#) that depict China's social changes and acts of violence, told The Associated Press that the short film would be a gentle romance as "it takes time for people to feel comfortable" in virtual reality.

"The speed and direction of movements may make people feel physically uncomfortable, so we're starting with a romantic story," he said in an interview.

Virtual reality entertainment consists largely of video games, but film festivals are starting to

showcase VR films as directors venture into the new medium. It offers a much more solitary experience compared to watching a movie in a packed theater.

VR requires a headset that blocks out your surroundings and lets you wander through a story in a different world—either by moving a few steps in various directions or sitting on a swivel chair and moving your body to look around a 360-degree scene.

The fake environment is, nonetheless, often realistic, but movie makers are still trying to work out how to tell a story in VR.

"I am still learning about VR and trying to understand it at the moment, but I'm very interested in this new technology which lets us view space from different angles," Jia said Saturday.

It also gives the audience more power as they choose what to watch.

"In the past, the audience could only imagine the world inside and outside the frame," he said. "VR liberates an audience and allows people to independently choose what we want to be concerned with. Audiences become more important."

"Today, we can divert our attention from the close-up shot in a traditional film that we had to watch in the past," added the 46-year-old Jia. "I think it's a brand new and valuable idea."

Earlier Saturday, Jia spoke at an event with Richard Peña, former director of the New York Film Festival, who told him that he felt the VR medium impinged on the ability of a director to tell a story.

Peña recalled a short VR detective film he had seen in which "the filmmaker wanted me to look left but I wanted to look right."

Jia said he thought the filmmaker "probably did a bad job" and suggested a director could deploy actors whose movements could direct a viewer's attention.

Jia has explored China's rapid transformation throughout his career, which includes early underground films, documentaries and international [film festival](#) prize winners, 2006 "Still Life" and 2013 "A Touch of Sin."

He spent years making underground films before censors allowed his first movie to be released in Chinese cinemas in 2004.

Jia will next month launch his own video streaming site, "Jia Screen," that he said would premiere 108 short films from around the world.

Jia told the audience at the talk organized by Columbia Global Center in Beijing that while today's technology and various streaming websites in China allowed people to make and upload their own films, those weren't being seen because the public didn't know which of the thousands to watch.

His platform will "work as a bridge to bring the information to the audiences instead of asking the audiences to do the job themselves," he said.

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