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Movies reclaim the 3rd dimension

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The term "3-D movie" used to carry certain connotations. There were thrills, sure, but also headaches, dizziness and a whiff of gimmicky desperation ("Amityville 3-D").

Nowadays, studios shoot their biggest-ticket items in 3-D, from DreamWorks Animation's "Monsters vs. Aliens," which comes out Friday, to "Titanic" director James Cameron's much-anticipated holiday 2009 sci-fi movie "Avatar."

"Monsters vs. Aliens," in which Reese Witherspoon voices the role of a Modesto woman transformed via meteorite into the 49-foot-tall-and-some-change Ginormica, seems a natural as the first film originated in 3-D from DreamWorks Animation ("Shrek").

The movie is "an homage to the old B-movies – the movies that started 3-D in the first place," said "Monsters vs. Aliens" co-director Conrad Vernon.

"Monsters vs. Aliens" will be released in a two-dimensional format as well, but it will likely draw more interest in 3-D theaters, just as the recent stop-motion animated film "Coraline," also a dual release, has done since coming out in early February.

"Home theaters have gotten so nice, with HD and surround sound, that when people go out to a movie theater they are looking for something they can't get in their home," said Doug Link, director of Sacramento's Esquire Imax Theatre, which opens "Monsters vs. Aliens" on Friday. "3-D lends itself to taking people to that place."

Until a few years ago, the giant Imax screens seemed like the only places to view high-quality 3-D films. Since then, RealD and Dolby have spread 3-D technology – which gives the viewer a perception of depth by shooting an image from slightly different perspectives representing the right and left eyes – to regular theaters.

Shawn LaRue, co-owner of Cameo Cinema in St. Helena, saw a demonstration of Dolby 3-D at a trade screening and "got goosebumps," he said. "I as a consumer was so taken by what I saw ... that I thought, that's gotta come home."

With financial backing from the Nimbus Arts nonprofit, LaRue and business partner Cathy Buck last year installed a Dolby system. As a result, the 140-seat Cameo became the lone digital-capable theater in Napa County, mixing "Monsters vs. Aliens," "Coraline" and even

January's "My Bloody Valentine: 3-D" in with its arthouse films.

"I saw the pickax coming out of the screen, and it scared the (life) out of me," LaRue said of "My Bloody Valentine." So he programmed two late-night weekend showings. "And we filled the house both nights."

New 3-D easier on the audience

The audience for "Valentine" skewed younger, LaRue said, than the typical Cameo audience, which tends to equate 3-D with "the 'Godzilla' era."

"There are a lot of suspicions about 3-D out there," LaRue said. "So there is a learning curve. But this is not the 3-D you remember."

The 1950s version of 3-D was like riding a rusty roller coaster operated by a one-toothed, leering canny. There was fun to be had, but at a cost.

"There were all sorts of alignment issues," with the old process requiring two cameras and two projectors, said David Wertheimer, executive director of the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California. "If your brain is seeing something that doesn't match what it expects, you get motion sickness."

But "digital technology has made digital 3-D a fundamentally easy process," said Wertheimer, whose nonprofit center is funded by Hollywood studios and technology companies. There's software to clean up images – and only one projector.

"But you still kind of have to know what you're doing" said Henry Selick, director of "Coraline." A sudden movement still holds the potential to hurt the audience's eyes, for instance.

For "Monsters vs. Aliens," a special tool was developed to smooth transitions from deep-set shots to comin'-at-ya moments, because "that's what causes your eyes to (cross)," Vernon said.

Neither Vernon nor Selick wanted to use 3-D for shock value, preferring, in most instances, to grab the audience through visual texture and depth.

"It (can throw) you out of the story" to see an object leave the screen for what appears to be the audience, Vernon said.

"Suddenly, you're not in the mind of the character anymore, (but) back in the audience."

Selick, who uses miniatures and stop-motion rather than computer animation, liked 3-D as a means of enhancing the real-world (or at least set-world) quality of his story of a girl who travels to another dimension within her Oregon apartment house.

"I was looking for that 'Wizard of Oz' transition from one world to another," said Selick, whose previous 3-D film, the Halloween perennial "Nightmare Before Christmas," was transferred to 3-D after its initial release.

Reportedly made for less than \$70 million, "Coraline" has exceeded that figure already at the U.S. box office. It performed "significantly better" on 3-D screens than on 2-D, Selick said.

"If I had my druthers, I would not have released it at all in 2-D," he said.

Economy slows digital conversion

But screens available for 3-D projection haven't kept pace with 3-D filmmaking. Though DreamWorks Animation predicted 5,000 screens would be available for "Monsters vs. Aliens," only 2,000 screens are now 3-D-ready, according to box office tracker Media By Numbers.

Digital conversions – a process that can carry a six-figure price tag – have slowed with the current credit crisis, with theater owners unable to get loans for improvements. This means 3-D films must compete for limited slots.

"Coraline," for instance, caught a break when "Jonas Brothers: The 3-D Concert Experience" didn't fare as well as expected, leaving more room for Selick's film on 3-D screens before "Monsters vs. Aliens" arrives to gobble them all up.

The good news is that digital projectors are decreasing in cost, Selick said. "And clearly, people are going to movies just like they did in the first Great Depression," he said, alluding to the overall box-office uptick in the first few months of 2009. "So it makes sense for the (digital and 3-D revolution) to happen. It just got stalled."

The slate of forthcoming 3-D releases, including Pixar's May release "Up," the 2010 offering "Toy Story 3" and 3-D rereleases of the first two "Toy Story" films, also makes sense given that consumers already have shown a willingness to shell out \$2, \$3 or even \$5 more for 3-D.

Wertheimer ventures that costs associated with the 3-D glasses and the digital-conversion process might account for the higher ticket prices. But Napa theater owner LaRue, who doesn't charge more when he shows 3-D films, attributes higher ticket prices at other theaters to basic supply and demand.

The big chains charge higher prices "because they can," he said. "It's a premium (service), and it's rare."

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