

In Defense of Stereoscopy: A Reconsideration of 3D in Owen Weetch's *Expressive Spaces in Digital 3D Cinema*

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Weetch, Owen. 2016. *Expressive Spaces in Digital 3D Cinema*. Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television, London, UK.

Digital 3D cinema has been maligned throughout its short history, frequently dismissed as a gimmick and a distraction; its detractors tend to consider it emblematic of a somehow devalued contemporary cinema-going experience. Following the unprecedented success of James Cameron's *Avatar* in 2009, the industry saw a permanent increase of films converted to 3D during post-production (often without the consent of the filmmakers themselves). The results of these half-hearted conversions took their toll on the reception and consideration of 3D as a cinematic device, an impression helped no end by the increase in price per ticket, or those pesky glasses. Thus, it would appear to be a decidedly uphill battle to make provoking a reconsideration of 3D's expressive and narrative capabilities the focus of a monograph. And yet, Owen Weetch's debut, *Expressive Spaces in Digital 3D Cinema* (2016), works tirelessly from the ground up to make the thoroughly under-examined case for 3D's artistic potential, and for its capacity to enhance our experience of a film, in ways usually intended by the filmmakers.

Weetch's approach and structure is designed to first dispel the popular criticisms and misconceptions of 3D cinema, and then to introduce the reader to the various techniques and expressive capabilities it can offer to our experience. He also delineates several creative uses in recent films through textual analysis, in order to demonstrate the critical benefits of this increased sensitivity to new technology. These uses range from the employment of slow motion and intensified continuity in *Avatar*, to point-of-view shots in motion in *Gravity* (2013), to foregrounded *mise-en-scène* in *The Hole* (2009), and so on. He begins the book with an outline of the numerous gripes and complaints audiences and critics have used dismissively towards 3D, many of which you will have heard, and many you might well have previously uttered yourself. For example, William Paul has argued that 3D cannot be put to productive use in narrative filmmaking, because it disrupts the commonly sought invisibility written of by David Bordwell that characterized classical Hollywood cinema, and continues to exist today. Paul suggests that by alluding to the frame's existence, which 3D could be said to do through an emphasis on space and objects outside the frame, the enchanting illusion of the narrative is lost. This leads to the popular and enduring consideration of 3D as an element of spectacle rather than a storytelling device. Weetch, aware of this kind of attitude, asserts: '[this] book is wholly concerned with addressing and correcting this assumption, aiding the viewer of 3D films to better understand their particular representational strategies and the meanings that those strategies construct' (6).

The first chapter focuses on *Avatar*, situating it as a watershed moment in its use of 3D to enhance narrative experience. Appropriately, Weetch then uses the film to introduce some important terminology and outlines some of the ways stereoscopy - the filming of the image from two perspectives to simulate binocular vision (or its creation via CGI in post-production) - is employed creatively in order to align us with the protagonist in his experience of a new world. Building on this foundation, the book then turns to Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, and Weetch delineates how its use of stereoscopically inflected point-of-view shots creates a spatial environment for the protagonist to master. He argues that the use of 3D manifests an unknown space for the character to inhabit while they progress towards self-actualization. The chapter's emphasis on close-reading, and its articulation of the relationship between character and environment, works tremendously well to counteract the presupposition of *Gravity* as a 'ride film', or an 'experience' that emphasizes its technical accomplishment before its narrative.

In the following chapter, Weetch, whose work might be at its most adept here, turns his sharp critical instincts towards the horror genre and Joe Dante's *The Hole*. Here, he employs canonical literature on the slasher film, synthesizing the work of, among others, Carol Clover and Vera Dika in order to interrogate how 3D can be formally integrated with the genre. The textual analysis accentuates how the film's subtle, considered use of stereoscopy augments the sense of tension associated with a typical horror film experience. Weetch suggests that, in cases where the filmmaker reaches a certain level of command over 3D, it becomes as invisible and immersive as any design element that aims to convey narrative meaning above all else.

The final chapters turn their attention towards the articulation of character relationships through the use of 3D, and how themes such as intimacy or longing can be expressively conveyed through 3D space. Weetch looks first at *The Great Gatsby* (2013) and then at Disney's *Frozen* (2013), providing detailed passages of analysis that further assert the capability of 3D to intensify our engagement with events and characters on screen. Particularly fascinating was the investigation of digital animation, and how its employment of stereoscopy can offer different possibilities to live-action. Indeed, Weetch suggests in his final chapter that 3D's expressivity can be at its most symbolic when used in animation, deploying examples that range from the spatial dynamics between characters at various points in the film, to how the texture and state of surrounding water can subtly allude to changes in relationships and narrative journeys. In demonstrating the nuance with which filmmakers can creatively employ stereoscopy, the final chapter is superbly timed, arriving after a rigorous introduction to the various facets and capacities of 3D cinema. This equips the reader to engage with the films with a similar degree of sophistication.

Ultimately, through the sheer quantity of detail and a high level of lucidity, Weetch offers a strong argument for 3D's artistic potential. When reading, it becomes less and less essential that the reader recalls his or her own experience with the film (in 3D or otherwise) - such is the clarity of critical exposition on frequent display throughout. It is understood by Weetch that the average viewer does not pay as close attention to a film's use of stereoscopy, and he offers a text necessary to guide his reader towards an enhanced sense of appreciation. The balance is struck between necessary handholding early on, contextual information, and sophisticated analysis. This paves the way to greater alertness and sensitivity to a film's use of 3D, Weetch arguing for digital 3D's capacity to enrich the cinematic experience. Weetch viewed these films hundreds of times in 3D, even remarking that he often took his glasses off to measure the distance between the two overlapping images on screen, in order to extract the levels of depth and space being employed stereoscopically. The depth of his

research cannot be contested, but his true achievement is the expert application of that research in this text, providing a work of scholarship that becomes an essential manual for the critical 3D viewer.

Weetch's book asks us to reconsider 3D, not as a fairground attraction, or another gimmick, but rather a filmmaking device that can be used as creatively and meaningfully as any other. Thus, this work marks a key entry into the literature on new technology in cinema. Filmmakers are usually not trying to make your eyes hurt, or to trick you into spending money for the same film with an added headache, he says. A lot of the time, stereoscopic filmmaking is just that--*filmmaking*--the construction of narrative meaning through whatever resources and tools are considered appropriate to enhance the audience's experience. Through his rigorous study of individual films and effective analysis of stereoscopy, which imparts to the reader the tools for a similar level of consideration, Weetch makes a compelling case that new technologies are almost always defined not by their groundbreaking mechanical complexity, but rather how they actually manifest.

Author bio

Joshua Schulze is a graduate in Film and Literature from the University of Warwick, where he was the first recipient of the V.F. Perkins Memorial Award. He is currently pursuing independent research, and has presented papers at conferences on such topics as class analysis in the work of Stephen King, and globalisation in the work of Bong Joon-ho. He is currently developing a project on the found-footage genre.

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ISSN 1558478X