

3D Pot of Gold?

This issue is dedicated to a reinvention of an old and established process, 3D.

Well 3D itself hasn't been reinvented but a number of technologically modest yet strategic improvements have occurred within a relatively short period of time to create a real breakthrough in both the production and display of 3D for cinema, HDTV broadcasting and disc.

It is the interaction of quite disparate technology that has created a new opening for 3D, and it is a challenge to make predictions of where high fidelity large screen production and presentation is going.

If we take high fidelity presentation in the whole it seems that the high end cinema and the low end TV is meeting in the middle.

On one hand we have IMAX building more cinemas than ever before but with a reduced screen size that can be described as IMAX "lite" rather than IMAX "max".

Then you have the reduction of resolution in IMAX presentations by the use of HD cameras rather than large format film.

A friend's child complained that Avatar IMAX 3D was soft.

This is no surprise when you consider that James Cameron used 1920x1080 pixel cameras, so it is a tall order if you'll excuse the pun to fill 40 ft of screen height with 1080 lines of image.

Cameron's production of the Titanic documentary was on the edge with similarly dubious resolution. Perhaps due to the subject nature it was acceptable, but expectations have moved on and audiences are becoming accustomed to high res dazzling HDTV displays both on their computer and in their living room.

However there are no complaints about quality of Avatar 3D on a regular size screen from patrons or distributors as 75% of box office takings outside of the USA have come from 3D screenings and 3 of the top 10 grossing movies from last year were released in 3D. So there is no question that 3D shot on digital cameras and projected digitally has found favour with cinema audiences.

The more surprising knock on the door comes from TV broadcasters hell bent on introducing 3D.

Whilst it took many years for some networks to introduce HD the appetite to introduce HD 3D channels is carnivorous mainly due to falling revenues due to the two pronged attack of the internet, stealing advertising dollars and audience.

There is no proven, sound business case for introducing HD3D but with bandwidth available and 3D TV screen technology becoming cheaper and more sophisticated it is a reasonable gamble especially since broadcasters are running out of options.

It is not surprising then, that there is a hookup between Sony, Discovery and ESPN.

Sony is planning to push sales of 3D capable sets by encouraging 3D production.

Although the World Cup Soccer and London Olympics will be available in 3D it is not clear if the public will, in the longer term pay the premium that will accompany the increased cost in producing and broadcasting 3D HD.

3D Pot of Gold?

It sometimes seems that TV production has polarised into low budget and no budget. The great ideas are there but with less money to produce them than 10 years ago.

This cannot continue into the world of HD 3D without compromises. Of course the 3D production compromises are rolling out, from software that promises 3D images from 2D, camcorders with two lenses but only one imaging chip and cameras with two imaging chips but only one lens.

None the less it is a rare moment in cinema history where a common process and imaging technology is being adopted in both cinema and broadcasting.

For the last decade we have had wonderful tools and abundant ideas to maximise High Fidelity Production and with an audience willing and able to take delivery in the home, yet there is a catastrophic fault in the business where there is apparently a lack of return on the funds needed to exercise the full potential of what is on offer.

James Cameron has show the world that there there is a pot of gold at the end of his 3D Rainbow even if the rainbow cost \$400mm to make.

We hold our breath to see if his production values and success can scale to the small 3D screen with on average one five hundredth of the budget....

If the overhyped and costly introduction of HD is anything to go buy we'll risk turning a lifeless shade of Avitar Blue.

Michael Brennan