

The turn-of-the-century understanding of ‘fakes’ in the US and Western Europe

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Abstract:

In the early days of cinema, ‘fakes’ – films which stage an event or refashion an existing film as a representation of the event in question – could be found in genres as varied as war films, actualities, boxing films, passion plays, etc. By using catalogues, newspaper reports, trade press, contemporary accounts, etc. this essay aims to better understand how the category of ‘fake’ films was construed c.1900 and whether the audiences were ever fooled by the producers’, distributors’, and exhibitors’ misleading claims. Specifically, I argue that ‘fake’ film was a broader category than re-enactments which sometimes included representations of sensationalist events on par with present-day ‘fake news’ and that distinguishing ‘fake’ films from genuine ones led to problems on more than one occasion.

Keywords: ‘fake’ films, re-enactment, early cinema, contemporary reception

As Frank Kessler reminds us in his elucidating discussion of the genre:

Film historians ought to be very careful when using the term ‘fake’ and make sure they explicitly state what exactly they wish to refer to.¹

‘Re-enactment’ and ‘fake’ are usually used interchangeably as a label for a genre that I am yet to outline more precisely but whose first approximation includes the staging of actual events or the deliberate mislabelling of existing footage as depicting the event of interest rather than the direct recording of those same events. At first inspection, it might seem that this synonymous use is not the most felicitous because, whereas ‘re-enactment’ is neutral, ‘fake’ carries a negative connotation of an intention to deceive. In other words, would it not be more fortunate to reserve ‘fake’ for a subclass of ‘re-enactment’? For, as Kessler continues:

From the simple fact that an action was staged, one cannot deduce that it was meant to trick audiences into believing they see an authentic record of the event.²

Kessler also warns, however, against projecting one's own meaning to past usages. To understand the relationship between intentional deceit and staging in the production, promotion, exhibition and reception of fakes, therefore, it is best to heed his advice and look at how early cinema contemporaries understood the term 'fake'.

In what follows, I will build on Kessler's definition of fakes as including the practice of both re-enactments (and sometimes even pre-enactments) and re-labelling to outline the understanding of the genre by its producers, promoters, exhibitors and audiences c. 1900. But I will also push the account of fakes forward and suggest that the borders between fake films and trick films were not as clear-cut as it now seems. I will also demonstrate that, contrary to Kessler, there were fakes like *Tracked by Bloodhounds* (Harry Buckwalter, 1904) which not only falsely claimed that specific sensationalist events took place but also deceitfully presented themselves as recordings of those very non-occurrent events. In the conclusion, I will address the question of whether the audiences were ever fooled into believing the false claims that some producers, promoters, and exhibitors made, arguing that, although most often not deceived, on some occasions they were. Sometimes, in fact, because of the concern of widespread deceitful practices, spectators misidentified even genuine films as fakes.

The evidence I use comes predominantly from accounts in the contemporary press such as newspapers and trade press with promotional material (either from company catalogues or the advertisements in the press) serving as the second most prevalent source. When it comes to contemporary definitions of fakes, producers' and distributors' accounts, on the one hand, and press reports, on the other, are of equal importance. Although the former clearly have a vested interest when it comes to exposing their competitors' practices (and may be disingenuous about their own faking), this does not change the fact that the description of the practice in question as (deceitful) re-enactment or re-labelling is what determines what a fake is (rather than who is doing it). The latter demonstrate that the audiences not only shared the core understanding of a fake as a re-enactment or re-labelling, but that they also expanded the term by insisting that even when the practice was not deceitful such films still amounted to fakes. When it comes to the reconstruction of whether the audiences were ever fooled, the press reports are clearly to be believed more given the aforementioned business interests of the producers, distributors, and exhibitors.

The pressing issue is how informative of the audiences these trade and newspaper reports are? Reporters are arguably closer to specialized critics than to general audiences but that does mean that the reporters themselves are somehow not a part of the audience at large. Although these reports are clearly not statistically representative of the overall audience, they are a good proxy for white, male, middle-class, adult urbanite understanding

of the fake category given the standard demographic composition of newspaper staff at the time. When a news reporter explains what a fake is in a widely circulated newspaper such as *The San Francisco Examiner*, moreover, at the very least it can be said that the term's definition is no longer constrained to either specialized press or a specific demographic group but that is available to the public at large. Furthermore, given that there does not appear to be anything overtly ideological in the term's definition – re-enactment and re-labelling are neutral practices in the sense that they do not necessarily serve the propagation of social injustices – there is no reason why there would be much distinct opposition along different demographic lines to the proposed definition. Furthermore, even when trade press contributors report on audiences demanding their money back and even when they depict the audiences as socially inferior to them by emphasizing their less than learned language (e.g. 'Gin me fo'teen rounds or gimme twenty-five cent!'), precisely because they are speaking about a group towards which they could easily be prejudiced, it should be safe to assume that overall the audiences were quite discerning when it comes to recognizing fakes. Conversely, when the arguably same male, white, adult, reporters write of the events depicted in *Tracked by Bloodhounds* as actually having happened then this is good evidence that on occasions at least some audiences were fooled into believing deceitful promotion.

One early cinema genre in which fakes played a great role was war films. Driven by curiosity, nationalistic jingoism, imperial pride, etc. turn-of-the-century audiences were very eager to see moving pictures of various conflicts of the time including those of the Greco-Turkish War (1897), the Spanish-American War (1898), the Second Boer War (1899-1902), the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05).³ When filmmakers failed to deliver for various reasons – war zone dangers, technological problems during shooting, the quality of the image, the non-photogenic nature of contemporary warfare due to the use of smokeless gun powder and the absence of face-to-face combat, etc. – fakers filled the demand by staging war films. Warning specifically of fake films about the Boer War, in 1900 'Mr. [Charles] Urban, the managing director of the Warwick Trading Company Limited [...] [explained] [...] that the general understanding of a 'fake' film is that of producing a film of a counterfeit representation of an actual event, such as has been practiced extensively with the South African war subjects, many of which were made in the suburbs of London, besides France and New Jersey, U.S.A.'⁴

Appeals to diligence about fakes were not reserved for war films alone. We find some of the earliest writings on fakes already in 1897 in the US press in reference to fight films.⁵ At the time, boxing had a precarious legal position in the States. Although pugilistic matches themselves were illegal, stage performances, filming and exhibition of the same were not.⁶ In other words, the sport elicited great interest but enjoyed very limited spectatorship. Spotting a business opportunity one Dan A. Stuart signed two great heavyweights of the time – Robert Fitzsimmons and James Corbett – for a fight which he would record and distribute widely. In the two months that took Stuart to prepare his films for exhibition, however, another famous film pioneer – Siegmund Lubin – saw his own

opportunity and decided to beat Stuart to the punch by re-enacting the fight for his own cameras and offering it to the public.⁷

Speaking of this Lubin's first re-enactment of a boxing match *The San Francisco Examiner*, for instance, warned their readers not to fall for the sham and assured them that the genuine recording of the match, the one made by Stuart, is coming to town soon. Titling the article 'Fight Pictures that are Fake', the journal also explained how a fake is made:

'The Examiner' received one of Stuart's telegrams, and Alf Ellinghouse, the well-known theatrical man, received another. In both wires the urgent request is made that the San Francisco public be warned of the attempt to foist 'fake imitations' of the championship fight pictures on it. The assurance is also given that the bona fide kinetoscope views will be in this city shortly, and that they will be introduced in such a manner as to leave no doubt as to their genuineness.

The method of counterfeiting the battle of the champions is simple enough when it is explained. According to Ellinghouse some enterprising Eastern schemers [Lubin] made a careful search through the ranks of the unemployed pugilists until two men bearing reasonable resemblance to Fitzsimmons and Corbett were found. The rest was comparatively easy. One of the impersonators was fitted out with 'a bald wig', the other with a pompadour, and their faces were made up so as to give them as near the appearance of the originals as possible.⁸

As we see the goal of the fake so construed is to present the recording of a staged event as the recording of the actual event. In this case, this is done by staging the event with actors matching the physiques of the fighters as closely as possible. In the case of fake war films, one had to keep an eye on the terrain, military outfits, and the like.⁹

Calls for vigilance of the above sort were not without foundation because some producers deliberately muddled the waters and misled their customers if not outright lied when advertising their films. Lubin was in the former camp for he never explicitly claimed that he is in possession of a genuine recording of the match. In fact, he advertised the film as *Corbett and Fitzsimmons, Films in Counterpart of The Great Fight* rather than simply calling it *Corbett and Fitzsimmons*.¹⁰ Albeit in small print, he also used terms such as 'reproduced' and 'fac-simile' which suggested, to anybody who was attentive enough, that this not a direct recording of the bout.¹¹ Stuart, however, was far from impressed and started campaigning against Lubin's fake of the Fitzsimmons-Corbett fight and threatening legal action.¹² Lubin responded by putting up advertisements emphasizing that his films have been copyrighted.¹³ This was still not a lie but by focusing on the copyright issues he played footsie and implied that his films were genuine, after all. Only those familiar with the copyright law of the time, however, would have understood that holding a copyright on a

film did not mean much beyond vouching that the film in question is not a duplicate of some other copyrighted film – in this case Stuart’s recording of the actual match.¹⁴

On other occasions Lubin was even bolder. In 1898 following another heavyweight bout – the Corbett-Sharkey match – Lubin cited Corbett’s trainer in his advertisements as saying: ‘I had the pleasure of seeing your Life Motion Picture of the late Corbett and Sharkey fight, and judge my surprise when I recognized myself jumping into the ring just as it occurred.’¹⁵ Although ‘fac-simile’ and ‘reproduced’ are there in fine print again, it is strongly implied that Corbett’s trainer recognized himself because Lubin’s film recorded the actual fight. Another strategy involved the speed with which Lubin made his fight films available: ‘Our Reproduction of the McGovern-Dixon Fight was ready the day after the fight took place. Don’t be a clam and buy pictures of a fight which are made four weeks after the fight took place and called original. Which is the fake, the one SHOWN the day after the fight or the one MADE four weeks after?’¹⁶ Such strategies clearly demonstrate the intention to present the films in question as genuine, without ever making the explicit claim that they were direct recordings of the event.

The advertising of a war film exemplifies an even daring misleading strategy bordering on a straightforward lie. The advertisement for an episode from the Spanish-American War – *Bombardment of Matanzas* (Edward H. Amet, 1898) – all but explicitly states that the recording was taken on location near Matanzas, Cuba at the time of the American navy’s shelling of Spanish positions:

The new TELESCOPIC LENS is a triumph of modern photography. It is possible to obtain accurate pictures at very long range. This is a most marvelous picture. In the distance can be seen the mountains and shore line where are located the Spanish batteries. The flag ship New York and monitor Puritan are in full action pouring tons of iron and steel at the masked batteries on the shore. Volumes of smoke burst from the monster guns, while shot and shell fall thick and fast. Some shells are seen to burst in the air, scattering their deadly missiles in all directions, while others explode in the sea, throwing volumes of water in the air. A final shot from one of the thirteen inch guns of the Puritan lands exactly in the centre of the main battery, completely blowing it out of existence. 600 feet of this engagement was taken and it has been cut down to 100 feet, using only the best and most interesting parts.¹⁷

It is well known, however, that Amet staged the film using scale models.¹⁸

Contrary to these deceitful strategies there were film producers who tried to be as clear as possible that their films are not genuine. The 1903 Pathé catalogue disclaimer for their ‘Historical, political and topical events: military scenes’ which include ‘Episodes of the Transvaal War’ states the following:

We always endeavor to reproduce each event which may interest our customers as it occurs, and with the greatest possible accuracy. For this purpose, as soon as anything takes place, our operator is at once sent to photograph the scene, whenever that is possible. We cannot however guarantee that all the views in this series are authentic on account of the many difficulties that arise in taking photographs on the spot. To supply this want and to keep up to date, we have done our best to reproduce these scenes as near as possible.¹⁹

Some producers were even more explicit. In its 1900 catalogue, the American Vitagraph Company insisted that all their fake films will be labelled as such:

Although many of the Boer War Films are taken under trying circumstances, the photography is generally excellent. However, the intense heat of the South Africa climate and the fine dust which hangs in the air for hours, has in some few instances caused a slight dimness in parts of the view, but this is more than compensated for by the fact that every picture is *absolutely genuine*. We will on no condition sell *Faked or Pre-Arranged War Subjects* unless announced as such, like the following.²⁰

Citing altogether five such films, the catalogue even divulges their filming location: ‘The above five views [...] were specifically posed for at an open-air Military Tournament in England by British Infantry and Cavalrymen.’²¹

Even Lubin, whose initial advertising strategy for his boxing re-enactments deliberately obfuscated the fact that his films were *not* direct recording of the matches, on some later occasions extensively marketed his fighting films as re-enactments. In 1900, only a few days after another highly publicized boxing fight – the Fitzsimmons-Ruhlin bout – Lubin invited the members of the press to his office in Philadelphia to witness the recording of the re-enactment on his rooftop studio:

Robert Fitzsimmons and Gus Ruhlin, the principals in Friday night’s heavyweight battle in Madison Square Garden; Charley White, referee of the fight; William Madden, manager of Ruhlin, and the seconds of Ruhlin and Fitzsimmons will all be in Philadelphia today to pose for ‘fight’ pictures. These men will go to the studio of S. Lubin, photographer of moving pictures where they will reproduce as nearly as possible Friday’s night fight.²²

Regardless of the transparency and the fact that the actual fighters re-staged their own match, the press remained sceptical and continued calling even such re-enactments fakes. The same article continued: ‘The moving pictures thus obtained will be sent all over the country and probably advertised as having been taken at the ringside.’²³ Although adding

the qualifier 'honest', another journal still described the film as a 'fake': '[Fitzsimmons and Ruhlin] were here to enact the scenes of their fight before the camera, so that the public that did not have the chance to see them in the real thing might have the pleasure of looking at an honest fake of the fight.'²⁴ Complaining about the continuing practice of faking, finally, *The Optical Lantern and Kinematograph Journal* argued that the best strategy in promoting such motion pictures is to avoid any deceit. But even for such cases they retained the label 'fake': 'A far wiser plan [than attempting to pass them of as genuine], in our opinion, would have been to make no pretence about reality, show the films as faked and introduce incidents which would be impossible in a genuine picture.'²⁵

We can see then that contemporaries, especially the audiences if not the producers and/or distributors, understood re-enactments as 'fakes' irrespective of whether the recordings were billed as genuine or not and regardless of whether the films were re-enacted with people who participated in the original event or not. This would seem to make our present use of the term 're-enactment' synonymous with 'fake'. However, it turns out that fake was an even wider category than re-enactment for it included the practice of re-labelling as well.

A British trade journal, for instance, reported how an old fire subject film was re-labelled and sold as new and depicting the Great 1906 San Francisco Earthquake: 'One firm has raked up some fire or another from the dust heap of almost forgotten things, and with some perfect *sang-froid* offers it as representing the appalling catastrophe at San Francisco.'²⁶ What gave the film away as a fake is that it showed firemen at work despite the common knowledge that the quake destroyed the water mains making firefighting impossible.

Up until now I have only discussed the possibility that the filmmakers and distributors deliberately deceived the exhibitors to whom they sold films and the spectators to whom the film was shown. But the exhibitors could also deceive their audiences independently from whatever the producers and distributors did. Stephen Bottomore, for instance, reports a confession of an itinerant Lumière cameraman Francis Doublier who in Russia in 1898 deliberately misrepresented stock footage on hand as genuine shots of Alfred Dreyfus and his jailing on Devil Island.²⁷ Doublier stopped showing the films only after an audience member objected that the events in question took place in 1894, a year before the Lumière Cinematograph was invented. Another example comes from Germany in 1897 where the same film from the Greco-Turkish War was first presented as *Execution of a Turkish Spy / Erschiessen eines türkischen Spions* and a few months later as *Execution of a Greek Spy / Erschiessen eines griechischen Spions*.²⁸

For the contemporaries, then, fakes included both re-enactment and re-labelling. They were a part of different genres: fight films, war films, and topical subjects being the most notable ones. Producers, distributors and exhibitors alike faked pictures. In the era of 'fake news' Kessler's advice not to project our own understanding of the fake to past is, therefore, extremely well placed. There is, however, a space for improvement even on Kessler's understanding of the term.

Although Kessler includes both re-enactment and re-labelling among fake films, it seems that the category of fake for contemporaries was potentially even wider than that for trick films sometimes appear to be treated as fakes. In 1900 a notable trade press journal discussed trick films under the heading of 'Fake Cinematograph Pictures' stressing that 'almost any impossible feats can be seen by the use of fake films'.²⁹ In the next issue the journal appeared to publish a correction in which, prompted by Charles Urban, they admitted that such films are better understood as trick films.³⁰ But even so the title of the correction remains confusing insofar it uses a disjunction instead of a negation: 'Fake or Trick Cinematograph Pictures'. Moreover, it is unclear that the matter was as unambiguous as Urban makes it to be for there are other reports which interchange trick photography and faking.

One such case concerns the Miles brothers' direct recording of a boxing match between Oscar 'Battling' Nelson and Joe Gans from 1906 won by Gans. Despite winning the bout because of a Nelson's foul punch under the belt, Gans was not pleased with the film and felt it did not give a representative view of the fight. He repeatedly claimed the film had been 'doctored' in the sense that Nelson's camp modified the actual recording.³¹ Nelson's camp responded that 'films are 11,770 feet in length, and contain 180,000 separate photographs [...] and it would be impossible to change the films to their own satisfaction even if such a thing were contemplated.'³² Both are clearly talking about manipulating the frames of direct recordings in same way – essentially doing trick photography. But on at least one occasion this was described as faking:

Mr. M. C. Coyne, manager of the company showing the pictures here [Fairmont, West Virginia], when questioned about the statement that Joe Gans made to the effect that the pictures were 'doctored' in Nelson's favor, said 'What have we to gain by "doctoring" or "faking" our pictures from a business point of view, what difference does it make who had the better of the fight?'³³

What this demonstrates is that there was some sliding between the notions of doctoring and faking which should not surprise us because doctored photographs were also known as fake photographs at the time.³⁴ Given that film was a photographic medium back then, it is understandable why some would occasionally call films capitalizing on trick photography fakes.

Another development of Kessler's account of the category pertains to his attempt to distinguish between present and past usages of the term. He gives an example of a German journalist Michael Born who in the 1990s sold staged footage of spectacular non-occurrent events including, among other things, Kurdish terrorist plots and Ku-Klux-Klan meetings in Germany as actual undercover recordings to a German television channel.³⁵ To Kessler's mind this is not the type of fakery that characterized film production around 1900. This claim, however, appears to be belied already by some of the earliest fakes.

In 1897 Georges Méliès made four fakes of the Greco-Turkish War including *Mohammedan Inhabitants of Crete Massacring Christian Greeks / Massacres en Crète*.³⁶ The film is not extant, but according to contemporary reports it depicted Turks and their Albanian allies entering a cottage, dragging a young Greek girl out, and decapitating her father. It is undeniable that massacres happened during the war, but this specific beheading appears particularly spectacular and without a clear real-life model. As such, the example is closer to Born's sensational presentation of non-existent events as actual than to re-enactments based on real-life events such as James Williamson's *Attack on a China Mission* (1900).³⁷

If this example leaves some doubt, consider the following advertisement by the Selig Polyscope Company for *Tracked by Bloodhounds*:

THE MOST SENSATIONAL FILM EVER MADE

Tracked by Bloodhounds

Or

A Lynching at Cripple Creek

Negatives Actually Made at Colorado's Great Gold Camp and of Actual Occurrence

[...]

This is one of the most sensational pictures ever made. Our photographer was in Cripple Creek ready for business when the exciting events occurred. The negative was made in the great gold camp. Dozens of prominent miners and citizens who have since been involved in the deportation troubles can easily be recognized in the pictures.

This subject is one of the sensational money-makers. The advertising Cripple Creek has had during the past few months will make the people extremely anxious to see a picture actually made in the Cripple Creek district.³⁸

The catalogue description goes on to outline the story in twelve scenes which revolves around a tramp coming to Cripple Creek, strangling a woman to death, being pursued by the titular bloodhounds, and finally getting caught and lynched. The lynching in Scene XI is described thusly:

The captured tramp is rushed up the side of the hill and to the tree. He is hastily arranged for hanging. The rope is thrown over the limb of a tree, where it is caught on the other side by willing hands and strung up with a howling mob of bloodthirsty miners and cowboys surrounding him. Before life is extinct bullets from their revolvers pierce the body.³⁹

It is undeniable that lynchings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century US were not at all uncommon. The practice of photographing actual lynchings as they occurred and

even using these photographs as postcards is well documented.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is not impossible that there exist genuine film recordings of lynchings from that time.⁴¹ In this particular film, however, we can be certain that the advertised lynching was not of 'Actual Occurrence'.⁴²

Cripple Creek that Selig Polyscope Company's Catalogue continuously refers to was a mining district in Colorado and one of the centres of union labour strikes in the US at the beginning of the twentieth century. The district came into national spotlight on 6 June 1904, when an explosion shook the district's Independence depot killing a number of non-union strike breakers.⁴³ The business-friendly forces supported by the Colorado National Guard immediately started deporting union members – the troubles mentioned in the advertisement. The locals' intention to lynch the perpetrators assumed to be union workers was reported from coast to coast.⁴⁴ There were also reports of titular bloodhounds used to track down those suspected of planting the dynamite.⁴⁵ No lynching, however, took place at Cripple Creek.⁴⁶ The closest was a threat of lynching to a local sheriff who resigned to save his life.⁴⁷ And finally, there was no murderous tramp either.

Selig Polyscope Company clearly tried to capitalize on the highly publicized unrests at Cripple Creek. The all-too-common practice of lynching in general and the widely reported threats of lynching and the use of bloodhounds in particular, allowed for a plausible promotion of the film as a direct recording of an extra-legal execution. This tactic, however, is belied by the fact that not only was there no crime at the time involving a tramp and a miner's wife but also that despite the threats there were no lynchings relating to labour unrests either. Clearly then, we are dealing with a presentation of a non-occurrent event as actually taking place on par with Born's sensationalist 'documentaries' almost a century later. In this sense we could say that fakes also included visual implementations of what we nowadays refer to as 'fake news' – deliberate propagation of fabricated stories. In other words, some fakes were visual enactments of fabricated events where not only the events were presented as factual but also their visual enactments were advertised as direct recordings of those non-occurrent events.

The last standard question that remains in the attempt to reconstruct the historical understanding of fakes is whether or not the spectators were ever fooled into believing the producers', distributors', and exhibitors' deceitful claims. When it comes to *Tracked by Bloodhounds*, the evidence is inconclusive. It hinges on whether we understand the word 'reproduction' in the following passage in the sense of Lubin's 'fac-simile' fight films above or in the sense of direct recording. If we understand 'reproduction' as 'fac-simile' then the report does not evince false beliefs; otherwise it does:

A feature tonight will be a change of program in the Electric Theatre. The pictures offered tonight will be 'Tracked by Bloodhounds,' a reproduction of thrilling events in Cripple Creek, beginning with the murder of a miner's wife and ending with lynching; [...]⁴⁸

But irrespective of how we read 'reproduction', it does seem that the anonymous author behind the quote was at least fooled into believing that a murder and lynching took place (if not that it was actually caught on camera). Other reports are more sceptical of the whole affair in the first place. One speaks of the general use of bloodhounds to track criminals on the run but does not mention the specificities of the crime and instead of referring to Cripple Creek, Colorado gives south as an example:

Mr. Shepard [...] has just secured a most remarkable picture called 'Chased by Bloodhounds.' A great portion of the escaped criminals in the south are tracked by these bloodhounds, and it is an exact realistic illustration of one of these man hunts [...]⁴⁹

A number of commentators sceptically cast the murder as 'alleged':

The pictures represent a supposed criminal assault upon a white woman and the chase of the criminal by bloodhounds.⁵⁰

The majority of reports, simply list the film as one of features of the bill without implying anything about the non/occurrence of the depicted event:

There are some very good moving pictures, the chase after a bandit with bloodhounds, his capture and lynching being the feature.⁵¹

When it comes to fakes more generally, views on whether the audiences were ever fooled diverge. Kessler remains relatively agnostic by claiming that catalogues and specialized trade press accounts will not yield desired answers.⁵² According to Dan Streible, the question is important only for the boxing aficionados and not the general audience.⁵³ Bottomore includes contemporary reviews to argue that fakes posed a significant problem for contemporaries leaving them fooled on more than one occasion.⁵⁴ Film historian Kristen Whissel, finally, has claimed that the audiences discriminated between fakes and actualities perfectly well.⁵⁵

Whissel focuses on war fakes and bases her claims on a couple of related points. The familiarity of the audiences with highly popular stage re-enactments such as 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West' which staged, among other things, battles with Native Americans and preceded cinema would have helped film audiences discern actualities from fakes. The key feature of battle re-enactments – on stage and screen alike – was the ideal positioning of the spectator at the event itself. Once the spectators recognized that the camera is positioned in the middle of the battle it would be easy to perceive such positioning as implausible were it a direct recording of the skirmish. In other words, the film would be immediately recognized as fake. To substantiate this, finally, Whissel cites a contemporary review which makes the very same point.

Bottomore does not deny that plausibility of the camera position served as the main criterion for distinguishing between war fakes and actualities. In fact, he cites a number of contemporary sources which specifically give advice on how to spot a fake along those lines.⁵⁶ One example reads:

You see, you can't take a picture of a battle without getting into the thick of it, – the range of the cinematograph is not large, – and if an enemy saw you turning the handle of a machine on three legs, pointing a long muzzle at them, they, being wholly illogical and unscientific, might conclude that you were practising [sic] with some new kind of Maxim and smokeless powder. The chances that you would be alive to take the pictures back to an admiring British audience would not be hopeful.⁵⁷

But Bottomore emphasizes the point, and rightly so, that the recurrent advice on how to spot a fake must have meant that there were occasions when people were fooled. In fact, he also identifies several such instances. As was already mentioned, it took some time for the spectators to realize that Doublier's films could not have been direct recordings of Dreyfus.⁵⁸ Another example concerns a correspondent who wrote to a trade press journal inquiring how to identify a fake: 'A correspondent asks us how he is to know real from sham war films, seeing that several subjects are made at home from life models.'⁵⁹ Yet another relates to a certain E. Anderson who wrote to the same journal seemingly believing that he saw a direct recording of the attack on China mission. The journal offered a correction:

We have received the circular which you enclosed and note that you think it wonderful that some cinematographic artists should be on hand to photograph the attack on a Chinese mission house or station. You appear to take matters too seriously, for the whole thing is a fake picture – a sort of pantomime scene enacted in this country with scenic backgrounds.⁶⁰

We can add to this an example which demonstrates that what might be completely obvious to one person, fails to register with another:

How any person can believe that a motion-picture outfit can be taken on a battlefield and worked directly in front of a lot of riflemen firing directly at the camera, I don't see; but you hear 'Oh!' and 'Ah!' 'Weren't those men *brave*, George, who took that picture at San Juan Hill?' etc., etc., all over theatre when those interesting but fraudulent pictures are being shown.⁶¹

Whereas the plausibility of the camera position was regularly cited as a litmus test for fake war films, the poor quality of imitation would on most occasions give fake fight films away. During one screening of Lubin's re-enactment of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons match, for

instance, the film was immediately recognized as a fake because the protagonists barely resembled the fighters:

After a delay of several minutes, which seemed hours to the small boy in the gallery, the long looked for light appeared on the curtain, and on walked three men, who completely filled the space. The audience saw that the picture was a fake in an instant. One of the men wore a wig – plainly visible – imitating Fitzsimmons' bald pate, and the other was made up, pompadour and all, to represent 'Gentleman Jim.'⁶²

The fact that this audience felt cheated and successfully demanded their money back also suggests that Streible overstates his case when claiming that 'distinguishing the vile fake from the true document [as an] [...] evaluative schema was not yet the norm.'⁶³ For this was not a unique occurrence. The crowd gathered to see the same fight in Canton, South Dakota was not pleased either:

The machine performed its duties in a passable manner, but the record of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight was a fake pure and simple, it not being a likeness of either one of the men of pugilistic fame that was portrayed on the canvass. It seems that Manager Shaff lets most any old show have the hall, and it will not be long before it will be a difficult task to secure any kind of a Canton audience.⁶⁴

The same can be said of spectators in Jacksonville, Florida who, spotting a different type of deceit, also demanded their money back:

When the fourth round [of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight] was announced the same film used in the first and second rounds was used [...] 'Gin me fo'teen rounds or gimme twenty-five cent!' was the exclamation at this juncture.⁶⁵

It is undeniable that some audiences were more willing to accommodate fakes than others. But even here, the matter seems to have revolved around whether the advertising was clear enough or not:

An audience that numbered about 2,000 people went to Mozart Park last, night to see [Lubin's] Cineograph reproduction of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight at Carson. [...] The audience was rather boisterous at times, and sentiment was divided as to the merit of the production. As it was not advertised as the original Verascope [sic] production, the cry of 'fake' raised by some is uncalled for.⁶⁶

Those who thought the advertising too ambiguous, as we have learned was often the case when fakes first appeared, felt short-changed.

The same normative concern for the film's potential status as a fake holds for instances when in the absence of the direct recording, as was the case when lighting failure stopped the shooting of the 1899 Fitzsimmons-Jeffries bout, the fake was a useful means of illustration:

When it is realized that no pictures of the Jeffries-Fitzsimmons fight were taken, the above information becomes truly exciting. The pictures in question are pure fakes. Billy Leedom, in a red wig poses as Fitzsimmons, while Jack McCormick tries to act as Jeffries did.⁶⁷

In other words, it was not only boxing aficionados who were worried about fakes – the matter was important to the public at large. Or, put in yet another way, a direct recording of a boxing match was preferable to a fake as soon as fakes started appearing. In fact, sometimes the concern went as far as to colour the reception of genuine films. More than one report of a screening of the already mentioned lightweight championship match between Nelson and Gans claimed that the films were fake:

The pictures of the Battling Nelson-Joe Gans fight, shown for the first time in this city at the New York Theater Roof last night are somewhat of a disappointment to put it mildly. In the first place, they are not good clear pictures: in the second place only twenty-six of the forty-two rounds are given – the first twenty and the last six rounds – and what's more the last six rounds are so unlike the rest of the fight in environment and action that there is a strong smell, as of cheese burning, noticeable even from the films. In plain English, we are compelled to the belief that these final six rounds are especially posed and not the real result of the battle.⁶⁸

It is likely, however, that the reporter is mistaken. The reason the film was shorter is because the filmmakers – the Miles brothers – edited the forty-two round long film to a manageable size.⁶⁹ The fact that the fight lasted so long also meant that the lighting conditions were deteriorating as the match progressed.⁷⁰ By the time of last rounds, the lighting would have been so bad to explain why 'the last six rounds are so unlike the rest of the fight', especially if there was a sharp transition from the twentieth to the thirty-seventh round.⁷¹ Interestingly then, the category of fake was of such importance that the concern for failing to spot a fake occasionally led some to report genuine films as fakes. This was not lost on the contemporaries either:

[W]e have recently seen a number of subjects, purporting to be records of real events, but palpably fakes, in which the aim of the makers has been to

conceal their nature. [...] excesses in the past have led to an excess of incredulity to-day, and many a genuine subject is regarded as a 'stage managed' one.⁷²

Finally, there is also good reason to believe that the obverse failures of discrimination on par with those reported for fake war films – confusing fakes for direct recordings of events – took place in the case of fake fight films as well. The above film by Miles brothers was also cited as a fight film which is likely to cause epistemic problems for at least one group of viewers: 'the ladies who prefer to see the prize fight on canvas instead of at the ringside [...] will not know whether the end of the fight is faked in the picture or not.'⁷³ The remark is undoubtedly sexist because, among other things, it misrepresents patriarchal norms precluding women from attending live bouts as female preferences. But it still allows us to extract the articulation of the litmus test for spotting fake fight films – a level of familiarity with live matches. Its non-sexist version can be found already in the commentaries of the Fitzsimmons-Jeffries fight that Streible himself cites:

[U]nfortunately there are thousands of people who did not see the actual fight, and who, for that matter, never saw either of the fighters, and it is upon the credulity of these unfortunates that the promoters of the 'fake' pictures depend for the success of their questionable scheme.⁷⁴

Some commentators went even further by claiming that even people familiar with the actual ringside matches could be fooled.

Whether the pictures were those of the originals or only substitutes requires an expert's eagle eye for the mill is so clever and so much like the original that the average person would be inclined to think the Fitzsimmons and Jeffries really were pictured.⁷⁵

That distinguishing fakes and direct recordings was of no small importance to the contemporaries is also in line with the fact that genuine films were generally preferable to fakes all things being equal. If this is the evaluative preference, then it makes sense that advertisements would internalize the evaluative criterion and either obfuscate the advertisement in the hope of increasing sales or come clean beforehand to pre-empt any criticism concerning fakery. We have seen both strategies on the preceding pages. And we have also seen that the spectators oftentimes demanded their money back upon discovering false advertising.

Although the above preference was a general rule, Bottomore reminds us that occasionally fakes were preferred to direct recordings. The same year that Méliès made the first war fakes, the war correspondent Frederic Villiers made the first genuine war films on location. One would think that the first war pictures ever taken would have caused a

sensation but Bottomore has demonstrated that whereas Villiers' films had only enjoyed a limited run in the UK, Méliès' fakes were distributed all around the world.⁷⁶ Unlike Méliès' war films, none of Villiers' survive so we cannot be exactly sure why Méliès' were much more successful. Some of the possible reasons include the potential poor quality of Villiers' films and their relative uneventfulness when compared to action-packed Méliès' offerings.

We see then that when a plethora of contemporary records is examined – trade press, catalogues, advertisements, newspaper reports, recollections, memoirs, etc. – it is possible to glean a relatively clear picture of both the understanding and the reception of fakes. Contemporaries understood fakes to include re-enactments of events that took place, stagings of non-occurrent events, re-labelling of existing footage, and on occasions even trick films.⁷⁷ Regardless of the intentions of the filmmakers and exhibitors to deceive or not such films were regularly labelled as fakes. Although generally direct recordings were preferable to fakes, there were occasions when fakes overshadowed genuine films in popularity. Moreover, many fakes were, undoubtedly, immediately spotted as fakes because of their quality of impersonation or the implausible camera positioning. But some managed to fool their audiences. And determining whether something was a fake or not was no academic matter reserved for a small number of spectators with special interests but of importance for the public at large. In fact, spotting a fake constituted such an epistemic concern that it could lead to overcorrections – misidentification of genuine films as fakes.

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Notes:

¹ Frank Kessler, "'Fake' in Early Non-Fiction", *KINtop* 14/15 (2006), p. 92.

² Ibid.

³ For an unparalleled account of the history of early war films, including the earliest war fakes see Stephen Bottomore, *Filming, Faking, and Propaganda: The Origins of the War Film, 1897-1902*

(Utrecht, 2007). For an illuminating account of the Spanish-American War from the American film-industry perspective see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: American Screen to 1907* (New York, 1990), pp. 225-262.

⁴ 'Fake or trick cinematograph pictures', *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, December 1900, pp. 153-154.

⁵ For a comprehensive study of boxing films in the silent era see Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema* (Berkeley, 2008).

⁶ Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, p. 195.

⁷ For an account of the filming and faking of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons match see Streible, *Fight Pictures*, pp. 52-95; Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, pp. 194-208.

⁸ 'Fight pictures that are fake: clever schemers working San Francisco with a counterfeit Kinetoscope', *San Francisco Examiner*, 22 May 1897.

⁹ For the relationship between staging, re-enactment, faking, and fiction see Mario Sluagan, *Fiction and Imagination in Early Cinema: A Philosophical Approach to Film History* (London, 2019, forthcoming).

¹⁰ *New York Clipper*, 17 April 1897, p. 115.

¹¹ *New York Clipper*, 15 May 1897, p. 180. It also must be noted that the meaning of these terms might have been lost on some. A projection of Lubin's film in Elizabeth, N.J. which culminated in customers demanding their money back was commented upon thusly: 'It was surprising to see how many people there were who did not know the meaning of the compound word fac-simile. They know it, however, now.' 'Exhibition of Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight at the Lyceum causes a riot', *Phonoscope* 1.9 (1897), p. 8.

¹² *New York Clipper*, 24 April 1897, p. 134.

¹³ *New York Clipper*, 15 May 1897, p. 180.

¹⁴ This strategy did not always work. Newspaper articles report that Huber's dime museum in New York and a certain Marion S. Robinson of Toronto, were slapped with an injunction for screening Lubin's re-enactment of the 1899 Jeffries-Sharkey fight. The reason was not copyright but property right. William A. Brady's lawyer successfully argued that because Brady went to great lengths to secure the match and its filming (by American Mutoscope and Biograph Company), Brady held the property right over the 'reproduction of the fight'. 'Pictures pay well', *Topeka State Journal*, 26 December 1899, p. 2; 'Fake photos stopped in Canada', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 14 January 1900, p. 3.

¹⁵ *New York Clipper*, 17 December 1898, p. 718; 24 December 1898, p. 734; and 31 December 1898, p. 750;

¹⁶ *New York Clipper*, 17 February 1900, p. 1092; and 24 February, p. 1113.

¹⁷ *New York Clipper*, 2 July 1898, p. 16, block capitals in the original.

¹⁸ Kirk J. Kekatos, 'Edward H. Amet and the Spanish-American war film', *Film History* 14.3/4 (2002), pp. 405-417; Bottomore, *Filming, Faking, and Propaganda*, pp. 185-190.

¹⁹ Pathé Catalogue, 1903, p. 60, in Charles Musser et al. (eds.), *Motion Picture Catalogs by American Producers and Distributors, 1894-1908* (Baltimore, 1984). Interestingly, in a later catalogue the disclaimer is dropped and many of the same films are advertised as 'Historical, political & genuine military scenes': Pathé Catalogue, 1905, pp. 92-93, in British Film Institute, *Early Filmmakers' Catalogues* (London, 1983).

²⁰ American Vitagraph Company Catalogue, 1900, p. 5, italics and bold in the original, in *Motion Picture Catalogs*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 'To take fight pictures', *Topeka State Journal*, 15 August 1900, p. 2. The article misreports the date of the re-enactment – the correct date is 13 August.

²³ 'To take fight pictures', p.2.

²⁴ 'Fitz and Ruhlin fight the fight over again', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 August 1900, p. 6.

²⁵ *Optical Magic Lantern and Kinematograph Journal*, August 1906, p. 199.

²⁶ Quoted in Kessler, "'Fake" in early non-fiction', p. 88, italics in the original.

²⁷ Stephen Bottomore, 'Dreyfus and Documentary', *Sight and Sound* 53.4 (1984), p. 290.

²⁸ Herbert Birett, *Lichtspiele: Der Kino in Deutschland bis 1914* (Munich, 1994), p. 39.

²⁹ 'Fake cinematograph pictures', *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, November 1900, p. 138.

³⁰ 'Fake or trick cinematograph pictures', *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, December 1900, pp. 153-154.

³¹ 'Joe Gans tells his side of fight', *Evening Star*, 31 October 1906, p. 9.

³² *Fergus County Argus*, 30 November 1906, p. 8.

³³ 'The real thing', *Fairmont West Virginian*, 19 December 1906, p. 10.

³⁴ Cf. 'Experiences of a newspaper photographer', *Photographic Times* 37 (1905), pp. 201-205.

³⁵ Kessler, "'Fake" in Early Non-Fiction', p. 87.

³⁶ Bottomore, *Filming, Faking, and Propaganda*, pp. 74-78.

³⁷ Williamson's film was based on the Siege of the International Legation in Peking that took place in the summer of 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion. For more on the film see Frank Gray, 'James Williamson's 'composed picture': *Attack on a China Mission – Bluejackets to the Rescue*', in J. Fullerton (ed.), *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema* (London, 1998), pp. 203-211; For more on the fakes portraying the Boxer Rebellion see Bottomore, *Filming, Faking, and Propaganda*, pp. 450-475.

³⁸ 'Tracked by Bloodhounds', 1904.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, 2004); Amy Woods, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, 2009).

⁴¹ There is an advertisement for a film titled *Lynching Scene* (1897) which claims that this is 'a genuine Lynching Scene' and adds: 'By our contract with the authorities names of party and place cannot be given' – International Film Company Catalogue, 1897/1898, p. 18, in *Motion Picture Catalogs*. As the film is only 75 feet long it seems unlikely that all of the following happened within the equivalent short time frame: 'angry mob overpowering the sheriff, storming the jail, and dragging their prisoner to the nearest telegraph pole, from which he is immediately swung into eternity, as bullet after bullet is fired into his swinging and writhing body', *ibid.* However, because lynchings were sometimes pre-arranged and photographers pre-invited to document the deed, there is still a non-negligible chance that this is 'a genuine Lynching Scene'. Moreover, given that the film refuses to specify the victim's name and location it is impossible to disprove that the lynching it depicts (either directly or as a re-enactment) did *not* take place.

⁴² The initial advertisements in the press are slightly different and include the following phrasing: 'Negative Actually Made at the Colorado Cold Camp During Actual Occurrences'; *New York Clipper*, 16 July 1904, p. 470. By September, interestingly, the 'Actual Occurrences' phrase is dropped and

only 'Negative Actually made in Colorado' remains; *New York Clipper*, 17 September 1904, p. 676.

This is not necessarily due to change in the advertising strategy but could simply be due to saving on advertising space. The advertisements for the film can be found as late as 6 May 1906, p. 293.

⁴³ Tim Blevins, Chris Nicholl & Calvin P. Otto (eds.), *The Colorado Labor Wars: Cripple Creek 1903-1904, A Centennial Commemoration* (Colorado Springs, 2006).

⁴⁴ 'Photographs of men marked for assassination are found in the victor strikers' headquarters', *San Francisco Call*, 8 June 1904, p. 2; 'Threaten lynching', *Evening Times Republican*, 7 June 1904, p. 1; 'Every man walking arsenal', *Washington Times*, 8 June 1904, p. 3.

⁴⁵ 'Troops to save town from torch of mob', *Evening World*, 7 June 1904, p. 3.

⁴⁶ 'Sherman Bell's story of Colorado disorder', *Washington Times*, 21 August 1904, p. 2.

⁴⁷ 'With threats of violence, citizens alliance force city officials to resign', *Bisbee Daily Review*, 8 June 1904, p. 1.

⁴⁸ 'Miracle Milo's daring leap', *McCook Tribune*, 18 August 1905, p. 7.

⁴⁹ 'To-morrow's picture shows', *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, 17 December 1904, p. 7.

⁵⁰ 'Richly deserves to be run out', *Las Vegas Daily Optic.*, 19 July 1904, p. 1. This is a part of report which claims that a group of African Americans in Cripple Creek threatened another African

American by the name of Edwards with lynching because they believed that he posed in the film.

The implication is that he performed the role of the tramp, but this is clearly false because it is

visible that a white actor plays the role. The report was picked up at least as far as North Dakota and

Kentucky: 'Negro is chased out', *Wahpeton Times*, 22 July 1904, p. 6; 'A colored mob', *Evening*

Bulletin, 20 July 1904, p. 1.

⁵¹ 'Unique-the trick horse', *Minneapolis journal*, 13 December 1904, p. 1.

⁵² Kessler, 'Fake' in early non-fiction', p. 92.

⁵³ Streible, *Fight Pictures*, p. 140.

⁵⁴ Bottomore, *Filming, Faking, and Propaganda*, pp. 55-60.

⁵⁵ Kristen Whissel, 'Placing the spectator on the scene of history: the battle re-enactment at the turn of the century, from Buffalo Bill's Wild West to the early cinema', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 22.3 (2002), p. 236; Kristen Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity: Traffic, Technology, and the Silent Cinema* (London, 2008), p. 95.

⁵⁶ Bottomore, *Filming, Faking, and Propaganda*, pp. 57-58.

⁵⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵⁸ Bottomore, 'Dreyfus and documentary', p. 290.

⁵⁹ 'Sham war cinematograph films', *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, March 1900, p. 30.

⁶⁰ *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, December 1900, p. 168.

⁶¹ 'Experiences of a newspaper photographer', *Photographic Times* 37 (1905), p. 204.

⁶² 'Exhibition of Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight at the Lyceum causes a riot', *Phonoscope* 1.9 (1897), p. 8.

⁶³ Streible, *Fight Pictures*, p. 140.

⁶⁴ *Dakota Farmers' Leader*, 16 July 1897, p. 5.

⁶⁵ *Phonoscope* 1.7 (1897), p. 7.

⁶⁶ 'Two thousand people', *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, 21 June 1897, p. 5.

⁶⁷ 'Fake fight pictures', *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, 3 August 1899, p. 6.

⁶⁸ 'Maybe fight films have been faked', *Washington Times*, 9 October 1906, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Streible, *Fight Pictures*, p. 174.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ The mistaken reports 'that the last four or five rounds of the great battle were not caught by the machine, because it ran out of film', together with the aforementioned Gans' complaints, must have also coloured the reception. *Times*, 27 September 1906, p. 4.

⁷² *Optical Magic Lantern Journal and Photographic Enlarger*, August 1906, p. 199.

⁷³ 'A filmy story', *Daily Appeal*, 18 September 1906, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Streible, *Fight Pictures*, p. 141.

⁷⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

⁷⁶ Bottomore, *Filming, Faking, and Propaganda*, pp. 71-81.

⁷⁷ It should be noted that the event could also be pre-staged as is the case with Georges Méliès' *The Coronation of King Edward VII / Le Sacre d'Édouard VII* (1902).