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Transformers 3D offers hope amid Hollywood gloom

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When box office revenues from the just-released Transformers: Dark of the Moon get tallied this weekend it is expected that 3D ticket sales will be strong.

But a buoyant 3D box office for Dark of the Moon - widely expected to be one of the biggest blockbusters of the summer - cannot conceal that these are very precarious times for 3D and the big studios are concerned.

When James Cameron's Avatar arrived in cinemas 18 months ago in all its 3D splendour the format was hailed as Hollywood's saviour.

With a long-term erosion in movie admissions in the US and shrinking revenues from home entertainment - especially DVD sales - 3D was seen as a lifeline that could help keep the studios solvent.

Declining sales

The problem is, until Transformers: Dark of the Moon, there has been nothing to match the 3D prowess of Avatar and audiences have rebelled. Moviegoers have not seen fit to pay a premium for a 3D ticket when a film can be seen in 2D for significantly less.

The bubble of excitement over 3D has burst. Statistics show a decline in ticket sales. And it is a trend that has been evident from the start of Hollywood's current blockbuster season.

Box office analyst Gitesh Pandya says: "I think the honeymoon for 3D is over - the percentage of grosses coming from 3D screens is getting less and less with almost every film."

The consensus is that the waning of audience interest in 3D can be blamed on poor quality renderings - too many shoddy upgrades of films conceived in 2D converted into unsatisfactory 3D in post-production, often as an afterthought.

With these mediocre films there often have not been real dramatic differences between 2D and 3D versions.

'Waste of money'

Chris Weitz, one of Hollywood's top directors, says: "3D is in trouble. It's been overused. They're charging more for 3D - people find it hard to justify paying more for a ticket when they

don't know if what they've seen is 3D or not."

The complaints of moviegoers at a New Jersey multiplex this week cannot bring much comfort to studio executives.

John Buck from Bayonne said: "I think it's a waste of money and people are being robbed."

Fellow moviegoer Donetta Riley was not overly impressed either. "I thought it was really cool when it came out but I think they've pushed it a little too far," she said.

One of the most powerful figures in the media world, Sony chief executive Howard Stringer, also concedes 3D has been problematic.

He does not single out his subordinates at Sony but points the finger at a lazy mentality in Hollywood in general.

"People got a bit careless this year. You took it for granted. You take the easy money for doing a 3D movie and charging higher prices for it, but the audience isn't stupid."

Those glasses

It is not just the poor quality of 3D films that's causing audiences to lose interest in the format. Hollywood icon Al Pacino says: "I love 3D I just don't like the glasses. I don't like that you have to put on glasses. I wish you could just go in and see 3D."

The glasses are a problem. Audiences have complained of discomfort, hygiene concerns and the fact that they cannot turn to their neighbours and see them properly while a film is being screened.

But Professor Toby Miller, author of *Global Hollywood 2*, thinks there is a more fundamental ongoing problem with 3D that will be hard to correct.

He says: "Many people complain of headaches as a consequence of the requirement that the eye do something it's never had to do before, which is focus on one plane, that is the screen, at the same time that it's focusing on very divergent depths of field, so there's a lot of extra work for the brain to do - is there really a payoff?"

What box office analysts can't quite fathom is why 3D is flourishing overseas but turning sluggish in North America.

One theory is that 3D is a much fresher format outside the US.

Gitesh Pandya says: "I think it's just a matter of time before the 3D novelty wears off overseas because if people see three or four or five bad 3D movies in a row no matter what continent you live on you're going to stop coming."

Magic of 3D

Industry insiders see *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* as a possibly pivotal movie in the evolution of 3D.

The film was conceived entirely in 3D from the bottom up. As a consequence paying the extra ticket price may well prove worthwhile for audiences.

One top US film critic, AO Scott from the New York Times, has written: "Dark of the Moon is one of the few recent 3D movies that justify the upcharge."

The film's stars hope their movie will reacquaint audiences with the magic of 3D not witnessed since Avatar. This week at Dark of the Moon's New York premiere Shia LaBeouf - the film's leading man - was really giving the format the hard sell.

"There's no other way to see this movie - truthfully - I like the movie and I hate 3D, I have yet to see a movie that's enhanced the medium, but this is different and I'm not saying that just because I'm in it. This is the perfection of 3D," he said.

Despite its woes 3D is not going to go away - but the industry needs to move quickly to make a correction.

One possible strategy is that the studios will now make fewer 3D pictures but strive to make them of a much higher quality.

It won't be easy, but the pressure is really on to get this right. Hollywood desperately needs the extra long-term revenues 3D initially promised but has not yet been able to deliver.

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