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Does the D in 3D Stand for Desperate?

Garner Simmons · Thursday, August 19th, 2010

Tomorrow the Weinstains and Dimension Films will release *Piranha 3D*, the latest attempt to cash in on Hollywood's newest preoccupation. But horror films' death grip on the human imagination aside, the real question is: Is 3D the next logical extension of the cinematic experience or merely another fad?

Clearly the studios would have us believe it is the former – that audiences, given a choice, will prefer 3D to 2D every time. As proof, they point to the astonishing profits raked in by James Cameron's *Avatar*. With a projected take of \$3 billion-plus, it is the highest grossing film ever made. This is due in no small part to theaters charging an additional \$3 to \$5 per ticket. Looking to cash in, close to 60 3D projects have been announced for release over the next 2 years, including such diverse titles as *Mars Needs Moms!* and Martin Scorsese's *Hugo Cabret*.

From the beginning, motion pictures have coupled technology with commerce. Leaving the uncertain scrap metal business in 1907, Louis B. Mayer, eventual head of MGM, took a flyer on a new invention: the cinematograph. Charging a nickel admission, Mayer would show a ten-minute one-reeler. As the audience filed out, Mayer was euphoric. He had taken their money but had given nothing tangible in return. Plus he could reshow the film for more money, over and over. Something for nothing. The perfect business model.

The next step was finding ways to justify charging more. As always, the answer was: technology. The coming of sound, color, and widescreen all added to the motion picture experience. Then in 1952, a film titled *Bwana Devil* about rogue lions in Africa was released in 3D. Over the next 2 years, some 45 features were produced in 3D including *Cat-Women on the Moon* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M For Murder*. Obviously, a pattern.

All 3D films, then and now, required two simultaneously projected images, slightly off-set and special glasses using either red-green or polarizing lenses to create the illusion of depth of vision. But is such high-tech gimmickry the reason we go to the movies?

Motion pictures are a “realistic” art form. The best movies are the ones that so thoroughly engross us that we lose ourselves in the story until the tail credits roll and the lights come up. 3D, on the other hand, creates the false sense that we are actually witnessing the action like some invisible voyeur. Yet ironically, every time you move your head or adjust your 3D glasses, you are consciously pulled out of the story – reminded that it is not “real” at all.

Avatar, like virtually everything James Cameron has done, is large and expensive. Being the first

of the current spate of 3D films, it has benefitted enormously from recent advances in motion-capture and 3D technology. And then there is the “wow” factor. Audiences, wowed by *Avatar*’s Visual FX, willingly suspended their disbelief, ignored the lame storyline, and embraced the clichés. Described as “Pocahontas with Big Blue Indians,” it is overlong and cloying. To deflect criticism, Cameron merges hokey Sci-Fi action with a “save the rain forest” message. While the result paid off at the box office, one wonders: Would it have amassed such critical and public support had it not been first?

The current joke in Hollywood is: If you can’t make it good, make it 3D. Consequently, films like *Clash of the Titans* or *The Last Airbender* were digitally altered in an attempt to take advantage of the new trend. The results were mixed with many in the audience feeling less enthralled than ripped-off. As the screen-grab from *Piranha 3D*’s website (above) illustrates, 3D is now just another one of the barker’s tricks to get you to come into the tent, along with Facebook and Twitter pages, the inevitable iPhone app, and the live tour of the Piranha Bikini Girls. As Brandon Gray, president of Box Office Mojo, notes in Sunday’s Financial Times: “The studios are guilty of short-term thinking. They all jumped on the 3D bandwagon, but they’re avoiding the real issue... their bankruptcy regarding storytelling.”

Nevertheless, Hollywood continues to add more digitally equipped movie theaters capable of 3D projection to prevent grid-lock in anticipation of the coming 3D wave. Similarly, 3D HD TV is also being rushed to market (cost: \$3,000 to \$4,000 per screen plus \$150 per pair of 3-D glasses). During the Great Depression, movies became an inexpensive escape from economic woes. As a result, the movie business was seen as “Depression-proof.” In today’s down economy where it is still possible to watch your current television at no additional cost, one wonders if corporate greed has at last overwhelmed sound business sense. Indeed, recent statistics show that the percentage of box office income from 3D runs has dropped precipitously – from 70% to nearly 50% in the past nine months. Like piranhas caught up in a feeding frenzy, perhaps they will actually devour themselves.

Only time will tell. No doubt 3D will have its biggest impact wherever voyeurism is most prized: Premium sporting events, horror films, and porn. But in the end, it wouldn’t surprise me if the biggest winners in 3D turn out to be the ophthalmologists. And the audience will be left craving characters and stories with real dimensions – not with visual tricks.

Guest Columnist Garner Simmons is a screenwriter/producer/director, and the author of Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage.

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