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MEDIA FRENZY

Why Hollywood Is Getting Serious About 3-D

By **RICHARD SIKLOS**

IT'S kind of fitting that the first live-action 3-D movie expected to find its way to the modern multiplex after a preview at the [Cannes Film Festival](#) last week is a [U2](#) concert film. The band's lead singer, [Bono](#), is known for wearing shades, so it might seem downright participatory for the audience to don 3-D spectacles in order to have, as The Times's Sharon Waxman put it last week, "the palpable experience of being present" while U2 rocks out.

In a more mainstream way, Hollywood bigwigs like James Cameron, [Jeffrey Katzenberg](#), [Steven Spielberg](#), Peter Jackson and Robert Zemeckis all have new 3-D projects in the works and are proclaiming the beginning of a bold new era for cinema.

Obviously, 3-D is not exactly a post-modern idea, and for most people it first brings to mind thoughts of wacky, red-lens-blue-lens cardboard glasses —or even of the headgear that [Imax](#) offered when it started showing 3-D flicks on its giant screens in the 1980s. But 3-D is clearly coming into its own, and its cinematic aspect is just one element of technology's broader march toward a new era of make-believe super-realism.

Part of the enthusiasm for 3-D is what it will mean for creative expression and story-telling. And part of it is Hollywood's response to changing technologies — you can be sure that James Cameron's aptly named feature "Avatar," scheduled for release in 2009, will look a whole better in a movie theater than it will on a laptop or [iPod](#).

Last week, I sat in a nearly empty Times Square theater and watched "Meet the Robinsons," the animated, 3-D [Walt Disney](#) feature that has taken in a solid \$150 million since its premiere on March 30. Like many other 3-D offerings that studios are bringing to the screen, it was projected on a digital system called Real D that a growing number of theaters are installing.

It's doubtful that even the current generation of glasses —simple black plastic frames with clear lenses — would satisfy Bono's tastes. But they are fairly unobtrusive and, without them, the image on the screen is a blur. With them, the 3-D illusion enhances the experience, making a robot's head seem to extend to the seatback in front of you, and streams of peanut butter and jelly fly past your face.

It's more than a gimmick, but to my eyes it's hardly a revolution, either — it's a device that can make a good story better, but can't make a dull story good. (The same goes for high-definition, the current rage of home video and television programming: watching [LeBron James](#) live in HD is spectacular; it's less exhilarating when Tony Soprano is biting into a cannoli.)

Whether it is the savior of the cinema-going experience or a nice add-on like surround sound and comfy chairs is yet to be seen, but there is palpable excitement around 3-D.

Equally intriguing, 3-D is coming not just to the theater, but also to the living room and potentially to anywhere your eyeballs might happen to wander. In addition to retooling his “Star Wars” series in 3-D, [George Lucas](#) is working on a new 3-D television show. All sorts of TV and display companies, including Philips, are working on a next generation of 3-D HD monitors that might not even require viewers to wear glasses.

If you believe the theory that TVs and computers will merge into one utility, 3-D offers intriguing interactive possibilities — especially the use of avatars in everything from PlayStations and Xboxes to virtual worlds for grown-ups like Second Life and virtual playgrounds for children like Club Penguin.

For the uninitiated, avatars are digital representations of yourself in video games or as alter egos in the online world. At first blush, they may seem like something for geeks and under-30s, but a lot of people are trying to figure out ways of bringing avatars into the mainstream — the idea being that a virtual world like Second Life is just a three-dimensional version of the Internet.

There are already longstanding and impressive avatar applications for people with disabilities and, of course, the military. Instead of going to a typical two-dimensional Web site like, say, [Yahoo](#), maybe one day there will be a 3-D version where you and your friends can hang out, or visit online shopping malls, cooking classes, foreign lands and just about anything else that exists in the real (or imaginary) world.

Just as the U2 film gives audiences a front-row experience without going to the live show, much of the online excitement around 3-D involves letting people explore the real world in an immersive way.

By now, for instance, many people have already had the fleeting thrill of using a piece of software known as [Google Earth](#). It uses automated satellite imagery to give an up-to-date rendering of the world, through which users can zoom in on their blocks, homes or any other landmark.

But one of the more interesting tangents that [Google](#) is pursuing is the use of 3-D modeling to attach buildings and structures to satellite maps so that landscapes can eventually be viewed (and explored) from any perspective.

Google uses a software it acquired last year, SketchUp, to allow people to create digital renderings of objects, their homes or entire city blocks, which are then kept in something called the 3D Warehouse — from which the most accurate renderings are grafted onto the Google Earth database.

JOHN V. HANKE, who runs Google Earth, told me a few months ago that Google’s approach to recreating the world in 3-D was initially for “purely utilitarian” uses like real estate searches and finding the nearest [Wal-Mart](#), whereas the 3-D tack that Hollywood and video game companies are taking is born out of “pure fun.” But he acknowledged that the two were destined to intersect.

In one interesting educational use, the cable-channel operator Discovery Communications has

been providing streaming video to Google Earth since last year: when you visit Yellowstone Park using the service, you can view documentary footage that Discovery provides.

The accelerating blurring of real and artificial is sure to raise warning flags about how we interact. One hopes that such activities as “going outside to play” and “talking face to face” would still hold some appeal in our 3-D future. And it doesn’t take mathematical genius to calculate that 3-D + porn = \$\$\$\$. But Hollywood’s 3-D foray also demonstrates that the idea is to improve existing media experiences like going to the pictures (or doing research), rather than replacing real-life endeavors.

While there’s no question that the entertainment and information industries are destined for some kind of 3-D future, Mr. Hanke said, “there’s no master plan sitting on the shelf on how it’s all going to happen.”

For now, we just have to slide on the specs or click the mouse and enjoy the show.