



May 22, 2007

Top Directors See the Future, and They Say It's in 3-D

By SHARON WAXMAN

LOS ANGELES, May 21 — If some prominent Hollywood directors and an Irish rock band have their way, moviegoers en masse will soon be heading back to the future, wearing newfangled 3-D glasses.

Last week the next phase in the theatrical viewing experience took a significant leap forward, as Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson signed on to direct and produce for Paramount's DreamWorks Studios a trilogy of 3-D movies about the intrepid Belgian comic-book hero Tintin. And on Saturday nearly an hour of footage from the 3-D concert film of the Irish rock band U2 made its debut at the Cannes Film Festival.

As "U2 3D" demonstrates, this is definitely not the 3-D of drive-in memories. The concert film gives the audience the palpable experience of being present, as the camera swivels around Bono's face, then soars over and down among the 60,000 concertgoers. And though the new version still requires audience members to wear glasses, they are not the old red-and-green variety but sleek black ones.

"This is a different experience; it's much more voyeuristic," said Jon Landau, the producer of "Avatar," James Cameron's ambitious and expensive movie about a battle between humans and aliens, which is currently being shot in 3-D using a combination of computer animation and motion-capture technology. "The screen has always been an emotional barrier for audiences. Good 3-D makes the screen go away. It disappears, and you're looking at a window into a world."

That view, however, isn't completely clear yet. So far digital projection has been installed in only about 2,300 of the 37,000 theaters in the United States, with 3-D projection in just 700 of those. Theater owners have been slow to upgrade to expensive digital projectors, and it is an open question whether many American moviegoers will pay an extra dollar or two for tickets to 3-D films.

The 3-D film first flourished in the early 1950s, when movies like "Bwana Devil," "House of Wax" and Disney's "Melody" introduced audiences to the delights and annoyances of donning

special glasses. But because of a combination of technological complexities, eye fatigue and a lack of compelling feature-length movies, many of the 3-D films were horror or soft-core pornography, which kept the filmmaking format on the fringes of the mainstream.

The emergence of Imax and the technological advances of the last few years, however, have piqued the interest of Hollywood's top directors. Mr. Cameron, who made the 3-D Imax documentary "Ghosts of the Abyss" in 2003, is using motion capture technology and computer graphics to create realistic characters and fantasy worlds for "Avatar."

Twentieth Century Fox will release that film, with an estimated \$200 million cost, in 2009, mainly in 3-D. (Mr. Landau said that Mr. Cameron wore 3-D glasses — the latest have plastic rims — to look at his daily footage.)

Audiences, which have had a taste of the future in 3-D versions of children's fare like "Monster House" and "Chicken Little," will get another early blast of the experience in Robert Zemeckis's adventure-drama "Beowulf," to be released, wherever possible in 3-D, by Paramount and Warner Brothers in November.

And DreamWorks Animation SKG has announced that all of its future movies will be shot in 3-D, for release beginning in 2009.

"I believe that this is the single greatest opportunity for the moviegoing experience since the advent of color," Jeffrey Katzenberg, the chief executive of DreamWorks Animation, said in an e-mail message. "It has been more than 60 years since there has been a significant enhancement or innovation to the moviegoing experience."

He predicted that starting in 2009, "a significant percentage of the big mainstream films will be made and exhibited in this format."

The widening embrace of 3-D by Hollywood's leading directors and major studios comes at a critical moment for the movie industry, which faces expanding competition for leisure time from home theaters, the Internet and games. And it also solves, at least temporarily, the continuing pressures from the thriving trade in bootleg movies. A 3-D film cannot be recorded easily from a movie screen because the images are blurry to the naked eye. And so far there is no way to show a movie in 3-D on DVD.

The push to 3-D may also be the impetus needed to spur movie exhibitors to switch from film projectors to digital ones, say industry executives. A digital projector can cost around \$100,000, a sum that has proved prohibitive to many exhibitors. Adding the 3-D component,

including the silver coating of the screen, costs about \$20,000 more, but the added benefit is immediately visible, said Michael V. Lewis, chairman of Real-D, which dominates the 3-D projection business.

There is already evidence of a box office payoff. "Meet the Robinsons," an animated Disney film, was released in early April in 3,400 theaters, of which 600 (about 18 percent) were equipped with 3-D. The 3-D theaters brought in 30 percent of the box office revenue from the first weekend, according to Disney. And a 3-D version of "Polar Express" from 2004 has been released three years in a row in Imax theaters around the winter holidays, taking in \$65 million.

Greg Foster, the chairman and president of Imax Filmed Entertainment, warned that not all films were suited to the format. "Three-D isn't a panacea — it isn't a magic pill," he said. "It's a spectacular thing if it fits three specific criteria: Does it take you somewhere? Is it made by a visionary filmmaker? And is the concept behind the film organic to 3-D?"

He added: "If you're going to do 3-D because you need a gimmick to sell tickets, the audience is too smart for that."

Among films that have not worked well in 3-D were "Chicken Little" and "Ant Bully," which were also not successful at the box office.

The new projects aim to be more than mere gimmicks. Mr. Spielberg and Mr. Jackson have been working on the "Adventures of Tintin" project for about a year with Mr. Jackson's special effects company, Weta Digital.

Part of the decision-making process included a week of motion capture work on the "Avatar" set in the Playa Vista section of Los Angeles last November. That visual information was sent to Weta in New Zealand. There it was married to a computer model of Tintin, the young, red-haired Belgian adventurer of comic-book fame, who is wildly popular in Europe though less so in this country. The results persuaded both directors to push forward with the trilogy.

Mr. Jackson is expected to direct the first film, Mr. Spielberg the second, with the director for the third undecided, according to a DreamWorks spokesman. There is as yet no start date for the first project.

Mr. Spielberg and Mr. Jackson both declined to comment for this article. Stacey Snider, the co-chairwoman of DreamWorks, also declined.

Mr. Jackson's manager, Ken Kamins, said the director had long been fascinated with 3-D but until now had not been swayed by the ability to create a full-length feature experience. "Based on various tests he's seen, he believes in the future of 3-D," he said. "This is really starting to create some interesting imagery that gives the filmmaker a lot more creative license to play with."

To shoot the U2 concert film, the directors Catherine Owens and Mark Pellington placed about a dozen cameras throughout stadiums during the band's concert tour in Latin America last year, and shot more than 100 hours of footage. The film, co-owned by the band and 3ality Digital, a 3-D movie production company, does not yet have a distributor, but the partners expect the film to reach theaters in the fall.

Sandy Climan, chief executive of 3ality Digital Holdings, said the improved 3-D format would entice moviegoers eager for something new.

Mr. Katzenberg agreed. He predicted that after 2009, "consumers will own their own 3-D glasses in the same way they have sunglasses for going outside."

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