

Understanding What Avatar Means

By Melissa Keeping

The buzz surrounding 3D was tangible at the International Digital Film Forum held last month in Paris, with exhibitors keen to display the latest cameras and 3D HDTV, and Avatar was being eagerly discussed both as a special effects masterpiece and a pivotal point in the evolution of cinema.

The key players, AAM, XDC and Dolby were all there in force, as well as French exhibitors and distributors alike. Yet for all the excitement, the post-Avatar landscape is clearly worrying the post-production industry.



Given that the cameras developed specially for this film enabled the DP and the director himself to go back and view the 'rushes' on set immediately after filming, this shift has apparently single-handedly eliminated film from the future. It has brought into question the very need for film at all. As Mark Jaszberenyi, head of Colourfront, a 35mm and digital print laboratory in Hungary said, "The lab is now on the set," so it remains to be seen where this leaves the lucrative post-production industry a decade down the line.

Ultimately this will also affect the downstream markets – TV, downloads, pay TV, DVD, and Blu-ray, to name the obvious. The TV version will be as easy and immediate to produce as the cinema version. Filming in digital will open the doors to providing multi-discipline content and if they are to survive, post-production houses must capitalize on the opportunity to become 'one-stop-shops'. It throws the age-old convention of the three-month window between the theatrical and the DVD release into the air; if you wanted to you could sell the DVD to the audience as they walk out of the cinema.

The biggest concern expressed at IDIFF was about storage. With ever-increasing amounts of data, the challenge for studios and independents alike was how to securely store the data without risk of corruption and piracy.

It's the end of an era, Bill Feightner of Efilm told the conference. He said that we will never see the like of 35mm again, the world's established format for a century. Technology is changing so fast that we could now see new formats emerging every 4-5 years and if business is to thrive, then awareness and funding are key.

What is the cinema of the future, people were asking. Deployment depends on the VPF, and in its current format it has a shelf life of about 10 years. Technology is forcing the issue; as existing servers and projectors become obsolete, exhibitors will upgrade and by then, they will be expected to finance this themselves. This in turn opens up a potentially lucrative second-hand market for markets currently reliant on used prints, as well as independent exhibitors who can't or won't capitalize on the VPF in time.

Feightner pointed out that while advancements are being made, and he suggested that 4K will replace 2K eventually, without the server being upgraded at the same time, the image is compressed, thus making the expense of an upgrade pointless. Ultimately of course, it is content, not image quality that will keep audiences coming.

Tomaso Vergallo of Digimage Cinema (France) countered this by the age-old argument that as home-cinema technology grows ever more competitive and impressive, where does that leave cinema in all its post-Avatar glory? The industry was fretting much the same way in the early 80s when VHS burst onto the consumer market. And the answer is still much the same – the big screen will always have an appeal over the small one, especially as the consumer becomes ever more sophisticated and demanding, which is no bad thing for exhibitors. Image quality will always be compromised on a small screen, regardless of the technological wonders of home cinema.

