MUCH 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

* 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 step 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.
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]
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, of course, that the 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 underplayed 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 glutted. 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...
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 be-
fore 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 sepa-
rate 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 in-
terior apartment background, we see a
closeup (so that the movement domi-
nates 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 ex-
terior 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 repeti-
tive action the illusion of being a con-
tinued action. For, whenever a move-
ment is not completed, we understand
that the one which follows is a con-

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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 "Finn's" 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.