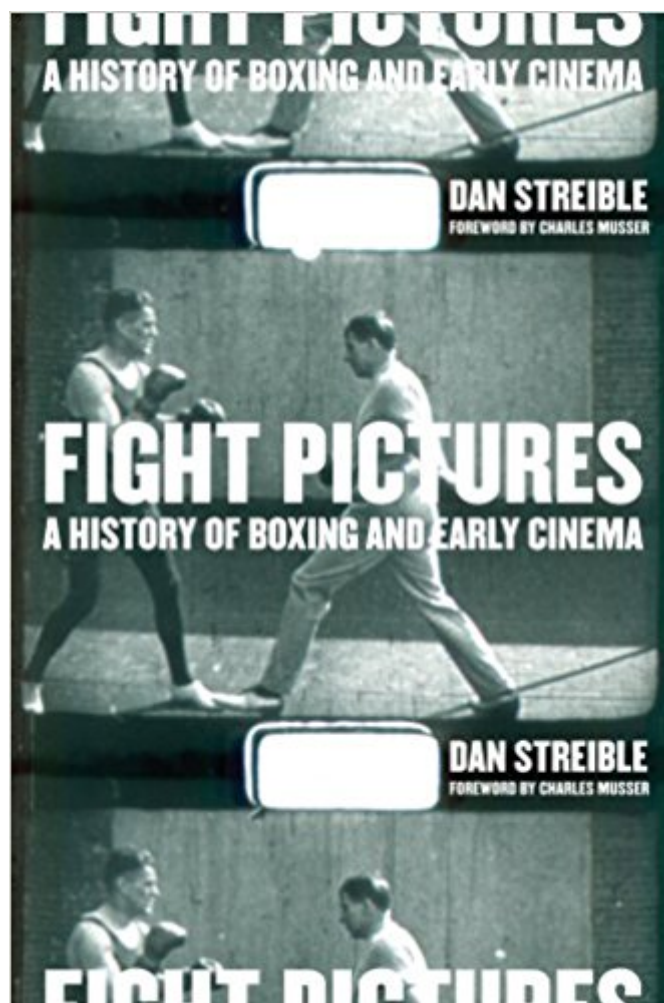


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# Fight Pictures: A History Of Boxing And Early Cinema



## Synopsis

The first filmed prizefight, Veriscope's Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight (1897) became one of cinema's first major attractions, ushering in an era in which hugely successful boxing films helped transform a stigmatized sport into legitimate entertainment. Exploring a significant and fascinating period in the development of modern sports and media, *Fight Pictures* is the first work to chronicle the mostly forgotten story of how legitimate bouts, fake fights, comic sparring matches, and more came to silent-era screens and became part of American popular culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Groundbreaking. . . . It offers . . . the thrill of discovery, an opportunity to learn often-startling new information. . . . It is in every way a masterful piece of work.” (Leonard Maltin *The Moving Image* 2009-08-20)

“Rigorously researched.” (Sight & Sound Magazine 2009-05-01)

“A truly excellent recently published piece of scholarly film history. . . . Meticulously researched and highly illuminating.” (Dave Kehr *Davekehr.com* 2009-07-19)

“The history of boxing and early cinema is now to be given its first thorough history with the publication of Dan Streible’s long awaited *Fight Pictures*.” (Bioscope 2008-03-05)

“An important contribution to American film studies.” (David A. Gerstner *American Historical Review* 2009-02-01)

“Authoritative.” (Travis Vogan *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 2010-08-19)

“Written in a straightforward, sometimes punchy style. . . . Anyone interested in cinema, in boxing, or in the development of modern American society really should seek it out.” (Tribune (Uk) 2009-08-14)

“[This] is an

important contribution to the history of . . . cinema. (Evan Rhodes Modernism/Modernity 2010-01-01) "This book is the result of several years of research and provides a rich account of fight films within the context of complex interactions among personalities and of the rapidly changing technological, economic, social, and legal landscapes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is the best and most complete account on the subject. (The Journal Of American History 2009-08-03) "Chronicles the near forgotten story of how fights, fake bouts, sparring matches and silent era pictures became ingrained in American popular culture. (Little White Lies 2009-04-23)

"This compelling book forces us to rethink the history of cinema. Dan Streible's thought-provoking rediscovery of an entire lost genre of hundreds of early films reminds us how much we still do not know about the development of American movie culture. The fact that only a fraction of these forgotten films survive, and those mostly in fragments, makes this historical account of them all the more valuable."#151;Martin Scorsese "Men in skimpy clothing engaged in the manly art of beating on each other became the cinema's very first movie stars. With masterful historical research in both film and sport history, Dan Streible's book provides the definitive account of the complex fascination these first films exerted, as prizefighting collided with early cinema and staged new battles over gender, race and class."#151;Tom Gunning, author of *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, and *The Films of Fritz Lang* "Sporting' men and curious women, slumming elites and working-class laborers, nativists and European immigrants, Great White Hopes and insurgent African Americans"#151;Dan Streible's meticulous research brings to life the dynamic, overlapping, and often contentious public spheres that fight films pull into focus. Written in smart and straightforward prose, *Fight Pictures* combines new critical insights about early cinema's aesthetics of display and struggles for cultural legitimacy with the social histories of boxing and American modernity."#151;Jacqueline Stewart, author of *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*

For years, early fight films and photography have captivated me. Being a lifelong fight fan, I was only aware of a hand-full of films having been done of championship fights between the invention of Thomas Edison's Kinetograph Camera and the early 1910's. This book reveals all of the records of fight films that were produced during that time and detailed accounts of the making-of these films. Early cinema and boxing have always been synonymous with one another and Dan Streible explores the implications as much as the films themselves. There is a social and economic side to

the business of film making which Dan Streible eloquently weaves into a melting pot of late 19th-early 20th century Americana. It helps if the reader is a boxing fan and is aware of the impact of the actual fighters and fights showcases but once again, Streible takes great detail in building up the events that were as much a part of Social and American history (Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight of 1897, for example) as they were a part of Boxing and Film history. The detailed facts of the book are amazing yet depressing to know how many fights were not filmed during that pioneering era of fight films. I had always hoped that more of James J. Jeffries' fights were filmed and/or intact. For such a great heavyweight of mythic proportions, very little survives of him on film. The same can be said of the Bob Fitzsimmons-Peter Maher fight that actually had the film crew on site, ready to capture the eventual one-round knockout, only to find that rain clouds had spoiled the sunlight necessary in documenting an event with the equipment of the day. In any case, I highly recommend the book to any boxing enthusiast wanting to learn of the significance of prize fighting at the turn of the last century. Equally, film students or buffs who think they may know the origins of cinema will be surprised at what types of "actors" and "stage sets" were actually used in early movies. This was a time when life truly imitated art.

Dan Streible's book is a must for anybody interested in the earliest years of cinema. Masterfully bringing together the histories of sport and motion pictures he expands our understanding of the powerful influence of boxing films on the shape of cinema and reminds us that sports and media have a long, long history.

Growing up in the 60's and for want of anything better to do I picked up one of my Fathers books which happened to be a large volume on boxing. I seem to remember it was a Lonsdale Sporting Library edition and told the story of the Heavyweight Championship from the London Prize Ring until Jack Dempsey's dethronement and Gene Tunney's retirement at the end of the "roaring twenties". Figures from this "golden age" assumed in my fertile imagination almost mythical proportions. Later and becoming more informed I realised that it was a violent and unscrupulous age. Tragic figures won and lost fortunes while legendary fighters could later be found doing menial work; if work at all, often dying in obscurity or un-mourned in a paupers grave. During the 1960's the then glossy pages of the Ring Magazine had plenty of archive material between it's covers. It's Editor and founder: Nat Fleischer had written prolifically about many of the great fighters and had met or seen many of them in action. Since the turn of the Century he had worked as a journalist and in his time officiated in over a thousand boxing contests as a judge. During the 60's World handball champion Jim Jacobs

began collecting many old and rare fight films and I seem to remember the heated if well meant arguments over the relative merits of the old timers against the modern era fighters. Looking today between the not so rose tinted frames of surviving footage I think I can appreciate that fighters of this period were often highly skilled and tough. In those days they had to contend with a difficult and distinctly less squeamish world [or was it so very different?] with prejudice and corruption being rife. I have waited for Dan Streble's book for many years since I came across his name mentioned in Patrick Myler's 1998 biography on Gentleman Jim Corbett. I assumed incorrectly that publication was imminent and had nearly given up hope. It was a nice surprise therefore when I chanced upon the book while surfing a few weeks ago. There is plenty to enjoy here for the film historian or boxing buff. It will also appeal to students of history, sociology, popular entertainment and culture. I devoured its 350+ pages in a couple of days and then read it again more thoroughly. I hope it will put to bed many of those discussions about the old films assumed to have been made or survived on various boxing forums and the like. Parallel with legitimately filmed contests was a thriving business in re-enactments, sometimes featuring the real fighters or more often actors or people brought on to set who often bore little or no resemblance to the real protagonists! It seems strange but a century ago prize fighting was not only illegal in many US States but laws were passed banning the transportation of fight films especially after the Jeffries Johnson contest of 1910. Society has tolerated odd things at different times. In Victorian England the evils of the demon drink was frowned upon but drug taking tolerated while today "Adult Cinema" co-exists with censorship in neighbouring countries, states and can even flourish across the high street. At times boxing film was even seen as "underground" entertainment or "stag" material. There is plenty of fascinating information here and an extensive index of the genre during this period. No doubt there will be film and sports fans who have seen or imagined they have seen other footage so I am sure the author would be pleased to hear from them. If anyone has the officially shot footage of the missing Jeffries Sharkey contest of 1899 that is missing then I for one would be pleased to see it; even the last round where the patched up warriors re-enacted as the original film had run out! Apart from a couple of seconds at the end of the "The Night They Raided Minsky's" [1968]- and these may have been from a flicker book or some such- we only have tantalising stills of the event where over some 100 minutes the fighters had their hair burnt from the many low slung arc lamps rigged to enable the event to be filmed and the referee George Siler had to wear a broad white rimmed hat to protect himself. All this for the sake of filming indoors under artificial lighting. It is ironic that that some "not so bootleg" footage does survive of the event and even this has a story all to itself. Only a few years ago hundreds of Mitchel and Kenyon films were discovered in a pair of metal drums in an old

photographers shop in Blackburn England. Carefully preserved they give us an insight into the 1st decade of the 20th Century. Among them are films of sporting events that when shown at their correct speed show us with clarity something our Great Grandparents may have seen or even in many cases footage of our relatives themselves. If like me your glass tends to be half full rather than half empty, the optimists among you will live in hope of a long lost or unknown gem being re-discovered in some vault somewhere. This is a fascinating book and should reward the reader who, like me will return in future to it's pages. Steve Bradley, Sheffield, England, August 2008.

It's about time someone came out with a book about this woefully-forgotten period of early cinema! Dan Streible's infectious enthusiasm for the history of this uniquely American artform is not to be passed by...

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