

Hollywood's 3D revolution is falling flat

By Dominic Rushe
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Shrink

Mars Needs Moms' poor performance at the box office so far is seen as yet another a sign of troubled times in the movie industry. Photo / Supplied

Mars Needs Moms, according to the title of Disney's latest foray into 3D animation, but this weekend the "House of Mouse" would settle for a few moms closer to home.

Sadly for Disney, last weekend was one of the most embarrassing in recent years for the company: its new US\$150 million (\$202 million) movie took just US\$6.9 million in ticket sales.

All is not well in movieland. So far this year, US ticket sales are running 20 per cent behind where they were in the first quarter of 2010 – US\$1.6 billion against US\$2 billion.

While supporters point out this is a tough comparison – Avatar, the most successful film of all time, was still raking in cash a year ago – attendances have fallen steadily since 2002.

The internet, video on demand, home movie systems and the recession have all taken their toll. Moreover, this year has been further marred by a plethora of 3D turkeys.

But over the past two years Hollywood and cinema operators convinced themselves they had found a solution to their problems.

3D blockbusters including Avatar, Alice in Wonderland and Toy Story 3 let cinemas raise prices, so falling attendances did not hit the bottom line as hard. They are also harder to pirate.

According to movie moguls Jeffrey Katzenberg and James Cameron, the new 3D technology is equivalent to the introduction of sound in 1927's The Jazz Singer or Technicolor with 1928's The Viking. This 3D, they argue, is the start of a third wave in movie making – a new golden era of innovation.

But not if no one goes. Mars Needs Moms opened on more than 3000 screens in the US and made about US\$2000 per showing, a pitiful return for a film of its budget.

Brandon Gray, founder of film-industry website Box Office Mojo, says there will be more of this to come. "For all the boosterism, 3D isn't ready for primetime," he says. "It's still watching movies wearing sunglasses in the dark. Come back when you've got that sorted out."

Gray says the success of Avatar et al was not down to 3D: "Those are films that people would have seen anyway."

The movie industry seems to have convinced itself that 3D is enough of a draw to bring in an audience willing to pay more for tickets. And now they have all bought into that idea, it is emerging that they might be wrong.

"Hollywood loves a bandwagon and Avatar was a really big bandwagon," says Gray. "But it's become a way for them to avoid what really matters – storytelling."

He says fans are no longer wowed by 3D alone and if cinemas don't cut prices and film-makers don't step up their game, big problems lie ahead.

Phil Contrino of BoxOffice.com is not so sure. "I think the issues are specific to this movie," he says.

"Whenever a 3D movie bombs, people are way too quick to jump on the bandwagon ... Then along comes a Toy Story 3 and the story changes."

Last year's two highest grossing films were available in 3D, Alice in Wonderland and Toy Story 3, as were six of the top 10.

Mars Needs Moms also uses a motion-capture 3D technique that some argue makes the characters too realistic and triggers the phenomenon known in robotics as "uncanny valley" – the sudden plunge in the public's emotional response from warmth to revulsion when presented with a robot that is too lifelike for comfort.

The next test comes with the release of Steven Spielberg's animated Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn this year.

"If anyone can pull it off, it's Spielberg," says Contrino.

But whether Tintin flops or not, 3D may be here to stay. Says Gray: "It's institutionalised now." Now it just needs to find an audience.

3D HITS

- * Avatar
- * Alice in Wonderland
- * Toy Story 3

3D MISSES

- * Mars Needs Moms
- * Cats & Dogs: The Revenge of Kitty Galore
- * Step Up 3D

– Observer

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