

# Creative cutting

How tempo and tension, time and space, may be controlled through inventively planned progressions

MAYA DEREN

**M**UCH has been written on the techniques of shooting—exposure, lenses, lighting, angles, framing, etc.—with the result that the serious amateur can readily become a competent cameraman.

But relatively little attention has been given to the circumstances that he is also required to be his own cutter; and the fact that he must fill both functions *can* result in far finer film making than where there is a strict division of labor between the two functions.

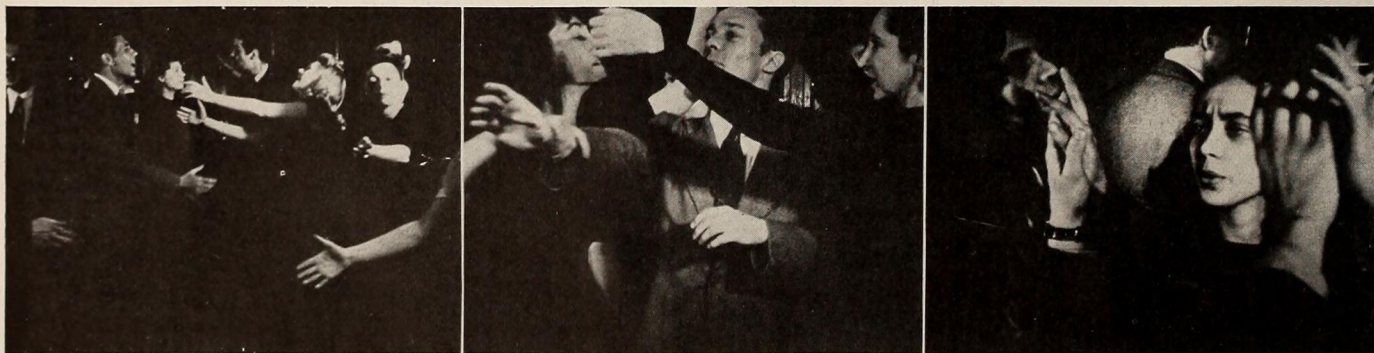
*It means that he is in a position to shoot to cut.* For, if he has the final, cut version of his film in mind, he can save footage by filming a room, for instance, from the one angle which would follow most logically from the previous shot, instead of shooting the same action from three different angles and then discarding two of them. More important, every detail of a shot—the direction of the light source, the rhythm and speed of the action, whether the person should enter the shot or should already be in the frame—can be meticulously designed to flow unbrokenly from the end of the previous shot, whether or not it has already been recorded. This complete control of one's film, if consciously exercised, makes

possible a compelling continuity in the final product.

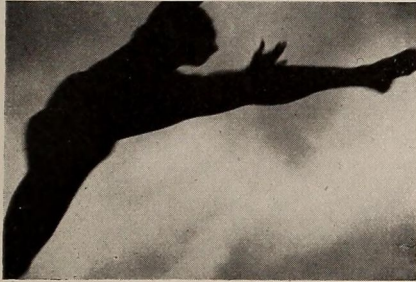
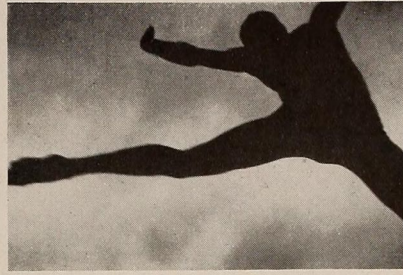
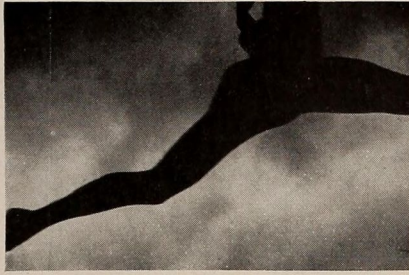
Certainly, it must be obvious that a motion picture consists not of individual shots, however active, exciting or interesting they may be, but that, in the end, the attention is held by the way shots are put together, by the relationship established between them. If the function of the camera can be spoken of as the seeing, registering eye, then the function of cutting can be said to be that of the thinking, understanding mind. By this I am saying that the meaning, the emotional value of individual impressions, the connection between individually observed facts, is, in the making of the film, the creative responsibility of cutting.

For example, the length of time which one permits a certain shot to continue is actually a statement of its importance. Let us imagine that one wishes to show a specific person entering a large building (an institution which must be identified in some way), in order to accomplish something there. This would probably call for two shots in succession; a wide angle shot from across the street would be required to identify the building, and a close (possibly "pan") shot would be required to show and

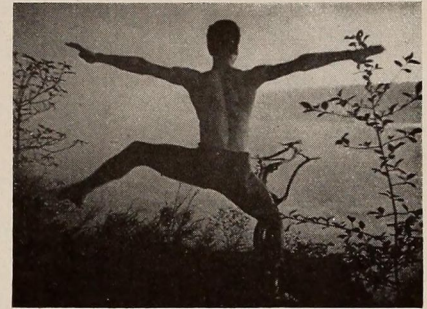
16mm. scenes by Maya Deren



• These frames, each a different shot of the sequence, show how a pattern of movement can be emphasized by interchanging the persons, so that the large pattern, if accented, is the central consistent focus of attention. The large pattern here is the temporary interruption of the progress of one person by the relationship of two others. First, a boy and girl start toward each other in greeting. But that greeting, now between two others, is shown as an impediment to a man's progress. In the third, the greeting is consummated by still other people, forcing a girl to stop and start around. In the fourth, she does go around a person, but not one of those who hold hands in the third. And, in the fifth shot, she is seen in the clear, with the clasped hands in greeting of still other people in the background.



• Each of these frames is from a different shot of the leap sequence; but the homogeneity of the sky background and the directions of travel within the frame combine the four shots into the equivalent of a single slow motion shot which might be understood to "pan" with the dancer as he takes off, floats through the air and finally lands. However, this technique extends the duration time of the film leap to about five or six times that of a leap in reality, and so creates suspension and tension.



identify the person who is going in. It is quite possible that the wide angle shot of the building, its height exaggerated by a low perspective, might be much more interesting, pictorially speaking, than the close shot "pan." But one would never hold both shots for the same length of time on the screen.

If it was the action of entering the building which was important (as part of the plot, let us say) then any lengthy architectural treatment would delay the action and would give an importance to the actual appearance of the building, which, relative to the action, was unwarranted. One would hold the building shot only long enough for it to be identified, and then cut back, as rapidly as possible, to the continuation of the action.

On the other hand, suppose that, in the action of the plot, the person has dreamed of coming to this spot—that the building (a university, perhaps) represented for him a place where hopes could be fulfilled, where he would make his home for a long time, or something of that sort. In such a case, the cutting time of the two shots would be exactly reversed, for the camera, as an eye, would stare and fix upon the building and perhaps even lovingly travel over its architecture. Pictorially, this long time spent upon the building would convey the idea that the structure itself, as a "place," was important to the person in question.

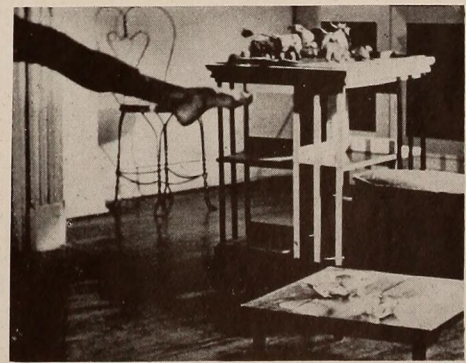
In cutting, then, duration serves not only to show or identify something, but it is also a statement of value, of importance. In determining the length of duration, the relative importance of each shot must be carefully weighed. And if this is done by the same person who is shooting, there will be a minimum of footage which ends up (or should end up) in the trash basket.

Timing, in the sense of duration, can actually become an even more active element when it creates tension. Here, it is a matter of the relationship between the duration of the object or action within the shot and the duration of the shot itself.

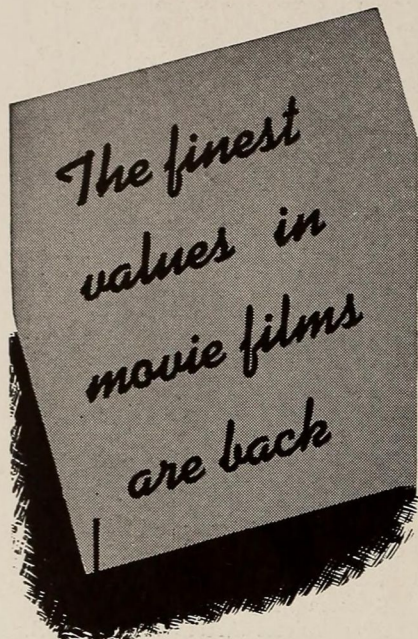
I should be inclined to say that, in general (there may be, in specific cases, exceptions), whenever the duration of the shot exceeds the duration of the action, there is a decrease in tension, and vice versa. For this reason a static shot of a building will become boring if it is held longer than the identification or appreciation of the building requires; the active curiosity of the eye is very soon satisfied.

Moreover, in the static shot, we see something which, we know, lasts longer than the duration of the shot. We know that nothing critical will happen to the building after we no longer see it, and consequently there is no tension. But a static shot of a person balancing on one leg, for example, can be held much longer, for we know that that action must have some conclusion; and so, the longer we look, the more the tension increases, until, finally, the person actually falls, the action is completed, our anticipation has been satisfied and we relax.

It is the phenomenon of duration as tension which explains why slow motion—which may have in it very little activity—often makes for greater tension than normal or rapid motion, for the tension consists in our desire to have our anticipations satisfied. An example of the use of duration as tension is the very last sequence of my short dance film, *A Study in Choreography for Camera*. The dancer takes off from the ground for a leap, and the shot is cut off while his body is still ascending in the frame. This is followed by a [Continued on page 204]



• These two shots are linked together by the consistency of the tempo at which the dancer lowers his leg and by the fact that the position and angle at which the leg enters the interior shot are an accurately logical continuation of the body position and action established in the exterior long shot.



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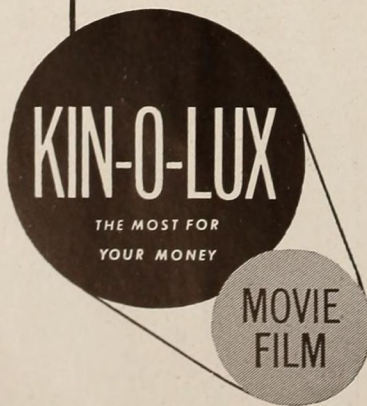
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## Creative cutting

[Continued from page 191]

shot against the sky of his legs traveling horizontally—the plateau of his leap. This is followed by a shot in which he moves descendingly through the frame, and this, in turn, is followed by one in which he lands on the ground. All this was filmed in slow motion; there is no sense of rapid or emphatic movement. Rather, the sequence has the quality of a slow floating. Yet, I should say that it creates more tension than any other sequence in my four films, for the simple reason that, cinematically, the leap endures much longer than it could in actuality. During this stretch of time the audience is waiting for the dancer to come down to earth, as it knows he must, eventually.

The fact that this sequence consists of four shots does not contradict the idea of duration, for these are so identical, cinematographically, that, to all intents and purposes, they comprise a single shot. Essentially, the point remains the same; namely that the image of leaping was given a duration which far exceeded the normal anticipation which was waiting to be satisfied.

It is also significant that this total duration of the sequence was achieved by not permitting any of the single shots to satisfy the normal necessity. That is, the first shot was cut off just at the point where the dancer began to descend, the second shot similarly, and the third was cut off just before the landing. In the second and third shots the ascent is also cut off, since, once he had leveled off, to show him rising again would have implied a fall in between shots. In other words, no single action was completed, and, consequently, the subsequent action was understood not as a new and independent action but as a continuation of the one which has not yet been completed.

In this sense, movement or action is carried "across the splice." This principle of cutting into an action is basic to the whole problem of the continuity of a film, even when the action is not so extreme as a leap. The failure to realize the importance of this technique accounts for the stuttering tempo of many amateur films. Over and over, an action is shown through to its completion. Our anticipation is satisfied, not to say gluttoned. We relax, and the subsequent action is a new one which must begin at the bottom again, in commanding our interest and attention.

This is so important a contribution to intensity and continuity that a film should actually be so planned as to have a maximum of its cuts occur in action. Let us say that an incident consists of two periods of action separated by a pause, as when a person comes up to a table, pulls out a chair

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and sits down. It is an action which must be filmed in two parts, a long shot showing the approach, and a closer shot, showing, let us say, the details of the dinner which he is about to eat.

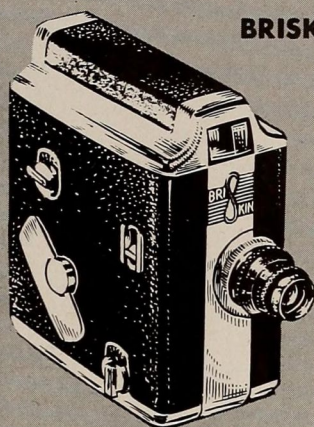
Normally (and let us assume that we wish to render the action normally), there is a pause at the moment when he arrives at the table, as he prepares to undertake the action of pulling out the chair. The temptation is to shoot his walk and arrival in long shot and to begin the closeup with his pulling out the chair, the cut taking place during the pause between these actions. But a much stronger continuity, tension and interest would be created by cutting off either the long shot, just before he comes to a stop, and picking up the close shot with his arrival (entering the frame), then the pause and then his pulling out the chair—or to hold the long shot until he had started to pull out the chair, and let the closeup cut in after the chair movement had already begun.

Obviously, such techniques demand that the cutting be decided upon before any shooting is done, unless, of course, one can afford to waste film by shooting the entire episode both in long shot and in closeup and later throwing away half of each. It is difficult to put the scissors to one's own film, but the sacrifice of a few frames of action—those frames which bring it to a stop—is justified by the smooth, compelling flow of the film which it will achieve.

It is impossible to overestimate the compelling continuity of duration which movement carried across the splice can create. Obviously a prerequisite of this technique is a consistency in the tempo or rhythm of the movement; but once this is achieved and carefully pointed up cinematographically (angle, light, etc.), it can be used to hold together even places which are completely separate in actuality.

In the dance film, the dancer appears in a long shot sharply defined against the sky, as he begins to lower his leg from a high position in the air. The pace of this action is well established by the time the leg reaches waist level. At this point there is a cut. Against an interior apartment background, we see a closeup (so that the movement dominates the locale) of a leg being lowered from the top of the frame at exactly the same rate of speed that governed the previous long shot. The effect is that the dancer has stepped from exterior to interior in a single movement, so completely does the action across the splice dominate both sides of the splice.

This technique can even be carried a step further (or, more precisely, in a different direction), to give a repetitive action the illusion of being a continued action. For, whenever a movement is not completed, we understand that the one which follows is a con-



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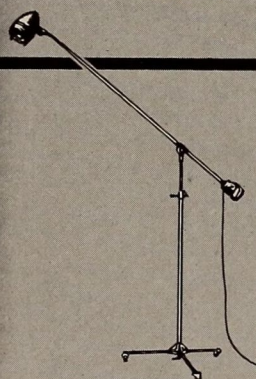
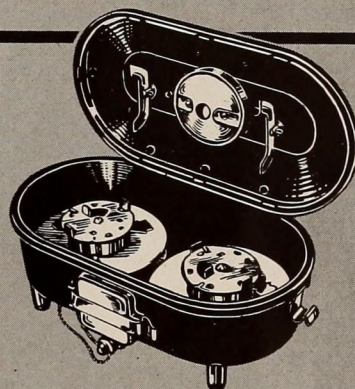
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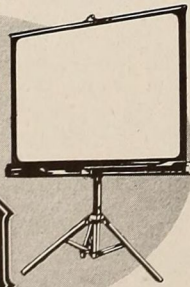
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tinuation of the incompleting movement. The leap of the dance film, which I described a moment ago, is an example of this; for, in actuality, the same leap was repeated four times and was made continuous by not being completed in the film until the end of the fourth shot.

The same technique creates a long fall at the end of my most recent film, *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. In this case the person dropped from a considerable height four times against a blank background. Both the area covered and the action were repeated; but, since the body fell vertically through the frame each time, so that the disappearance at the bottom of the frame was immediately followed by an appearance at the top of the frame in the next shot, the four shots joined together gave the effect of a continuous movement.

Both the leap and fall occur against rather neutral backgrounds which cannot be identified as repeated areas. But so compelling is continuity of movement across a splice that even identifiable backgrounds become subordinate to it when assisted by a manipulation of angles. In my previous article for *MOVIE MAKERS* (June, 1945), in which I dealt primarily with cinematography, angles, etc., I described a sequence in which a girl climbs up a large driftwood tree root.

For emotional purposes in the film, it was necessary to extend the time of climbing far beyond the time it would actually take. Consequently, the girl climbed the tree three times, entering at the bottom of the frame and exiting at the top of the frame each time. The first shot was a downward angle, as if she were low; the second was a level angle, as if at eye height, and the third was an upward angle, as if she were overhead. The tree root was a very distinctive formation, and the shift in angle did not, actually, change its shapes beyond recognition, provided one expected to recognize it as a repeated area. But the movements through the frame and across the splice were so compelling that the three shots of the root seemed to be a continuation of an area which is only consistently similar in its construction. It is not recognized as being a repetition.

The furthest extension of this principle which I have thus far attempted occurs in the party sequence of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. My idea was that the reason people go to parties is to establish personal, social relationships; that, if all the long static conversational pauses were omitted, there would emerge a sort of dance, consisting of people moving towards one another, passing one person in order to reach another, greeting each other, etc. Above all, I wished to convey the idea that all these different people were there for the same reason and were doing essentially the same thing and

even, as it were, making the same movement—that the consistency of the total movement pattern transcended the variety of the individuals involved.

First I made a series of shots in which different persons approached each other, gestured to each other, clasped hands, etc., in approximately the same way. Then I cut together, for instance, one couple as they first recognized each other and started to approach each other, and followed this by a shot of another couple in a further development of the same movement; then came two other persons who meet, clasp hands and start to turn; another couple finish a sort of turn about each other and start to separate; and then two persons, back to back, move in opposite directions.

Since the people are all different, and since it is not a cumulative action—in the sense of adding up to any narrative story—the only thing which crosses the splice and makes one shot seem to come from the previous one is the movement which is never brought to a stop but is always continued by the following shot. If cutting into movement can be the principle of tension and continuity for one hundred and fifty feet of film which does not have a story direction, then surely it can do wonders for the solution of simpler sequences in which interest is also maintained by character action, story plot and known characters.

(A second discussion by Miss Deren on the possibility of Creative Cutting will follow in an early issue of *MOVIE MAKERS*.)

## Filming is fun

[Continued from page 192]

to our camp on a nearby lake, rather than "down the river" aboard the *Aylwyn*, our boat. It was here that the final scene of the picture was made.

Lying comfortably outstretched in the warm water with my head resting on the shore and my feet in about ten inches of water, I riled up the bottom, so that nothing below the surface was visible. A good heavy stone made a wonderful splash, and from that splash two feet appeared briefly at the surface only to sink again slowly. This was an extreme closeup in which only a small patch of water and the feet were in the camera field. The scissors put this scene in just the right place, beside the *Aylwyn*, fifty miles away. The same method was used when the "Finis" sign came from the water. It was raised with the help of a lever operated from a very comfortable chair on the dock.

A few personal shots for family use finished my only magazine film, and *Doghouse Blues* was shelved for 1943 with just one scene filmed—the final one.