The Long Count: Projection, Duration, and Evidence in *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight*

The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight (1897) was filmed and exhibited on the claim that it could settle a disputed result. In the sixth round in Nevada, James J. Corbett's knocking down of Bob Fitzsimmons, and Fitzsimmons' subsequent recovery, was contested by Corbett's camp. They maintained that Fitzsimmons had stayed down past the ten seconds allowed, accusing the referee of allowing him a 'long count.' At the Academy of Music in New York, the Veriscope screened this fight with William A. Brady, Corbett's manager, cranking the projector. In his memoir *Showman* (1937), Brady admits to slowing the projector so the referee's nine-second count ran thirteen on screen. Subsequently, William Muldoon, the official timekeeper of the fight, was in the audience and objected, shouting, "Brady, you're a liar!" (Streible 2008, 75-77). The film, screened 2,700 miles from where the fight was held, was presented as a mechanical record superior to ring officials' presumed human error. At the Academy of Music, however, the length of the count depended entirely on the speed at which the projector was cranked. Therein, the screening produced a second count rather than settling the dispute at hand, bypassing objective verification.

The incident at the Academy of Music puts tension on a central claim in theories of early cinematic time. In *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane holds that "while photography could fix a moment, the cinema made archivable duration itself" (Doane 2002, 22). For Doane, then, the indexicality of the film image guarantees its status as a record of "pure time or duration which would not be that of its own functioning" (23). While Doane cites "the choice of a standard speed in projection" as having "epistemological underpinnings" (21), she omits a crucial detail, that projection speed was standardized at twenty-four frames per second only in

November 1926 with sound (Brownlow 1980, 167). Before then, each projection's speed was set by the operator at each individual screening.

This paper challenges Doane's account and contends that *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* stored the order of the fight and the intervals of time between its frames, but not the rate that converts those frames back into units of time. Put simply, it did not archive the duration of the fight. While the film's authority as indexical evidence came from the camera, its duration came from the projector at each individual screening. In effect, then, archivable duration was not a property of film in 1897. Rather, it was retrospectively put back onto early cinema after its later standardisation with the cinema becoming an institution.

Analyzing the Academy screening requires incorporating the projector and the person operating it into the *dispositif*. Specifically, Frank Kessler's conception of the *dispositif* proposes using the term "in an analytical perspective rather than as a normative category," asking not whether a media configuration constitutes a *dispositif* but "what happens when we study it as a *dispositif*" (Kessler 2018, 55). Kessler divides the concept into three distinct poles: the techno-pragmatic pole, comprising the media technology and the ends to which it is used (55); the textual pole, extending to performance, since "the 'text' of a projection…may go far beyond the images projected onto the screen" (56); and the user-spectator pole, the position assigned to the spectator and their viewing position within the communication process (56).

Each pole of the cinematic *dispositif* can be determined for the Veriscope in particular. The technology consisted of a camera and a hand-cranked projector, and its declared end for the purposes of *The Fight* was to settle a dispute. The text of each screening included a lecturer, a bell standing in for the gong, and the speed at which the image ran *viz*. the hand-crank (Streible 2008, 79-81). Furthermore, the spectator, positioned as a juror, was invited to examine the

evidence and judge the true status of the count, thereby settling the dispute. Kessler, in addition to considering lecturers and live music as part of the projected text, would concur with the argument that perhaps in 1897, before a standardised projection speed, the text also included its own speed.

Charles Musser's history of early exhibition can explain the reasons as to why speed belonged to the screening and not the film text itself. Before 1903, he illustrated, editing and programming were "under the control of individual exhibitors, not the production companies," who were "simultaneously acting as programmers and editors" (Musser 2024, 18-19). Granted, Musser does not explicitly clarify an account of projection speed but his account of exhibitors places the final decision about a film in their control. At the Academy of Music screening, Brady was the exhibitor exercising that control over *time*.

The heavyweight title bout between Corbett and Fitzsimmons was held in Carson City on March 17, 1897. Promoter Dan Stuart and inventor Enoch Rector formed the Veriscope Company to film the event, arranging the fight for three simultaneous cameras on large-format film (Streible 2008, 52-60). Premiering at New York's Academy of Music on May 22, 1897, before touring with a live lecturer, the film was commercially positioned as mechanical evidence to resolve the disputed length of the sixth-round count.

Capitalising on this, the Veriscope was promoted on the principle that "the apparatus can't lie" (74-75). Moreover, since the fight's outcome was already known via telegraph, the film offered the opportunity of re-examination to audiences that were already aware of the result (80). In Streible's words, "for the first time, a full photographic replay could examine such questions" (73). The audience, then, came to the theatre as a jury to deliberate over past events. Re-examination, then, was the spectacle audiences paid for but instead got an obscured one. The

time a knockdown took was an element the exhibitor controlled, and so the spectacle of evidence in each theatre was operated by individual will.

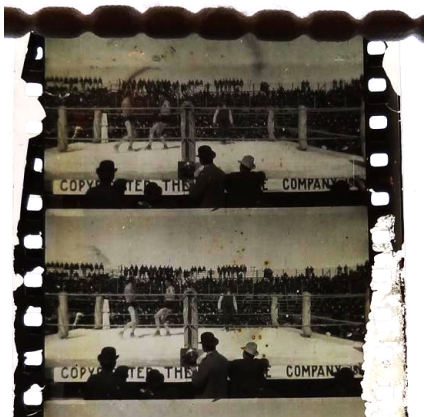
Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's account of mechanical objectivity describes a nineteenth-century scientific ideal founded on "freedom from will" (Daston and Galison 1992, 83), in which the authority of an image rested on "nonintervention, not verisimilitude" (120). The camera's value as a witness to an event lay, and was perceived as such, in the absence of a human hand at the moment of capture. Their account, however, stops at camera inscription, explaining why capture was trusted while neglecting how the projector reintroduced human will into the image.

The cameras set up by Stuart and Rector recorded the fight as a sequence of frames, moving forward in a chronological order. The negative, in effect, contained an order of events and the proportions between them, in that each frame followed the one before, and the count in the sixth round occupied a fixed number of frames. However, the record of the rate at which those frames had been exposed by the cameras was not recorded, and so the film could not, on its own, return them to units of time i.e. seconds. That conversion required a second value that was to be supplied at the screening, but, as illustrated, that standard had no basis yet. The trade press, as late as 1908, reported that there "was no hard and fast rule" for projection speed (*Moving Picture World* 1908, quoted in Brownlow 1980, 165). Moreover, the Veriscope's own promotion shows this discrepancy in Stuart's "statistics on projection speed and the physical length of the film" (Streible 2008, 77), publishing the speed as a specification while every operator set it by hand at variable rates. In Doane's account, this gap is left unaddressed. While the index guaranteed the order of the frames, it did not exhibit "pure time" in that the duration on screen was that of the projector's functioning.

Although written forty years later, Brady's memoir need not be fully accurate for the purposes of this argument. What matters more, I claim, is the period-verified possibility of manipulation (75). Reviewers at the time already noted that "what the Veriscope disclosed was open to question" (75), and Stuart's published speed statistics imply that speed was considered a variable worth fixing. Moreover, Streible interprets Brady's manipulation as an instance of his showmanship (75-77), but this claim neglects noting what the episode reveals about the medium. Brady, in effect, did not cheat duration by slowing down the crank since there was no 'true' duration to cheat. He used a freedom that every screening gave to every operator at the time, and he used it for self-interest, in the direction of his stake in his own fighter.

Muldoon's vocal objection shows a similar operation on part of the audience. Kessler notes that a spectator may refuse the position a *dispositif* assigns to them, "but then the communication process will fail" (Kessler 2018, 56). Essentially, Muldoon refused his assignment as juror and thus fracturing the communication by Brady by virtue of his own watch that he had held in the ring. The screening thus became a site of debate between two adjudicators, each with separate, individuated standards for timekeeping. Moreover, the clock that could truly calculate the time of the knockdown was an external device not present within the film.

Laboratory science faced a similar problem but solved it in the opposite way. Lisa Cartwright describes physiologist Charles-Émile François-Franck's 1904 experiment, where he placed a chronometer in-frame alongside a dog's leg reflex when struck with a hammer (Cartwright 1992, 147-48). The film served as its own "temporal gauge," in that by embedding a clock into the image, François-Franck ensured that regardless of projection speed, actual



duration was recorded within the frame. François-Franck, in not trusting the film strip to carry time and duration on its own, employed the chronometer in the frame to record the true passage of time.

For *The Fight*, the Veriscope had no such in-frame clock. Its timekeeping was and had always stayed outside the film: in the gong, in Muldoon's watch, and finally in Brady's crank. In Kessler's terms, two operate as different *dispositifs*, while staying with the same technology, with different ends. In François-Franck's case, the camera was being used to measure, and so time was secured within the record. The fight film, however, used the camera to show an order of events, and so the time within the frame was left to be decided at each screening. The surviving fragment of the film shows the strip as it reached the projector, as a sequence of frames, each showing a fixed instant in the fight (see Figure 1). The strip, in carrying just the order, does not and cannot record the rate at which they reliably should and did pass. Furthermore, François-Franck's experiments were filmed seven years after the fight at Carson City, showing that early cinema's capacity to record duration had to be built, initially, into the image on purpose. The Veriscope's claim to selling the film as proof of passage of time and a record of duration did not hold.

An objection remains: Doane does not claim that film literally stores time, only that it appears to. On the page following her central claim, she illustrates that the cinematic archive exists "nowhere but in its screening for a spectator in the present," and that once the present has been stored, it "ineluctably becomes the past" (Doane 2002, 23). Her account, however, treats the screening as the site of presence and not as the site of rate of change i.e, duration. She does indeed qualify the archive, but does so philosophically, through the gap between a stored past and its experience in the

Figure 1: Fragment of the 63mm Veriscope film of *The Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* (1897), National Science and Media Museum, Bradford, as reproduced on the Science and Media Museum Blog

present. The fight film, this paper argues, shows a material gap that Doane leaves unexplored. The Veriscope Company, in selling the film through its ability to store the count, illustrates an appearance of the industry as marketing a quality of the medium that it had not yet achieved. Doane's claim that "the cinema made archivable duration itself" (22) describes that marketing tactic without clarifying that, indeed, the cinema can store a record of events in a given period of time, but not its immutable duration.

Read as a *dispositif*, the Veriscope screening shows that duration in early cinema belonged to exhibition, which further belonged to both the techno-pragmatic and the textual pole. One film strip produced as many different durations as there were screenings, each of which were set by operators with interests of their own. Moving images, in being trusted as evidence of elapsed time before a fixed projection speed, asked their audience to accept from the camera a mechanical objectivity that could only be decided by an entirely non-objective operation: the hand-crank. Theories of cinematic time that locate duration in the index surmise that recording and projection run at the same rate, a notion inherited from the sound era. In 1897, however, they did not, thus prompting a re-configuration and re-appraisal of cinematic time as it relates to early cinema.

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