

Good Times Home

Depth Perception

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TUESDAY, 22 JUNE 2010 11:04 LISA JENSEN [COLUMNS - OPINION](#)



"I don't want Johnny Depp in my lap." These are eight little words that no one who knows me would ever expect me to utter. I was as shocked as anybody when I heard them cross my own lips at a recent Memorial Day party. Art Boy naturally assumed the most logical explanation: my brain had been taken over by aliens.

Whatever would possess me to say something so blatantly untrue? Alas, we were speaking of the virtual, not the actual, Johnny Depp. The subject was 3-D movies.

OK, I'm a well-known technophobe. I've been called a Luddite, a dinosaur, and a fetishist, and that's by my close personal friends. (Let's not even discuss the invective hurled at me by casual readers when I wrote about searching for an

old CRT monitor to go with my vintage Mac.) I do not text or tweet, nor do I own a cell phone, or any hand-held communications device with a small "i" in front of the name. Remember those "Question Authority?" buttons from the '60s? If I was still of a button-wearing age, mine would read, "Question Technology."

But I do know a little something about the art and history of the motion picture, which is why I greet the dawning of this new, improved, advanced, super-deluxe digital 3-D movie era with a resounding shrug.

I'm not opposed to 3-D; I don't think it spells the Decline of Cinema, and I'm not crusading to get it outlawed. The movies have been around for a long time and have weathered much stranger gimmicks than this. (Smell-o-Vision, anyone?) And I'm thrilled by anything that encourages people to get out of their man caves and cougar dens and see a movie on a bigger screen than their iPhones. But I just don't see how enhancing physical depth perspective adds anything essential to a story.

The first wave of 3-D mania in commercial movies broke in the early '50s. In those days, with movie studios desperate to lure people away from the tube and back into theaters, the 3-D process was milked for its most sensational aspects. Ads for the first 3-D feature, the low-budget jungle movie, Bwana Devil, promised "A lion in your lap!" In It Came From Outer Space, it was a flaming meteor bursting out of the screen at the audience. Of course, leave it to Howard Hughes to cut to the chase, marketing-wise. When he released the musical The French Line in 3-D, starring notoriously buxom Jane Russell, the ads leered,

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"It will knock both of your eyes out."

Of course, the spanking new digital 3-D technology that made Avatar the highest-grossing movie in the history of the planet isn't meant to be mere eye candy. It wants to change the way we experience movies. But here's the thing. I don't want to be virtually engulfed by a movie. I want the image to stay on the screen where it belongs and give me some breathing room, thank you very much.

This is not a holodeck on the Starship Enterprise. I don't need a movie to be interactive. I just want it to be good.

My favorite movie of 2009 was Pixar's wistful and wonderful Up. I saw it flat, and loved it. Did I miss anything vital by not seeing it in 3-D? I don't think so. Could I have given it any more than four stars? Same thing with Tim Burton's recent Alice In Wonderland, which I also saw, and loved, on a flat screen. OK, maybe I missed a virtual lap dance with Johnny Depp, so delightful in the holy fool role of the Mad Hatter. But unless they'd flown in Depp himself for a live appearance, I couldn't have enjoyed the movie any more.

A couple of weeks ago, I saw the latest Shrek movie in 3-D. There were some cool swooping effects and all, but nothing that added much to the storyline. (Projectile baby drool, however, was featured not only in Shrek, but in one of the trailers for upcoming 3-D movies that played with it. In a word, ew.)

And what about the glasses? The new plastic ones are bigger and sleeker than the cardboard '50s model with blue and red lenses. But, depending on the quality of the 3-D system (and there are various gradations out there), the image can be a little fuzzy around the edges—especially if you do anything radical, like move your head. Also, I take notes at the movies, and having to flip up the glasses to even find my notepad, (much less focus on it) is extra annoying.

Sure, I know that every technical innovation at the movies—sound, color—has been met by short-sighted doomsayers predicting the demise of the art form. Yes, movies have survived. But something poignant and universal was lost after the silents learned to talk, and almost no one uses the expressionistic fertility of black-and-white film any more since Technicolor bullied it off the screen.

Innovation itself doesn't make a movie any better or worse; it's still the storytelling that counts. By next month, most every theater in the county will have rigged up at least one 3-D auditorium, in time for this summer's blockbusters. I hope it pays off for everybody, especially viewers who know the difference between artistic depth and its sexy new virtual cousin.

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