Moving pictures: technology and the movies

From the early days of silent, black and white films to our modern digital productions, the film industry has changed a lot over the last century.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there weren’t any cinemas. When a travelling ‘picture show’ came to a town, people usually watched the short films in a tent. The first permanent cinema was Thomas Tally’s Electric Theater, which opened in Los Angeles in 1902.

By 1907, there were more than 4,000 cinemas in the USA, where audiences watched silent comedies, dramas and news stories, with a pianist providing music.

Colour films delighted viewers when they started to replace black and white films in the early 1920s, but it was the introduction of sound between 1926 and 1930 which really revolutionized the cinema.

Genres, like musicals and horror, became popular as film producers could include songs, dialogues and sound effects in their ‘talking pictures’. But some actors lost their jobs because they didn’t have good voices or simply couldn’t act and speak at the same time.
There were various experiments with 3D and with films with smells (‘Smell-O-Vision’) in the 1950s and 1960s, but they weren’t very successful. Film technology didn’t change much until the 1970s, when surround sound became popular. This made the movie experience more realistic because sound seemed to come from all directions.

After that, the next real revolution came with computers. Film-makers can now create very realistic special effects and computer-generated images have had a big impact, particularly on science fiction films and animation.

These days, digital projectors produce clearer images, and as 3D technology improves, films will seem more realistic. It’s also possible that with future technology, we’ll be able to connect our bodies to special cinema seats and feel the same emotions and sensations as the characters on the screen. But … will we really want to do that?