

1 The Sporting and Theatrical Syndicate

Boxing Pictures and the Origins of Cinema, 1891–1896

To the sporting fraternity I can say that before long it will be possible to apply this system to prize fights and boxing exhibitions. The whole scene with the comments of the spectators, the talk of the seconds, the noise of the blows, and so on will be faithfully transferred.

THOMAS EDISON, quoted in "The Kinetograph,"
New York Sun, May 28, 1891

Thomas Edison's direct address to "the sporting fraternity" as a prime audience for his forthcoming invention was not an idle remark. As moving-picture technologies developed over the next five years, boxing remained an important part of the earliest productions. Press and professional discourses often coupled them. When Edison introduced this general connection in 1891, the *New York Sun* concluded with a specific one. "With out-of-door athletic exhibitions and prize fights," the paper said of the kinetograph, "its work will be just as perfect, and Luther Carey's stride will be measured as carefully and reproduced as distinctly as the terrible blows by which Fitzsimmons disposed of Dempsey." These topical references presumed an insider's knowledge—of Carey, the record holder in the hundred-yard dash, and of the pugilist Robert Fitzsimmons, who had recently won the middleweight championship.¹ In the era before cinema, such arcana had limited circulation. Movie coverage changed that. Of all the sports, boxing became the most closely affiliated with early cinema.

Fight pictures did not become a matter of substantial public commentary until sporting, theatrical, and motion-picture interests collectively capitalized on the cinematic representation of newsworthy bouts—usually heavyweight title contests such as Corbett-Fitzsimmons (1897), Jeffries-Sharkey (1899), or Johnson-Jeffries (1910). Yet the producers of motion pictures, particularly in the United States, linked their technology with boxing from the beginning. Fight titles constituted only a small percentage of the several

thousand subjects listed for sale in early film catalogs. However, the frequent appearance of pugilists before the cameras of pioneer manufacturers was more than incidental. During the months between regular production for the Edison kinetoscope in 1894 and the international conversion to projected screenings in 1895–96, fight pictures emerged as the first genre of moving pictures to be distinguished by special forms of production and presentation. Commentators on the technology often associated it with this genre. The connection between motion pictures and boxing became one that, over the next two decades, both institutions sought to exploit, even as each tried to shed the other's sometimes tainting influence.

Why did boxing and cinema develop this interrelationship? Most apparent was the match of two practices that relied on brief, segmented units of performance. Recognizing this, makers of motion pictures competed for the best boxing subjects. Commercial competition existed between the Edison company and its rivals, but also among Edison's subcontractors—the Kinetoscope Company (also called Raff & Gammon), the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company (Latham, Rector and Tilden), and the Continental Commerce Company (Maguire & Baucus). The most important determinant, however, was sociological. In the 1890s, prizefighting and filmmaking shared a milieu: an urban, male community known to its contemporaries as the "sporting and theatrical" world.

INITIAL EXPERIMENTS: "MEN IN MOTION"

Evidence of cinema's affinity for pugilism comes from the very earliest recordings: W. K. L. Dickson's 1891–92 experiments at the Edison laboratory (see figure 4) and the 1894–95 kinetoscope pictures staged in Edison's "Black Maria" studio (see figures 5 and 6). Amateur and professional fighters of varying degrees of fame came to the New Jersey laboratory and sparred while technicians recorded their actions in installments lasting little more than a minute. By the end of their first year in the "Kinematograph Theatre," the Dickson team had filmed *Leonard-Cushing Fight*, *Corbett and Courtney Before the Kinetograph*, *Hornbacker-Murphy Fight*, *Billy Edwards and Warwick*, and others. There were also "burlesque boxing bouts," vaudeville turns of knockabout comedy stunts performed by stage veterans. The first catalogs also included numbers of athletic display or combat: *Wrestling Match*, *Gladiatorial Combat*, *Cock Fight*, *Boxing Cats*, *Wrestling Dogs*, *Lady Fencers*, *Mexican Duel*, and films of contortionists, gymnasts, and (foremost) female dancers.



Figure 4. [*Men Boxing*] (1891), experiment with the Edison-Dickson horizontal-feed kinetograph. This prototype recorded circularly matted images on $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-gauge celluloid, just over half the width of the 35 mm standard that followed. (Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division.)



Figure 5. R. F. Outcault's drawing of Edison's Black Maria, imagining a sparring match with synchronous sound recording. *The Electrical World*, June 16, 1894.

Similar impressions about the kinetic nature of this imagery are apparent in Dickson's illustrations for his book *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope, and Kinetophone* (1895). His drawing of the Corbett-Courtney fight appears on the cover alongside wrestlers, fencers, strongmen, dancers, and boxing animals. Such subject matter suited the kinetoscope's brief

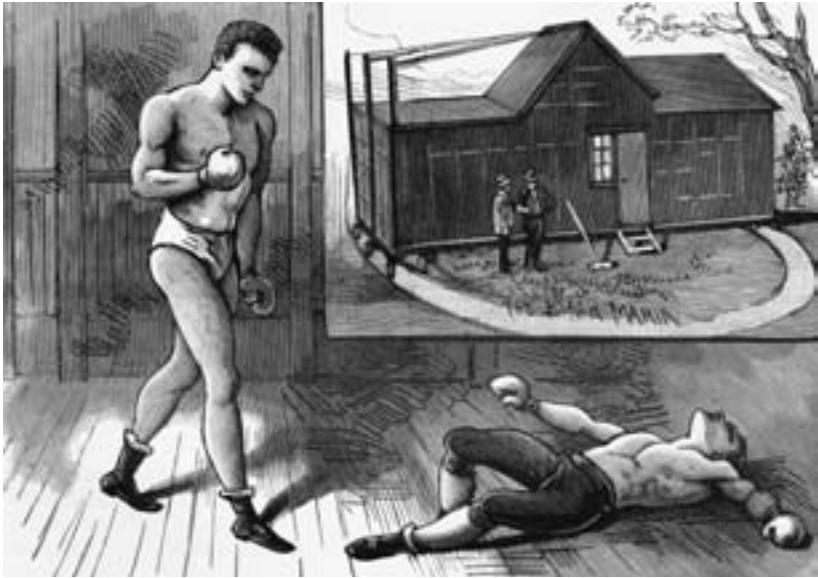


Figure 6. Fanciful illustration for "Knocked Out by Corbett: The Champion Cleverly Defeats Peter Courtney in Six Rounds for the Edison Kinetoscope," *Police Gazette*, September 22, 1894.

running time and the kinetograph's immobility. Boxing films were iterations of the corporeal and visual dynamism animating peep shows. The fighters' shuffling feet and flailing arms were on a par with Annabelle's serpentine dance and Professor Tschernoff's trained-dog act.

The early filmmakers' fascination with capturing the human physique in motion added to the prevalence of boxers in films. Recordings of what a Kinetoscope Company bulletin called the "sciened and skillful . . . exhibition of sparring"² could be classed with the series of poses by the celebrity strongman Eugen Sandow (1894), the widely viewed scene of May Irwin and John C. Rice in *The Kiss* (1896), or even *Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze*, January 7, 1894. In a coincidence worth noting, on that same January 7 a press item about Edison's latest inventions suggested that his kinetoscope could be used to record the upcoming heavyweight title bout. "It is claimed that by the use of this machine all the rounds of a boxing contest, every blow in a prize-fight or other contest, can be reproduced, and the whole placed on exhibition at a nickel a head. By this means the hundreds of thousands who would wish to see the meeting between [Jim] Corbett and [Charlie] Mitchell can witness the encounter, counterfeited by the



Figure 7. Eadweard Muybridge, "Athletes Boxing" (1893), zoopraxiscope disc. Muybridge projected 12-inch spinning glass discs onto a screen, creating a looping animation at the end of his lantern lectures. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)

kinetograph, on every street corner within a week after the gladiators meet."³

Such subjects had precinematic antecedents. Dickson's films of boxers continued the work expected of moving pictures. Commentaries on the development of the cinematic apparatus envisioned motion pictures as the fruition of work by the photographer-scientists Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey. Their serial photography and chronophotography of the 1870s and 1880s studied animal and human locomotion. Muybridge's *Athletes Boxing* (1879) stood out for some who saw the series. In 1882, when the photographer gave his first London presentation, *Photographic News* reported that the Prince of Wales greeted him with the words, "I should like to see your boxing pictures." In 1888, Edison received Muybridge in his new West Orange lab. while Muybridge was on a lecture tour with lantern slides. Edison took an interest in his colleague's zoopraxiscope, which projected still



Figure 8. The San Francisco fight between Dal Hawkins and George Dixon was not filmed, but the local press chose to illustrate it with a "kinetoscopic" image (which might have been more properly called "zoopraxiscopic"). *San Francisco Examiner*, July 24, 1897.

images in rapid succession from a rotating glass disc, approximating continuous motion. Muybridge used it at the end of his New Jersey presentation for "projecting animated versions of boxing and dancing."⁴

Edison recordings drew on these precursors. As early as spring 1891, Dickson used a prototype camera to record a fleeting sequence of two men standing toe to toe and circling their mitts. A rope in the foreground suggested a boxing ring. By autumn 1892, Dickson's crew had shot a similar test. *The Phonogram* magazine printed frames from *Boxing*, alongside examples from *Fencing* and *Wrestling*. Restating Edison's promise to "reproduce motion and sound simultaneously," the accompanying article concluded: "The kinetograph will also record with fidelity all that takes place at prize fights, baseball contests and the noise, stir and progress of games."⁵

These test pictures, however, are more reminiscent of Muybridge's motion studies than of later sound movies. The 1892 experiments even include

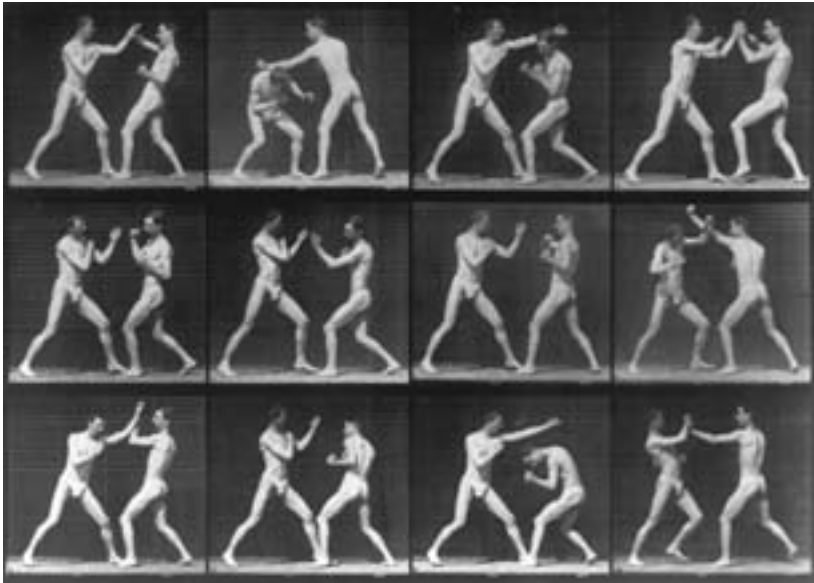


Figure 9. Eadweard Muybridge, "Nude Male Athletes Boxing," plate 336, *Animal Locomotion* (1887). (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)

a gridded backdrop similar to that used in Muybridge's *Animal Locomotion* series. Dickson's 1894 pictures of men in boxing trunks also resemble Muybridge's mostly nude athletic models walking, jumping, running, wrestling, and boxing. *Harper's Weekly* made the connection in June 1891. In "Edison's Kinetograph," the author George Parsons Lathrop discussed experiments in motion photography. The object of the cameras of Marey, Muybridge and Edison, he wrote, was to record "men in motion." The "great possibilities" of the kinetograph included the ability "to repeat in life-like shadow-play" all manner of human activities, including "prize-fights, athletic games, [etc.]"⁶ Given moving pictures envisioned by this generation of inventors, and the degree to which interest in the "science" of boxing comported with their science, it is not surprising that fight pictures headed the list of preferred subjects when Dickson wrote in 1894 that kinetoscopic "records embrace pugilistic encounters."⁷

Although they shared the kineticism and foregrounding of bodies visible in other recordings, fight pictures immediately distinguished themselves. They used different production methods, technologies, and personnel. The genre was also exhibited, publicized, and received in a manner distinct from other film subjects.

THE KINETOSCOPE EXHIBITING COMPANY

The production of fight pictures diverged from the Edison company's other early motion-picture activities. The firm collaborated with independent entrepreneurs who sought to exploit its technologies. Edison began selling kinoscope viewing devices and film loops to amusement operators in April 1894. Marketing proved disorganized until Norman C. Raff and Frank R. Gammon received "exclusive American marketing" rights by September 1. For two years their Kinetoscope Company sold territorial rights for the use of the machines and sold owners prints of the fifty-foot "photographic strips" produced in the Black Maria. The coin-in-the-slot novelty device—which appeared in arcades, hotels, amusement parks, and phonograph parlors—did only middling business even at its peak.

However, Raff and Gammon were not the only ones to contract for use of Edison's motion-picture technology. Before the Kinetoscope Company's "exclusive" agreement was finalized, a group of speculators lobbied Edison for the right to build a camera and viewer capable of holding longer strips of celluloid. The group consisted of the brothers Otway and Gray Latham, their father Woodville (a scientist and inventor), the engineer Enoch J. Rector (the brothers' college classmate), and financial partners Samuel J. Tilden Jr. (heir of the former New York governor) and J. Harry Cox (of the Tilden Company, America's oldest pharmaceutical manufacturer). Their stated purpose was to profit from recording and commercially exhibiting prize-fight pictures.

Edison's business manager, William E. Gilmore, granted the Latham application in May 1894 after interviewing Otway, who offered as references Tilden and the attorney John Dos Passos. On May 15, Latham ordered "ten Kenetiscopes." Rector began working alongside Dickson in the previously secret research labs. By June they had tripled the kinetograph's film capacity to 150 feet. Their company made good on its promise to use the improved equipment for the production of fight pictures. Although Latham recorded only a handful of bouts during the company's brief existence, each production made an impact.⁸

THE LEONARD-CUSHING FIGHT

After negotiations and technical alterations to convert the Black Maria into a makeshift boxing ring, the Latham partnership made its first film, the *Leonard-Cushing Fight*, on June 14, 1894. Historian Gordon Hendricks

describes the incident as “the first big Black Maria event” (apart from the Sandow visit in March) and “the last of comparable notoriety until the next Latham production—the Corbett-Courtney fight” in September.⁹ The Lathams’ drive to record a prizefight expedited Dickson’s achievement of better photographic results. The crew waited through several days of clouds for ideal sunlight, meanwhile conducting experiments (apparently unsuccessful) with “auxiliary lighting.” They also arranged the boxers’ exhibition to comport with the new camera’s capacity: it consisted of six one-minute rounds and culminated in a knockout by the favorite.

To a large extent, boxing succeeded as moving-picture fare because it could be structured around the kinetoscope’s formal constraints. Kinetoscope parlors generally placed machines in rows of five or six. By putting a film of one round in each machine and setting up a knockout climax, the serialized presentation encouraged exhibitors to buy all six films and the customers to watch the entire sequence. A *New York World* journalist who saw the fight being recorded made the strategy explicit: “The theory is that when in the first round he [the customer paying ten cents per view] sees Mr. Leonard, to use his own language, “pushing Mr. Cushing in the face,” he will want to see the next round and the next four. Thus he will pay sixty cents for the complete kinetograph of this strange and unheard of fight.”¹⁰

The Lathams banked on this strategy to such a degree that by August, now incorporated as the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company, they opened their own Manhattan storefront (see figure 10). The *Leonard-Cushing Fight* was the sole attraction, viewable on six new-model kinetoscopes. The monothematic presentation proved feasible for a short time, with seventy-two more machines ordered on August 23. Additional kinetoscope operators in Brooklyn (whence both lightweights hailed) were already marketing the films.¹¹

Selling rounds as separate films proved viable for several years, even as projectors replaced peep shows and cameras became capable of filming longer events. The *Leonard-Cushing Fight* remained in the Edison catalogs into the 1900s, still “sold by rounds.” Other companies still used this packaging practice as late as 1907.¹² An exhibitor whose venue might not allow projection of a full-length fight could purchase a condensation of the best rounds, or even the knockout alone. As Charles Musser points out, this opportunity for the exhibitor to choose parts of a film series and reassemble them for particular screenings functioned as the *modus operandi* for motion-picture entertainment until about 1903, when single-film, multi-shot narratives became the stock-in-trade.¹³

The *Leonard-Cushing Fight* and subsequent films matched boxing’s short units of performance with the modular production and exhibition



Figure 10. Handbill (6 by 9.5 inches, double-sided) for the first boxing pictures, the *Leonard-Cushing Fight* (1894). The Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company showed the six films in August, during the opening of its storefront in New York’s financial district. An unknown customer kept this souvenir and wrote on it: “I saw this with Laurence Miller in New York Sept 11/94”. (From the author’s collection.)

needs of cinema. But their significance is better explained by the meanings attached to prizefighting. Such images were not neutral to those who made or watched them. The general appeal of physical movement and the aptness of running times were secondary grounds for the genre’s proliferation compared to more conspicuous variables, such as the reputations of individual boxers, the promotional efforts of ring-friendly showmen, and the cultural controversies embedded in prizefighting.

Although of only minor importance compared to later boxing films, even the *Leonard-Cushing Fight* suggests how social context influenced a film’s production, exhibition, and reception. For example, why Leonard and Cushing? That the participants are named is itself significant. Early British and French producers, occasionally using boxers as subjects in a medley of *actualités*, often used generic titles: *Boxeurs* (Lumière, 1895), *Boxing Match* (Robert Paul, 1895), *Glove Contest* (Birt Acres, 1896), *Magnificent Glove*

Fight (1897), *Fight* (G. A. Smith, 1898), and *Great Glove Fight* (James Williamson, 1900). The Lathams, conversely, engaged in the marketing of filmed prizefights in which matching big-name athletes against each other increased publicity and receipts. The brothers spent considerable time creating a notable match-up for their debut. They considered pitting the undefeated Australian boxer Young Griffo against the popular George "Kid" Levigne (the pair had recently fought in New York) or the unbeaten lightweight champion Jack McAuliffe.¹⁴ When negotiations with these top-rank figures fell through, two Brooklyn lightweights were selected to enact the first bout before a motion-picture camera. Mike Leonard was a regional celebrity and a legitimate contender; Jack Cushing was an overmatched unknown.

Leonard versus Cushing, therefore, signified more of a set-up than a set-to: an opportunity for the celebrity favorite to exhibit his form while dispatching a credible fall guy. In retrospect, the extant portion of the film is notable for how little it resembles an actual contest. It appears an iconic, minimalist representation of a pugilistic scene. The gloved participants pose toe to toe in a half-sized ring. Behind them, against a black backdrop, kneel four men in white shirts holding towels. A referee stands immobile beside a bucket and stool in the right corner. This bare *mise-en-scène*, suggesting the likeness of a prize ring, shows Leonard to advantage. Cushing appears in the style of the deposed bare-knuckle champ John L. Sullivan: bare-chested, with dark, high-waisted, knee-length pants, sporting a crew cut and handlebar mustache, and displaying a slow, flat-footed boxing form. In contrast, the pompadoured Leonard (billed as "the Beau Brummel of pugilism") wears only cheeky white briefs, supported by a traditional American-flag belt.¹⁵ The limited Black Maria lighting and dark background make him the more visible figure. He is far more active and is allowed to land his punches unanswered.

Although the event was a staged presentation, confusion ensued about the nature of "this very strange and unusual fight." Newspapers described the bout in contradictory terms. Some reported a bout conducted with "real, solemn, bloody earnest" that was "satisfactory to the spectators." Yet they simultaneously acknowledged the manipulation of the contest: "The rules of the ring were remodeled to suit the kinetograph;" the boxers were "compelled to pose until the lights were adjusted;" or, as Jack Cushing was quoted as saying, "Fighting in front of a photographing machine was no fight."¹⁶

Perhaps exhibitors or sports fans were disgruntled by the false promise of "an actual six-round contest" full of "hard fighting."¹⁷ Perhaps disinterested viewers watched the brief scenes with momentary curiosity. But the

problem of distinguishing genuine contests from ones set up for the camera plagued both the early film industry and the sport of boxing. The cry of "Fake!" was heard both from ringside and screenside once boxing promoters and film companies joined hands. The equivocal reception of the Latham debut embodied the problematic nature of fight pictures.

The ambiguous nature of the fisticuffs between Leonard and Cushing also led to legal problems. Before the films had even been exhibited, a judge in Essex County, New Jersey, announced that a grand jury would investigate Edison and his associates for sponsoring an illegal act: a prizefight, or at least "something which was certainly meant to appear to be a fight to a finish."¹⁸ Following a denial of involvement by Thomas Edison himself, no legal action ensued. Nevertheless, the implications of legal scrutiny of fight film production were ominous. No state censorship resulted from the minor kinetoscope productions of Latham, Rector, and Tilden, but their subsequent exhibition as feature films in 1897 elicited some of the first legislative controls on motion pictures in the United States. This alliance with the illegal sport of prizefighting compromised cinema throughout its early history. Both exhibitors and viewers of the "living pictures of the great prize fight" between Leonard and Cushing would have recognized that they were party to an illicit venture.¹⁹ Less clear is the degree to which viewers thought themselves onlookers to a crime in progress or saw the films as fanciful recreations of a newsworthy event (much as they would have received theatrical reenactments, newspaper illustrations of crimes, or even the later filmed restagings of sensational murders or robberies).

In either case, the acceptance of the fight genre by a portion of the public and filmmakers' willingness to associate with pugilism both demonstrate that prizefighting, though illegal in most states, received a considerable degree of social acceptance. Historians of the sport have established that professional boxing at this time built a significant following even as it was suppressed.²⁰ Prizefighting was considered more like alcohol consumption or gambling than robbery or assault. Its status as sport or crime, amusement or vice, remained in flux. Like these other activities, prizefighting had its abolitionists and prohibitionists as well as its reformers, advocates, and practitioners. By choosing to film prizefighters, Edison, Latham, and subsequent producers knowingly entered this public fray.

The producers' attitude toward prizefighting was complex, one of neither straightforward advocacy nor sheer clandestine profiteering. The privileged status of Thomas Edison gave early film producers an advantage. For example, when the *New York World* noted of the Leonard-Cushing pictures that "Thomas A. Edison photographed them with his machine," the association

granted publicity and legitimacy to the films. Not only was the great inventor in attendance with “six scientific friends,” but he was also greatly caught up in the heat of the contest, “imitat[ing] every movement of the fighters.” Furthermore, the *World* reported, “Mr. Edison was well fitted to supervise a prize-fight,” having been a frequenter of contests at Harry Hill’s famous boxing establishment and thereby connected with his fellow Gilded Age hero John L. Sullivan. The *New York Journal* made light of the cultural contradiction, beginning its report on the first fight picture with the words: “Prize-fight in the interest of electrical science, Thomas A. Edison, inventor, philosopher, master of ceremonies.” At the same time, the *New York Sun*, detailing the grand jury investigation of the bout, could claim that “Wizard Edison” “did not see it, as he was up in the mountains” instead, they noted, “W. K. L. Dickson has charge” of the kinesiograph works. A Boston writer defended Edison as “a human and gentle man, who never saw a prize fight, nor would he permit one to be fought on his premises.” Thus, the films could simultaneously use the Edison brand for advantage and protect Thomas Edison’s personal reputation for integrity.²¹

The subcontracted production system used to make these fight pictures also allowed a less risky form of exploitation. While the Kinesiograph Exhibiting Company arranged to record conspicuous prizefights, the official Edison Manufacturing Company turned out a variety of subjects that allowed Edison and Dickson (and their public-relations staff) to write about the educational, scientific, and morally edifying possibilities of their pictures. This segregation deflected adverse publicity surrounding boxing pictures and simultaneously left the parent company with legal control over the films, patents, and, of course, profits.

CORBETT AND COURTNEY BEFORE THE KINESIOGRAPH

Profits were not substantial for the *Leonard-Cushing Fight*. The modest number of kinesiographs on the market and the limited fame of the two principals minimized the returns. But Latham, Rector, and Tilden negotiated further match-ups. Although business at their Manhattan kinesiograph parlor dwindled after only a few weeks, the Lathams soon secured a far more lucrative subject, featuring the world heavyweight champion, James J. Corbett. These pictures, Musser’s definitive study concludes, “generated the most income of any motion picture subject made during the kinesiograph era.”²²

Copyrighted as *Corbett and Courtney before the Kinesiograph*, the production followed the pattern of its predecessor: one-minute films of six



Figure 11. Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company letterhead, 1896. (Thomas A. Edison Papers.)

rounds of sparring, culminating in a prearranged knockout by the favorite. The Dickson-Latham crew made only minor alterations in preparation for the appearance of the champion: a slightly wider ring, a larger on-screen audience to authenticate the performance, and, judging from extant prints, better illumination of the subjects. These niceties aside, the production was virtually indistinguishable from *Leonard-Cushing*, save for the identity of the boxers.

Yet the reception of this second fight picture was remarkably different. The Leonard-Cushing films had received brief and limited attention, but *Corbett and Courtney* became the most widely seen kinetoscope attraction, its popularity continuing into 1896 and 1897. The films' near ubiquity is evident in contemporary photographs and illustrations of kinetoscope parlors and arcades.²³ Hendricks's *The Kinetoscope* concludes that *Corbett-Courtney* was "the most conspicuous motion picture to date, and it exceeded in notoriety all others for some time"; it "served to focus, as no other event had yet done, national attention on the Kinetoscope and the motion picture."²⁴

This unprecedented reception resulted from orchestrated publicity maneuvers involving newspaper, theatrical, sporting, and motion-picture interests. Some sources indicate that the filmmakers first attempted to induce the retired but extraordinarily popular John L. Sullivan to box for the camera, but there is no evidence that he had dealings with Edison or the Lathams.²⁵ Instead, they engaged Corbett, who had dethroned Sullivan in 1892. So central was he to the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company's success that the firm later had his visage engraved on its letterhead (see figure 11).

Regardless of the choice of opponent, in 1894 "Gentleman Jim" was the central attraction, a figure of rising and multifaceted celebrity. Corbett had risen quickly to the position of contender by employing a new, "scientific"

method of boxing that used quick, agile, score-and-retreat tactics to outpoint slugging and gouging bruisers. On February 18, 1890, the up-and-coming Corbett beat Sullivan's rival, Jake Kilrain, in New Orleans. On May 21, 1891, he came to national prominence by fighting a remarkable sixty-one-round draw with the storied heavyweight Peter Jackson in San Francisco. A veteran black West Indian fighter and the Australian champion, Jackson was ranked among the best of his era, but he could not get a title match because Sullivan refused to take on any nonwhite challengers.²⁶ When he "drew the color line" against Jackson, he was hardly alone in maintaining the segregationist order of the day. But others in the fight game were staging interracial bouts. (For his fellow Irish American, however, the champ consented to a joint appearance. In June, Sullivan and Corbett sparred briefly at a charitable event, wearing evening clothes with their boxing gloves.)

Corbett's performance against Jackson yielded larger opportunities. Accepting an offer from the showman (and fellow San Franciscan) William A. Brady, Corbett became a popular touring stage actor. During the theatrical season of 1891–92, he first appeared in a sparring scene from the oft-produced Boucicault melodrama *After Dark* (1868).²⁷ Brady obtained backing for a title bout against Sullivan in September 1892. The "Great John L." had himself been capitalizing on his status through theatrical appearances such as onstage sparring exhibitions and a touring melodrama, *Honest Hearts and Willing Hands*. In fact, Sullivan had not defended his title in more than three years.²⁸ When the challenger Corbett defeated the aging champion, Brady immediately placed him in *Gentleman Jack*, a loosely biographical play commissioned for the star. For three seasons, he toured as Jack Royden, a Princeton man and bank clerk who, at the behest of his sweetheart, reluctantly enters the ring and defeats a prizefighter who is in cahoots with the villain.²⁹

Unlike other professional boxers, the heavyweight titleholder seldom actually engaged in prizefights. Instead he cashed in on the belt through public appearances. For Corbett these included making speeches, sparring in theaters, syndicating press columns, accepting or dismissing challenges from contenders, publishing ghostwritten books, and giving shows—at the World's Fair, the Folies Bergère, Drury Lane, and other prominent spots throughout Europe and North America. But his principal vehicle remained his lead role as Gentleman Jack in the melodrama that reinforced his public persona. Brady later wrote that "the Sullivan fight and winning the championship was just a publicity stunt for Corbett's forthcoming play."³⁰ For both Corbett and Brady, prizefighting was as much a promotional endeavor as a sporting competition. The championship was not the end but the means to exploiting other lucrative opportunities.



Figure 12. James J. Corbett in fighting attitude and in costume for the play *A Naval Cadet* (1896). (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)

Corbett's appearance before the kinetograph constituted another such opportunity. He did not defend his title in 1893 and fought only a short bout with the British champion Charlie Mitchell in January 1894. The prospect of Corbett's taking on a new opponent therefore sparked anticipation of the film production. His presence alone guaranteed advance publicity. Speculation about the identity of his opponent only raised expectations.

The prospect of a terrific pairing, while not fulfilled by the little-known Peter Courtney, generated gossip and press releases. The Latham brothers attempted to strike a rematch between Corbett and Peter Jackson, offering \$15,000 for a contest "in a ten-foot ring before the kinetoscope." Otway's press release, written as a letter to the fighters' managers from the "Photo-Electric Exhibition Co.," suggested "this would be the best way to settle the match," because "everyone who would desire would ultimately, through the Edison invention, see the affair." Brady replied in kind. For a purse of \$25,000, he wrote, "we should be glad to have it come off under your direction before the kinetoscope, as Mr. Corbett would be delighted to have his motions and actions in the ring preserved for future generations."³¹ But Corbett's stated determination to reinforce Sullivan's "color line" precluded a confrontation with Jackson. A title fight with the top contender Robert

Fitzsimmons, who had a string of knockout victories, was deemed more probable.

The Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company made concerted efforts to land a Corbett-Fitzsimmons bout but failed to clinch a deal (though Enoch Rector would film the match in 1897). Disappointed at Corbett's unwillingness to share the spotlight with "Fitz," the Lathams substituted Courtney, a New Jersey heavyweight selected because he was said to have "stood up against" Fitzsimmons earlier that year.³²

Production of the Corbett-Courtney films again brought promotional opportunities not afforded other motion pictures. The meeting was staged on September 7, the second anniversary of Corbett's victory over Sullivan.³³ Thomas Edison put in a rare personal appearance at the Black Maria to greet the champion and his entourage, who were performing *Gentleman Jack* in Manhattan that week. And of course both the Corbett and Edison organizations encouraged press coverage. The following day many New York and New Jersey newspapers published accounts and illustrations of both the moving-picture apparatus and the boxers' performance.

What is striking about these reports is their consistent, almost conspiratorial, misrepresentation of the match as a real fight. Journalists offered colorful descriptions that supported the Edison company's attempt to sell "an actual contest," even though the sparring was prearranged and tame.³⁴ Surviving portions of the film show a smiling and laughing Corbett playfully slapping away Courtney's exaggerated swats. Although this improvised performance belies Brady's claim that "careful rehearsal" was done, it also illustrates his contention that Corbett, Courtney, and the filmmakers were complicit in "staging this phony battle."³⁵ As in *Leonard-Cushing*, mismatched contestants and an optimally timed knockout further signify an obvious setup. But those reading about the curious Black Maria bout were told instead of a "genuine fight" and presented with illustrations titled "The Champion Cleverly Defeat[ing] Peter Courtney."³⁶ The Corbett knockout even entered some ring record books. Later boxing histories and Edison biographies perpetuate the story with so much embellishment that Hendricks complains there is "more error recorded concerning this subject than any other."³⁷

The point of recounting these muddled chronicles is not to set some record straight, but to illustrate the polysemic nature of the reception of early motion pictures. Issues of representation and realism, recording and re-creating, fact and facsimile were inchoate in early film exhibition. Were these photographic documents from Edison the Man of Science, or lifelike reproductions (illusions? tricks?) created by the Wizard of Menlo Park? The

answer was both. As Tom Gunning expresses it, the later "Manichean division" between fact and fiction was not part of "the horizon of expectations in which films originally appeared. . . . The reception of the cinematic image" in 1894 readily fused *actualité* and fantasy, spectacles of popular science and magic.³⁸

This double perception coalesced in the Corbett films. Press accounts willfully created one colorful version of the event that conditioned public reception of the pictures themselves. Responses to the filmed bout were further complicated by boxing's tradition of ambiguous performance: even ring habitués could not always distinguish an honest prizefight from a bogus one. Finally, the *mise-en-scène* before the kinetograph paled in comparison to the stagecraft that concluded *Gentleman Jack*. Reviewers of the play remarked on the highly realistic reconstruction of the New Orleans Olympic Club, site of Corbett's 1892 victory over Sullivan. The climactic set piece proved an audience favorite, prompting Brady to enhance it with "a twenty-four-foot ring in the center of the stage, a referee, timekeeper, seconds, and bottle holders," plus three hundred extras cheering the champion's boxing prowess.³⁹ The Black Maria films restaged that restaging (casting Brady as timekeeper), but in much less detail. The Corbett-Courtney production was the cinematic twin of the *Leonard-Cushing Fight*, save for the vastly greater celebrity of its lead performer.

These layers of meaning and perception explain why the pictures were not denounced as fakes. Without expectations that a Corbett appearance had to be an earnest fight to the finish or presumptions that moving pictures needed to be "genuine," audiences could encounter *Corbett and Courtney before the Kinetograph* on several levels: as fans of an idol, partisans of boxing, curiosity seekers drawn by the novel technology, or gossips intrigued by publicity over the event. Unconfined by a fixed form of presentation, the films developed broad appeal beyond a select sporting constituency.

The outcome of another legal controversy supplied further evidence that the multifaceted nature of the filmed bout worked to its advantage. The day Corbett's activities were reported in the press, a judge ordered a second grand-jury investigation of Edison's alleged prizefight scheme. Although both Edison and Dickson had been accurately identified as producers of the affair, their subpoenas were waved away by a bald-faced public denial from Edison (with help, no doubt, from his formidable legal staff). Attempts to indict the boxers and spectators also failed.⁴⁰ To an even greater degree than in the Leonard-Cushing case, the hint of scandal attracted the public to the Corbett films, while the certainty of exoneration prevented any setbacks for the producers.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE CORBETT-COURTNEY FIGHT
PICTURE

The coup of an exclusive contract with the heavyweight champion, especially when validated by the financial success of *Corbett-Courtney*, prompted two changes at Edison Manufacturing: a further subdivision of production interests between the competing parties of the Kinetoscope Co. (Raff & Gammon), the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Co. (Latham, Rector, and Tilden), and the Continental Commerce Co. (Maguire & Baucus); and an increase in the production of boxing pictures.

The first change altered the traditional characterization of Edison, Inc., as a monolithic industrial giant. Rather than a single firm pursuing one line of production, in September 1894 the company became a manufacturing corporation whose creative work was subcontracted to other parties. While Dickson supervised activities in the Kinetographic Theatre and produced subjects directly for the Edison Manufacturing Company, he also facilitated productions by licensees. "Edison films" included subjects that originated not only with Dickson but also with Raff & Gammon, the Latham outfit, and Maguire & Baucus (agents for the kinetoscope abroad). Although the parent corporation profited, the smaller outfits considered themselves competitors. Each bore its own production costs, including the hiring of talent. Each urged Edison to pursue policies that would be to its own advantage.

One result of this competition was the immediate increase in boxing-film production that followed the *Corbett-Courtney* triumph. Although the Lathams had been granted use of equipment solely for the recording of prizefights, Raff & Gammon also began shooting fight pictures when their contract took effect in September 1894. With a schedule far more active and varied than the Lathams', Raff & Gammon recorded both conventional and burlesque boxing subjects, along with a variety of vaudeville acts. The first performers to follow Corbett's turn in the *Black Maria* were the Glenroy Brothers, comic boxers who appeared four times for the Kinetoscope Company. *Walton and Slavin*, a short-and-tall duo from Broadway, followed in October, days after *Hornbacker and Murphy, Five Round Glove Contest to a Finish* (see figure 13), for which actual prizefighters were hired. These early films remained restricted to rounds of twenty seconds, as the Kinetoscope Company still sold fifty-foot film loops for the original Edison machine, rather than film for the Lathams' expanded model. Raff & Gammon never landed ring celebrities to compete with Latham, either. In its final months, struggling to sell Edison's vitascope projectors, the firm was still making its own fight pictures. But *Boxing Contest between Tommy White and Solly Smith* (1896), with its



Figure 13. Edison's *Hornbacker and Murphy, Five Round Glove Contest to a Finish* (August 1894), featured little-known professional pugilists in five abbreviated rounds. The letter R at lower left brands it as a Raff & Gammon production. Only one round was known to survive until an additional one was discovered in England in 2005. These three nonconsecutive frames are taken from that print. (University of Sheffield National Fairground Archive.)

featherweights, remained obscure, and the return of Mike Leonard to the Black Maria for *Bag Punching* (October 1896) was lost in the mix of variety.⁴¹

Adding to the competition between Edison's main franchisees, other producers of motion pictures entered the market from 1894 through 1896. They too offered boxing scenes among their first efforts. In the United States, these included Maguire & Baucus, the inventor Charles E. Chinnock, and the American Mutoscope Company.

Maguire & Baucus produced films to supplement the prints they purchased from Raff & Gammon and the Latham firm.⁴² The operators branded the Black Maria film *Billy Edwards Boxing* as their own by placing a placard with their "MB" logo in the foreground.⁴³ They planned fight pictures on a larger scale to compete with the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Co. Ramsay's 1926

account mentions that in September 1894, Maguire & Baucus attempted to sign a contract with Raff & Gammon in which "one Hugh Behan was employed at a contingent \$3,000 a year to frame a fight between 'such first class fighters as Corbett, Jackson, Fitzsimmons, M'Auliffe, Griffo, Dixon, or Maher, and a suitable opponent.'" Ramsaye ends by saying merely, "The project produced no picture fights and was soon forgotten"—although not by Behan, who managed the popular Young Griffo when the boxer appeared in a Latham film, one of the first publicly projected motion pictures, in May 1895.⁴⁴

Charles Chinnock, a former vice president of the Edison United Manufacturing Company, offered early competition to Edison by building and selling a kinoscope-like viewing machine of his own design. He filmed several subjects between November 1894 and August 1895 and sold them to supply his machines, which circulated in saloons, hotels, and amusement centers from New York to Philadelphia (at such venues as Coney Island, Huber's Museum, and the Eden Musée) and in England and France. Chinnock's first pictures recorded a boxing match between his nephew Robert T. Moore and James W. Lahey. A production schedule began in January 1895 with a second fight (between a man identified only as "McDermott" and an unnamed opponent) and other films imitative of Black Maria subjects (such as a cockfight and female dancers).⁴⁵

A more lasting Edison competitor, American Mutoscope, also found boxing a suitable subject for its first test pictures.⁴⁶ Ramsaye's *A Million and One Nights* and Hendricks's *Beginnings of the Biograph* agree that the venture originated with a letter written by Dickson to Harry N. Marvin concerning "the possibility of some small simple device which could be made to show cheaply the final punch and knockout of a prize fight."⁴⁷ This flip-card peep show, dubbed the mutoscope, was placed on the market in 1897, but boxing and other subjects were being recorded by the biograph camera in 1895 and 1896. In Syracuse, New York, during June 1895, the company first tested its technology by photographing the cofounders, Herman Casler and Harry Marvin, sparring against a white backdrop.⁴⁸ That their initial impulse in front of a moving-picture camera was to stage a fisticuff caricature underscores the strength of the association between boxing and the year-old medium. Another reason for the choice, however, was probably that Dickson, the photographer of the Black Maria fighters, had left Edison's employ to become a founding partner in the company.

On August 5, when the camera was tested more extensively at the company's workshop in Canastota, New York, Dickson acted as cinematographer, filming two local "experts" in a sparring exhibition. The local paper identified the participants as "Prof. Al. Leonard and his pupil Bert Hosley,"

who “went at each other” for “more than one minute.”⁴⁹ Although American Mutoscope moved on to a variety of other genres, the company continued to incorporate fight pictures into its schedule, even recording the heavyweight title bout in 1899. The first four subjects listed for sale in the 1903 American Mutoscope and Biograph catalog were sparring contests.⁵⁰

As more makes of cameras and projectors became available throughout 1896, other entrepreneurs contributed to the welter of fight pictures in both Europe and America. In Germany, the Skladanowsky Bioskop’s earliest projected shows (of November 1895) included a film of a man sparring with a boxing kangaroo. In England, where the sport had long been popular, some motion-picture pioneers engaged active British pugilists. Birt Acres shot *A Prize Fight by Jem Mace and Burke*, and Robert Paul made *Boxing Match between Toff Wall and Dido Plum*. In the United States, even local productions began to appear. In Pittsburgh, the theater owner Harry Davis filmed *Maher-Choynski Glove Contest*. In New Orleans, a now-unknown filmmaker made *Prize Fight by Skelly and Murphy* for local exhibition.⁵¹

Of course, even after big-screen projection became dominant, a peep-show market endured. The machines remained so closely associated with boxing iconography that American Mutoscope could offer its own meta-movie in 1899. *The Automatic Prize Fight* showed two boys who “rig up a fake” mutoscope and induce an old farmer to take a peek at what he supposes to be a fight picture, only to be the recipient of a real punch in the face.⁵²

FRAMING REAL FIGHTS IN THE AGE OF PROJECTED FILM

Although the Latham, Rector, and Tilden enterprise manufactured only two sets of films in 1894, the more productive Kinetoscope Co. and Maguire & Baucus failed to outmaneuver them for future big fights. Through Rector and the Latham brothers, the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Co. maintained influential ties to sporting circles that businessmen like Raff and the Wall Street lawyers Maguire and Baucus lacked. The Lathams’ ability to recruit recognizable talent was sufficient for Edison to continue favoring their contract, even when it meant waiting months for a single film.

Immediately following Corbett’s film debut, the Lathams began negotiating for a fight picture that would surpass *Corbett-Courtney* in length, authenticity, and marketability. The optimal scenario would be an on-location recording of a championship fight between Corbett and Fitzsimmons. The pair’s public feuding led to the signing of a grudge-match agreement in October. Hoping to capture the event on film, the Lathams pushed Rector and

the Edison engineers to expand the capacity of their camera—at least to the limits of the three-minute rounds of genuine prizefights.

By November 1894 the technology had progressed sufficiently for Gray Latham to intervene in plans to hold the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight in Jacksonville, Florida. The theatrical and sporting journal the *New York Clipper*, which became a national vehicle for early motion-picture advertisements, published Latham's "startling proposition":

[Since the fight will likely not be allowed in Florida] we propose to make you an offer, which will certainly demand consideration. This offer would have been made at the time the several clubs were bidding for the championship contest, but for the fact that . . . the experiments at three minute subjects with the kinetograph had not proved entirely successful. Now, however, we shall not only be able to take each three minute round of the fight, but also the action of the seconds, etc., during the one minute rest between rounds. . . .

Our offer is a plain one. The fight must be held in the morning, and, in case the date selected should prove a cloudy day, we will ask for a postponement until a clear day comes round. . . . We want the fight before November 1, 1895, and will give \$50,000 for it. . . . We are enabled to offer this amount of money without depending upon the gate receipts, because, while a good many tickets will be sold, that is an entirely after consideration with us.

Both principals replied that, should the Florida Athletic Club deal fall through, the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company "would have as good an opportunity to secure the fight as any other organization."⁵³ The Corbett-Fitzsimmons duel eventually materialized in grand fashion, but not until 1897. By then, significant changes in the motion pictures had occurred, and amid the shifting powers, the Latham interests failed. However, their partner, Rector, survived to become the principal broker of the next two major fight-picture productions.

Relations between the Lathams, their partners, and their competitors were changing by the end of 1894. With the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight on hold, Woodville Latham pursued technological challenges rather than film production. Like inventors elsewhere, he realized that Edison was not expediting research in a projection system that could displace the kinetoscope. In order to develop a projector technology, which would place his firm in competition against Edison, the Lathams diversified their interests. Retaining the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Company subcontract, they incorporated the Lambda Company for the purposes of inventing and exploiting a motion-picture projector.

The Latham-Lambda project set up shop in Manhattan. Having established a working relationship with Edison Manufacturing employees during the development of the “prizefight kinetoscope,” Woodville Latham induced the technician Eugene Lauste to join his staff. Together they developed the simple “Latham loop,” which enabled projectors and cameras to handle longer films. (The loop became essential in nearly all motion-picture mechanisms, although Latham failed to patent it until 1902.) Further expertise came occasionally from Dickson, who was loosening his ties with Edison before joining American Mutoscope in the spring of 1895. By that time, the Lambda team had completed work on its “pantoptikon,” a wide-film-format camera and projector, which they demonstrated to the press on April 21.⁵⁴

Again the inventors of a new film technology first promoted their product with a film of a short boxing bout. And again the Latham connections succeeded in enlisting a well-known professional to appear in it. Young Griffo, the popular Australian who had nearly posed for the first set of Latham pictures, performed for the new camera in early May. The performance, however, differed from the ones that had gone before. Leonard and Cushing, Corbett and Courtney, and the other pugilists had merely sparred for the kinetograph. Griffo and his opponent, “Battling” [Charlie] Barnett, replayed a match they had just fought (on May 4) in Madison Square Garden.⁵⁵ Shortly after their bout, an abbreviated version took place under the supervision of Latham, Lauste, and (perhaps) Dickson on the Garden roof.⁵⁶ The film offered topicality that previous productions had not. If such reenactments could be marketed quickly, their commercial value could exceed that of unofficial match-ups created solely for the movies. *Young Griffo—Battling Barnett* may have benefited from public knowledge of the Madison Square Garden fight, but it was a minor event. However, as film and boxing became big businesses over the next decade, filmed “reproductions” of famous fights became standard fare.

Although Thomas Edison already had been quoted denouncing the Lathams’ projection efforts as a legal infringement on his kinetoscope,⁵⁷ the firm rushed *Griffo-Barnett* to market in New York. On May 20, 1895, the pantoptikon, renamed the “eidoloscope,” debuted in a Broadway store front, showing the prizefight film to the world’s first commercial viewers of a projected moving picture.⁵⁸ The projection of longer films had been accomplished by the addition of the simple Latham loop, although the running time was still only about four minutes. The wide-screen image offered a full view of the ring and, judging from press descriptions, an entire three-minute round of boxing with preliminary and concluding action to frame

the event.⁵⁹ (The Corbett rounds, by contrast, ended in medias res when film ran out.) The machine functioned imperfectly at times, yet public response was reportedly good: Lauste ran the Griffio film in a tent show on Coney Island's Surf Avenue throughout the summer of 1895, encouraging the production of several other subjects on the rooftop film stage, including a scene of the professional wrestlers Ross and Roeber.⁶⁰ The early exhibitor George K. Spoor also recollected the machine's success, reporting that the operator Gilbert P. Hamilton ran one of Chicago's first projected movie shows in the summer of 1896. According to Spoor, Hamilton ran "a prize fight or a boxing contest, about one hundred feet in length" on an eidoloscope located in an old church. Its reception was favorable enough for managers at the Schiller theater to engage the pictures as entr'acte material for a stage production of *Robinson Crusoe*.⁶¹

Further alienating and upstaging Edison, the Lathams' Eidoloscope Company sold territorial rights to its projector and supplied subjects to shows across the United States in 1895 and 1896. Film historians have documented the circulation of Eidoloscope exhibitions: from New York City and Coney Island to a Chicago variety theater and dime museum (August–September 1895); to the Cotton States Exposition, Atlanta, and a stop in Indiana (September–October); Virginia screenings by a third Latham brother; Keith's Bijou in Philadelphia (December); Rochester's Wonderland (January 1896); a Syracuse storefront (March); a successful Manhattan reappearance at Hammerstein's Olympia and the St. James Hotel (May); a long run in the Detroit Opera House, followed by a summer park show (May–June); and in a Boston theater (June). The projector did service in a touring production of *Carmen* (November–December 1896), showing a ten-minute film of a bullfight that Lauste and Gray Latham had shot in Mexico.⁶² Distribution was wide, but not strong enough to mount a threat to Edison's business. Even if the machine's technical performance had been better, without the resources to manufacture more machines and films, or the reputation to sell them, the Lathams' influence on a national entertainment market remained limited. The eidoloscope offered poor competition to Edison's vitascope (introduced in April 1896) and other superior projection machines. The Latham projector dwindled from sight early the following year. By 1898, the Eidoloscope Company was in receivership, having been taken over by a partner in the Vitascope Company of New Jersey.⁶³

Despite having challenged Edison directly, the Lathams were able to retain ties to his company because of the financial prospects of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons bout. Although they had angered their powerful partner by using his own employees to build their projector, Rector "maintained

diplomatic relations" with Edison.⁶⁴ The Kinetoscope Exhibiting Co., which Rector directed after the Latham split, still held its exclusive contract with Corbett. The proposed ringside films looked increasingly lucrative as anticipation for the bout mounted. With Rector pressing this advantage as reason to overlook the Latham misdealings, in September 1895 Edison specially built "four prize fight machines" (with an elaborate battery system) that would allow for location filming.

With its prizefight contract, the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Co. was allowed to remain in business despite the fact that it had produced only two sets of pictures and that its original contractors had attempted to undermine Edison. The Lathams' original rivals, Raff & Gammon, attempted to exploit this tension when their kinetoscope sales continued to wane. The public increasingly anticipated large-screen exhibitions, and the closest thing to a bona fide hit, *Corbett and Courtney before the Kinetograph*, was denied to the Kinetoscope Co. by the Lathams.

In an effort to bolster business, Raff & Gammon wrote to Thomas Edison on August 19, 1895 with an obsequious appeal for Edison to rescind his arrangements with "the Latham people" and grant the Corbett-Fitzsimmons picture rights to them, "the men who are really pushing the business of Kinetoscope sales." Airing their resentment of the competition's success with fight pictures, Raff & Gammon itemized their grievances: the Corbett-Courtney fight and the machines made for it violated the "exclusive" Kinetoscope Company contract; the Lathams had "sacrificed" Edison for their own gain by bringing out a "Screen Machine," "an imitation Kinetoscope," and original films; and, most reprehensibly, the letter alleged, the Latham people had attempted to go behind Edison's back by asking "the biggest amusement firm in America (viz: Jefferson, Klaw and Erlanger)," to capitalize the Eidoloscope Company.⁶⁵ The last item is especially telling, indicating the type of collusion and tendency to monopoly that characterized both the sporting and theatrical sectors (and indeed most American industry) in this era of trusts. In 1895, Klaw and Erlanger, a leading theatrical booking agency, arranged a "secret meeting" with other impresarios that gave rise to the Theatrical Syndicate, a cartel monopolizing playhouse bookings across the United States.⁶⁶ The syndicate (which included the star actor Joseph Jefferson) considered incorporating motion pictures into their road companies, and the Lathams aspired to become part of that monopoly rather than Edison's. However, Raff & Gammon convinced "Jefferson, Klaw and Erlanger" to consider Edison technologies instead. By informing on the Lathams, Raff believed he had demonstrated loyalty that Edison should reward with a prizefight contract.⁶⁷

Latham participation, however, had become moot. With Eidoloscope pursuing its independent goals, Enoch Rector (with Samuel Tilden's financial backing) now controlled the Kinetoscope Exhibiting Co. He dealt directly with both the film and prizefight interests. Rector eventually proved willing to negotiate exhibition plans with Raff & Gammon, but their firm proved to be of too little consequence. Raff & Gammon expedited Edison's entrance into the projection business by investing in the C. Francis Jenkins-Thomas Armat system, which Edison successfully marketed as the vitascope. Their own Vitascope Company failed even more quickly than their Kinetoscope Company. Edison developed a different project of his own and promoted it over the vitascope, forcing Raff & Gammon out of the film business altogether by the end of 1896.⁶⁸ On the strength of a single fight-picture guarantee, however, Rector preserved a strategic position in the sporting and theatrical business. The lasting power of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight pictures proved worth the wait.

The role of prizefight and boxing subjects in the history of cinema's kine-scope and early projection period was significant for several reasons, not all of them considered by earlier historians. Although Ramsaye and Hendricks correctly devote more than passing attention to the phenomenon, their interpretations of the significance of fight films should not be overemphasized. Ramsaye's essentialist notion of pugilism and the "destiny for the motion picture" should be anathema to any historian, though his specific references to events and individuals have proved useful. Hendricks's monographs emphasize mechanical accomplishments. Still, both authors demonstrate conclusively that the brief, contained, recognizable, kinetic action of a round of boxing was well suited to the technical limitations of the first motion pictures.

The prevalence of fight pictures in the earliest cinema has other significant implications. The conspicuous nature of prizefight films (derived from their length, the reputations of the participants, and their cultural status)—or perhaps even the *Corbett-Courtney* pictures alone—caused early producers and audiences to associate film presentation with boxing. Pursuit of profit was an obvious motivation as well.

Further telling evidence of the significance of fight films comes by way of contrast with the concurrent Lumière *cinématographe* productions. Among the Lumière subjects of the 1890s, numbering more than one thousand, only one, *Pedlar Palmer v. Donovan*, shot in England, was a fight picture; two were fistic burlesques done by clowns.⁶⁹ In 1896, Charles Webster, a Raff & Gammon agent scouting *cinématographe* presentations in London,

wrote to his employers (who had become desperate in their attempt to acquire fight films) that the Lumière pictures "are all local and cost a mere nothing in comparison to ours. They have no colors, prize fights or dancers, yet are received with cheers nightly for the past two month."⁷⁰

Webster's surprise at finding a successful film show without a prizefight attraction underscores the common association between cinema and boxing. It might seem appropriate to conclude that this was in part a national or cultural bias: American firms sought boxing events, and Europeans succeeded well without them. However, even Lumière's own posters advertised boxing alongside its signature images of *actualité* (such as train stations) and the famous gag from *L'arroseur arrose* (1895).⁷¹ Illustrations of the *Projektionsgerät* developed by the German manufacturer Oskar Messter depict the machine casting an image of two fighters on a screen.⁷² Cinema regularly evoked the image of prizefighters. Many contemporary characterizations of moving pictures accorded with Henry Tyrell's 1896 description in *The Illustrated America*, noting that typical exhibitions consisted of "street scenes, railway-trains in motion, boxing-bouts, bull-fights and military eventualities."⁷³

The affiliation between boxing and moving pictures was not, however, merely the result of filmmakers deciding to record boxers because they were simple to frame. When historicizing nineteenth-century cinema, it is a fallacy to think of the film industry, boxing world, and theatrical business as autonomous entities. In the 1890s, they inhabited a common sociological world, where men (almost always) involved in all manner of amusement, entertainment, promotion, and popular presentation operated within and saw themselves as part of a shared endeavor. The cinema of the 1890s presented itself to fellow professionals not in film trade papers but in places such as the *New York Clipper*, which billed itself as "the oldest American theatrical and sporting journal." There the theater, circus, vaudeville, music, drama, minstrelsy, sports, games, magic, dance, mechanical amusements, novelties, and moving pictures, all commingled. The editor Frank Queen made the *Clipper* the leading advocate of professional boxing in the pre-Sullivan era. His efforts were surpassed by Richard K. Fox, the audacious Irish sporting man who in 1876 bought the failing *National Police Gazette* and turned it into a mass-circulation "sporting and theatrical" tabloid that hyped prizefights to excess. It was in the *Gazette* that Americans read the richest and most widely circulated account of the Corbett-Courtney fight. Each issue included pinup posters of two sorts—prizefighters and theater soubrettes.⁷⁴

The men making and showing fight pictures saw themselves as part of this theatrical and sporting syndicate. Jim Corbett was not merely a professional

boxer but also a stage idol, picture personality, lecturer, fight promoter, columnist, and raconteur. The title of his autobiography, *The Roar of the Crowd*, connotes these diverse roles. William Brady moved easily from the roles of fight manager and promoter to those of actor, agent, theater owner, Hale's Tours operator, and, later, Hollywood producer (he was the founder of World Pictures and the first president of the National Assembly of the Motion Picture Industry, from 1915 to 1920). The titles of his two autobiographies, *Showman* and *The Fighting Man*, are also indicative. Brady was no doubt the main inspiration for the theater historian Albert McCleery's characterization of turn-of-the-century show impresarios. They were "dignified gentlemen, those producers, astute and elderly, with derby hats, silky black moustaches, fur coats and large diamonds in rings on their fat fingers and in pins in their cravats. Some of them had been prize fight promoters."⁷⁵ Finally, Terry Ramsaye draws a similar portrait of the Latham brothers as Broadway gallants with interests in all aspects of the show and sporting world.

In New York, the de facto national headquarters of boxing, the men who created fight pictures shared a common social milieu. Its center was Harry Hill's concert saloon, a Lower East Side establishment that was Gotham's most popular men's entertainment venue between 1870 and 1895. Boxing was showcased along with variety shows, accompanied by dining, drinking, dancing, and sexual assignations. Harry Hill was himself a former boxer and a matchmaker. As Timothy J. Gilfoyle and others have chronicled, John L. Sullivan made his New York ring debut there. P. T. Barnum was Hill's landlord. Richard Fox and Frank Queen made fight deals in the club. Thomas Edison, a regular client, made it one of the first public buildings to have electric light. Fighters, promoters, backers, gamblers, politicians, editors, writers, and fans all passed through Hill's and similar establishments.⁷⁶

In 1896, a new institution emerged that changed the ring business in New York. From 1896 to 1900, state law permitted boxing matches, but only in regulated, incorporated clubs. Hence, as commercial cinema was being born, those who wanted to profit from fight pictures had to deal with the peculiarities of these policed and politicized venues. The athletic club became a place to see professional fights, rather than a space for amateurs to play and exercise. Men could pay to become members of the club on fight night. The recording of prizefights and star boxers was subject to delicate negotiations among interested parties, local power brokers, and the police. In New York, this most often meant dealing with Democratic loyalists, whose party had authored the 1896 legislation.⁷⁷ It no doubt helped the Lathams that the financial backer of their Kinetoscope Exhibiting Co. was party stalwart

Samuel J. Tilden. His namesake uncle, a Democratic governor of New York, had won the nationwide popular vote for the presidency of the United States in 1876.

The connection between motion pictures and prizefights, then, was not merely technical or incidental. The social network of self-described sporting and theatrical professionals made the link a consistent and rationalized one. Specific practitioners and promoters forged the affiliation between boxing and cinema, relying on the two practices to publicize each other. This they did, with mixed results, for the next two decades.