

1. What Edison invention is highlighted at the opening of the film? Why do you think this was such a significant piece of technology?
2. What sort of vision does Thomas Edison have for the future? How does he assess the potentials of technology? How does he view weapons and arms manufacturing?
3. How does Nikola Tesla wish to power cities? What is the alternative to Direct Current?
4. How many “minor inventions” does Edison plan to create at what rate? What does this say about his ambition and inventiveness?
5. What personal problems and tragedies do Edison and Westinghouse confront as the Current War is in progress? How do you think tragedy transforms people?
6. What dangerous claims does Edison make about Alternating Current? Why so?
7. How does the film suggest Westinghouse might be a more hospitable employer than Edison?
8. Why do both Westinghouse and Tesla vie to provide the electricity for the Chicago World’s Fair at the Columbia Exposition?
9. How does the World’s Fair/Electric Chair montage demonstrate the double-edge sword of new technology?
10. Who wins the war of currents and why? How do we see similar rivalry today?

Shape

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Accompanying primary source:

**Excerpt from "Far Worse Than Hanging"**

Reprinted from the *New York Times* published in the August 7, 1890, covering the botched electrocution of murderer William Kemmler.

WAITING FOR THE EVENT

“By 4 o'clock this morning people were astir on the streets, and an hour later the street in front of the prison contained not less than 500 people. At 6 o'clock it was almost impossible to force a passage through the throng. Every eye that could be pressed to the openings between the bars of the gate was directed toward the window which lighted Kemmler's cell. . . .

As the morning wore on and the time for the execution drew near, the trees and housetops in the vicinity began to be peopled. Young men climbed telegraph poles and gazed eagerly toward the vine-clad prison. Men and women on their way to their daily labor joined the crowd at the entrance. The platform of the railway station across the street was black with people, and the temporary office of the Western Union Telegraph Company, which had been established in the freight station directly opposite the prison, showed many expectant faces. Just before 7 o'clock it seemed as if all Auburn had congregated in the immediate neighborhood of the prison.

KEMMLER SAYS HE IS READY

In the meantime Warden Durston had arisen and had gone to the cell of the condemned man. He carried with him the death warrant, and he read it to Kemmler as the latter sat on the side of his bunk. Kemmler's sole remark when the Warden had finished reading was: "All right, I am ready." The Warden then left the cell, and in the entrance hall above met the witnesses who had accepted his invitation. . . .

There was a very apparent nervousness among the men, used as most of them are to sights that would chill ordinary men's blood. The uncertainty of what was to come filled them with awe. Somebody attempted to speak, but his voice was lost in its own faintness. A step was heard outside. All eyes turned toward the door leading into the chamber. Warden Durston appeared, and beside him was the man who stood on the verge of an awful death. Yet there was nothing in his appearance to suggest this. His face was composed and he walked in an easy manner as though he were entering a room to receive a party of friends.

After he had crossed the threshold there was for an instant the deadest silence. It was broken by Warden Durston.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is William Kemmler." And Kemmler bowed.

"Gentlemen," [Kemmler] said, "I wish you all good luck. I believe I am going to a good place, and I am ready to go. I want only to say that a great deal has been said about me that is untrue. I am bad enough. It is cruel to make me out worse."

As he finished this little speech, he bowed again, and was about to sit down in a chair which had been placed beside the death chair. Warden Durston, seeing this, stepped forward, and Kemmler, noticing his action, saw that the time had come, and instead of sitting where he had intended, turned and easily dropped into the seat. Still he did it much as one might after a long walk fall into the welcome arms of an easy chair. He sat with the light from the window streaming full on his face, and immediately in front of him was the semicircle of witnesses. Warden Durston stepped to the chair, and at his request Kemmler arose. It was desired to see whether his clothing had been so cut away at the base of the spine as to allow of a clean contact between the electrode and the flesh. It was found that the outer garments had been cut, but the lower clothing had not been so. Durston took out a pocket knife and cut two small triangular pieces out of the shirt.

Then Kemmler easily settled back into the chair again. As he did so Durston started to get the rear piece in position. A murmur of surprise passed among the witnesses when Kemmler turned calmly to the Warden and in such tones as one might speak to a barber who was shaving him, said calmly: "Now take your time and do it all right, Warden. There is no rush. I don't want to take any chances on this thing, you know."

"All right, William," answered Durston, and then began to adjust the headpiece. It looked horrible with its leather bands crossing the doomed man's forehead and chin and partially concealing his features. When the job was finished Durston stepped back. Kemmler shook his head as one might when trying on a new hat, and then just as coolly as before said; "Warden, just make that a little tighter. We want everything all right, you know."

The Warden did as requested and then started to fix the straps around the body, arms, and legs. There were eleven of them. As each was buckled Kemmler would put some strain on it so as to see if it was right enough. . . . The last minute had come.

THE FATAL CURRENT TURNED ON

Standing on the threshold he turned and said quietly: "Is all ready?" Nobody spoke. Kemmler merely lifted his eyes and for a moment turned them enough to catch a glimpse of the bright, warm sunlight that was streaming through the window of the death chamber.

"Goodbye, William," said Durston, and a click was heard. The "good-bye" was the signal to the men at the lever. The great experiment of electrical execution had been launched. New York State had thrown off forever the barbarities, the inhumanities of hanging its criminals. But had it? Words will not keep pace with what followed. Simultaneously with the click of the lever the body of the man in the chair straightened. Every muscle of it seemed to be drawn to its highest tension. It seemed as though it might have been thrown across the chamber were it not for the straps which held it. There was no movement of the eyes. The body was as rigid as though cast in bronze, save for the index finger of the right hand, which closed up so tightly that the nail penetrated the flesh on the first joint, and the blood trickled out on the arm of the chair. Drs. Spitzka and Macdonald stood in front of the chair, closely watching the dead or dying man. Beside them was Dr. Daniels, holding a stop-watch.

After the first convulsion there was not the slightest movement of Kemmler's body. An ashen pallor had overspread his features. What physicians know as the "death spots" appeared on his skin. Five seconds passed, ten seconds, fifteen seconds, sixteen, and seventeen. It was just 6:43 o'clock. Dr. Spitzka, shaking his head, said: "He is dead." Warden Durston pressed the signal button, and at once the dynamo was stopped. The assembled witnesses who had sat as still as mutes up to this point gave breath to a sigh. The great strain was over. Then the eyes that had been momentarily turned from Kemmler's body returned to it and gazed with horror on what they saw. The men rose from their chairs impulsively and groaned at the agony they felt. "Great God! He is alive!" someone said: "Turn on the current," said another; "See, he breathes," said a third: "For God's sake kill him and have it over,' said a representative of one of the press associations, and then, unable to bear the strain, he fell on the floor in a dead faint. District Attorney Quimby groaned audibly and rushed from the room.

Drs. Spitzka and Macdonald stepped toward the chair. Warden Durston, who had started to loosen the electrode on the head, raised it slightly and then hastily screwed it back into place. Kemmler's body had become limp and settled down in the chair. His chest was raising and falling and there was a heavy breathing that was perceptible to all. Kemmler was, of course, entirely unconscious. Drs. Spitzka and Macdonald kept their wits about them. Hastily they examined the man, not touching him, however. Turning to Warden Durston, who had just finished getting the head electrode back in place, Dr. Spitzka said: "Have the current turned on again, quick—no delay.' Durston sprang to the door, and in an instant had sounded the two bells, which informed the man at the lever that the current must be turned on.

THE CURRENT TURNED ON AGAIN

Again came that click as before, and again the body of the unconscious wretch in the chair became as rigid as one of bronze. It was awful, and the witnesses were so horrified by the ghastly sight that they could not take their eyes off it. The dynamo did not seem to run smoothly. The current could be heard sharply snapping. Blood began to appear on the face of the wretch in the chair. It stood on the face like sweat.

The capillary or small blood vessels under the skin were being ruptured. But there was worse than that. An awful odor began to permeate the death chamber, and then, as though to cap the climax of this fearful sight, it was seen that the hair under and around the electrode on the head and the flesh under and around the electrode at the base of the spine was singeing. The stench was unbearable.

How long this second execution lasted—for it was a second execution, if there was any real life in the body when the current was turned on for the second time—is not really known by anybody. Those who held watches were too much horrified to follow them. Some said afterward that it lasted a minute. One said it lasted fully four minutes and a half. Opinions ranged all the way between those figures. Dr. Spitzka, who was as cool as any man could be under such circumstances, says it was not more than a minute. It was 6:51 o'clock when the signal went to the man at the lever to shut off the current. Kemmler had been in the chair just eight minutes from the time the current was first turned on. There is nobody among the witnesses present who can tell just how much of that time the current was passing through the body of Kemmler.

As soon as the current was off again Warden Durston rapidly unscrewed the electrodes and unbuckled the straps. Kemmler's body again was limp. This time he was surely dead. There was no doubt of that. The body was left sitting upright in the chair, and the witnesses of the tragedy that had been enacted passed out into the stone corridors as miserable, as weak-kneed a lot of men as can be imagined. It had nauseated all but a few of them, and the sick ones had to be looked out for. They were all practically silent for some time. Their minds were too busy to enable them to talk. They all seemed to act as though they felt that they had taken part in a scene that would be told to the world as a public shame, as a legal crime. . . .”