Now Showing in 3D...But Why?

When scrolling through the list of upcoming movie releases, it is difficult to find a movie that is not also going to be released in 3D. Yet, why would a person pay $3.00 or more on top of the regular movie ticket price, when the movie itself is not really enhanced, and the viewer is likely to come out of the theatre with a blinding headache? Nonetheless, 3D movies have recently made movie studios billions of dollars, because it is a novelty that movie fans are presently willing to pay extra for. 3D may be the latest leading movie trend, which many claim is the future of all film production; however, this 3D era will be remembered as just a fad due to poor quality 3D conversion, and vision related problems associated with 3D viewing.

If ticket sales and scheduled upcoming movies are any indication, 3D is going to be the future of the entire movie industry. In fact, one columnist said, “The time may come, and it's not far off, when 2D showings for some movies simply won't exist...2D viewers are about to be pushed right out of the movie market” (CB). While 2D probably will not completely disappear, especially considering 3D movies cost so much more than the traditional 2D movies, 3D certainly seems to be making a major impact on the movie industry. DreamWorks’ CEO, Jeffrey Katzenburg “predicts that soon enough all movies will be made in 3-D and audience-members will bring their own pairs of polarized spectacles to the theater” (Engber). People might question Katzenburg’s opinion, when there have been many attempts to popularize 3D in the past, and they all failed. However, a Popular Mechanics article claims, “People always liked 3D...It just didn't work very well. The 3D format is now much more reliable,
thanks to the introduction of digital technology and products developed by companies such as RealD” (McCarthy). With the invention of this more dependable digital technology, the quality of 3D movies is much improved over its previous incarnations in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. 3D movies now have “the potential to take audiences into the reality on the screen… [Viewers] can almost touch the world the characters exist in… Regardless of all the arguments against it, 3D looks to have a big future ahead of it” (Mills). From all the positive promotion of 3D movies by the film studios, it seems that 3D may very well be the future of all film production.

However, even though 3D technology has improved, this 3D phase will still be short-lived, because studios insist on using a 3D conversion process that sacrifices quality to save money. One 3D reviewer comments, “When a bad movie makes obscene amounts of money off a gimmick, it becomes easier to justify the creation of films with more dimensions and less depth” (CB). The creators of these films also will take shortcuts to save money, as long as the public keeps paying to see the movies, even if it means spoiling the quality of the picture. A computer graphics supervisor for a prominent visual effects studio states, “Many of the stereoscopic movies have been made 3D after they were shot, which can cause heaps of distractions in the final product. Even if the film was originally shot 3D it takes someone knowledgeable in the field to make it effective.” He goes on to say, that movies made 3D after the filming process “never reflect the same results as if you were filming using two cameras, simultaneously, from slightly different perspectives,” but movie studios use the fake 3D process, because “double the camera gear means double the footage and often doubling the camera crew. It also doubles much of the visual effects work as you have to render everything twice” (Murphy). Due to the excessive cost of shooting in stereoscopic 3D, most of the 3D movies coming out in the near future are post-filming 3D conversions. So far, all of the movies that have been converted to 3D as an afterthought have been of much poorer quality than the very few films that were shot in stereoscopic 3D and were
originally planned as 3D movies before the filming process ever began. One 3D critic sarcastically remarks that he wishes “Hollywood would figure out that converting a 2D film to 3D is like Ted Turner converting a black and white film to color – something about it just seems…off” (Young). The novelty of this 3D boom will eventually wear off, and movie viewers are going to realize that the movie studios are cutting corners and jeopardizing the quality of their films just to make a profit.

Although the current 3D capability is much more advanced technologically than in past decades, 3D viewing still has many vision related side effects. One author jokes, “Movies used to bring people together, but 3D divides [movie-goers] into haves and have nots… [People] who have to vomit and those who do not” (CB). However, that witticism is not too far from the truth. “There has been a strong correlation between 3D movies and headaches and sickness,” when assessing effects of 3D movie watching (Mills). All of the health related issues arising from 3D viewing seem to be related to how the eyes try to adjust to see the different layers of the 3D picture. One health website discusses optical issues when people watch 3D movies:

…[these people] actually discover health problems because they are unable to see the images clearly. About 2 to 3 percent of people have [vergence accommodation conflict] where only one of the eyes turns inward to track a close object...Other conditions that cause 3D movies to fall flat include lazy eye (amblyopia), strabismus, keratoconus, or poor vision in one eye due to cataracts, glaucoma or retinal problems. (Reynolds)

While some of these conditions are treatable, having such vision problems should be no reason to be excluded from theatre movie viewing. If film studios had the choice, they would make all movies strictly 3D, because they can charge so much extra per ticket, but they would be alienating a rather large audience. The senior editor of Slate explains this type of audience:
Five percent to 8 percent of the population is stereoblind and can't convert binocular disparity into depth information. That means they can't appreciate any of the 3-D effects in a RealD or IMAX movie. An additional 20 to 30 percent of the population suffers from a lesser form of the deficit, which could diminish the experience of 3-D effects or make them especially uncomfortable to watch. (Engber)

Not only can some people simply not see the 3D effects properly due to their vision troubles, but the process of the eye trying to make sense of the separate images to create a 3D picture can also cause nausea and headaches. One site points out 3D movie watching has “a risk of visual fatigue and ‘simulator sickness,’ a type of nausea that also plagues users of flight simulators, head-mounted virtual reality displays and other 3D applications” (Reynolds). The number of side effects connected with 3D viewing, and the fact that such a large portion of the movie viewing population cannot even see the 3D visuals, will eventually lead to the current 3D trend’s downfall.

Proponents of the latest 3D obsession are merely money hungry film studios and others that stand to profit from the higher priced admissions to see these 3D movies. The technology has improved since the last 3D manifestation in the 1980s, and a few movies that were actually filmed in true stereoscopic 3D have done exceedingly well in the box office, prompting Hollywood to try to make 3D the only future of cinema. However, to save money and rake in extra earnings, most movies are being converted to 3D after the filming process, which causes the visual effects to be of such poor quality that it no longer enhances the movie. The future of 3D is also suffering, because of all the vision related side effects, such as headaches and nausea. There is even a decent sized portion of the population that cannot even experience 3D effects well or at all, due to pre-existing vision problems. Ultimately, the movie-going public is going to realize this latest 3D craze for what it is: just a fad.
Works Cited


