

SMPTE at 110: Looking Back, Leading Forward

BY RICHARD WELSH



As SMPTE celebrates turning a spectacular one hundred and ten years old, I have been considering how the future was viewed when we were founded. Motion pictures were, of course, on the rise globally and needed a standard to allow interoperability for film; hence SMPTE was formed. The first photographic film images were made in the late 1830s; a few years later, the stereo photograph was invented. They were viewable using the stereoscope—a single-user device, which gained much popularity in the late 1800s. With the invention of celluloid film, motion pictures emerged about 40

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years later, and by the 1910s, the motion picture industry had adopted stereoscopic exhibition for the first time. 3D cinema had many resurgences over the following decades, but its popularity ebbed and flowed, not least because of the complexity of shooting it. With the advent of Digital Cinema, and its ability to be converted to stereoscopic replay, a new burst of 3D activity followed. As consumer formats could also support it, 3D made its way into the home with 3D TVs and some limited stereoscopic broadcasts. However, interest waned, and 3D TVs' moment in the spotlight gave way to UHD, HDR, and streaming. Step forward VR/AR, and 3D is back again. And so it goes almost full circle—almost 200 years after the first stereo photograph was available through a single-viewer device, we find ourselves with stereoscopic motion pictures on single-viewer VR devices. Now, this isn't to say anything about 3D as a format; of course, for most of us, that's how we

experience the world visually, and it makes sense to have this as an immersive format for entertainment. And now we can go further. With 3D and 4D scanning, immersive media can transition to free-viewpoint VR. So will this be the moment for stereoscopic 3D to take its place as a permanent fixture of entertainment?

In 2011, SMPTE published a book, “100 Years of 3D Cinema,” which included a paper titled *Stereoscopic Motion Picture*, written by our founder, Charles Francis Jenkins, in October 1919. At that time, the buzz around 3D was high, and at any industry trade show, you would

see 3D everywhere. You may well be reading this at IBC 2026, and I’m ready to bet AI appears on nearly every stand. AI is, of course, impacting all areas of today’s world—not just media—and all industries are scrambling to understand how it impacts them and how it might bring advances in how they operate. I doubt many people 15 years ago would have guessed that. And so in another twist, AI may well be the technology that enables 3D and immersive entertainment to become mainstream. Time will tell, and one thing is certain: SMPTE will be there to help the industry navigate it, as it has done for over 100 years. Our

community continues to provide education, standards, and forums that help the industry make sense of complex technological waters, and navigate uncertain times with confidence. I am proud to be part of an organization with such rich history in our industry, one that has been there from the inception and throughout the evolution of every major development in media and entertainment. I can’t wait to see where we go next as an industry, and I’m excited to be a part of SMPTE’s place in that future history.

DOI: 10.5594/JMI.2026/GHJU5455
Date of publication: 1 September 2026

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