

THE FILM EDITOR must make a wide range of decisions. He must judge what footage is good and what is bad; choose between all the possible ways of arranging shots in a sequence; select the most appropriate cutting points; and objectively evaluate his decisions with respect to the total film.

# THE TECHNIQUES OF CREATIVE FILM EDITING

**Great creative opportunity of film art occurs at the editing table; but the editor must work with the pieces of film that has been given him.**

*AMERICAN CINEMATOGRAPHER IS indebted to Calvin Productions, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri, for the opportunity afforded to reprint a condensation of the series of informative articles on Film Editing which have appeared in recent issues of "The Aperture," the company's monthly workshop publication for 16mm film producers. The series, condensed to a 2-part article, begins on this page. The illustrations have been added to point up some of the salient points in "The Aperture's" treatise.—Editor.*

THERE IS A LOT more to film editing than simply splicing scenes together in sequence. For one thing, editing calls for decisions—hundreds of them. Many of the decisions in editing are mechanical, especially when the editing problems have been anticipated in scripting and shooting. Yet, there are often opportunities for selecting and arranging visible and audible reality on the editing table.

Any sequence of pictures has part of its meaning expressed by the order and relative lengths of the individual shots, by the rate of presentation, and by the accompanying sound track. Nevertheless, the actual footage that was shot represents the limiting framework for the editor's creative activity. He can rearrange, shorten, and eliminate scenes. He can make better transitions both from shot to shot, and sequence to sequence; but he must work with the pieces of film that have been given him. Thus, a large share of the responsibility for the successful editing of a film falls to the script writer, the director and to the cinematographer. All three must anticipate the problems that will arise in the final stages of reassembling the fragments of reality.

Many film directors believe it imperative to edit their own films in order to achieve the effects planned during the shooting. By doing both jobs, they are also able to see the mistakes and misjudgments they made in shooting. Most directors, however, achieve a refinement of production technique which enables them to turn over the task of editing to someone else with complete confidence.

## Basic Procedures

Let us now consider a practical step-by-step procedure in editing a motion picture film:

First, assemble the work print—splicing together all takes that are related to a given subject, or usable in a given sequence.

Then view this footage and



make mental notes of the best shots, and the shots that should be discarded.

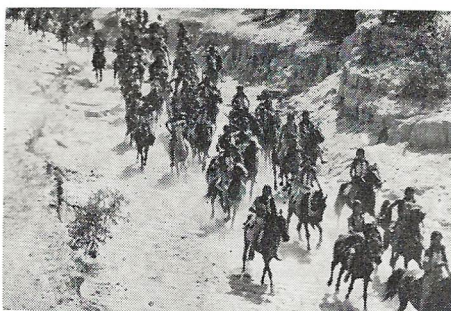
Next, throw out technically-bad footage—any and all that includes edge-flare, reveals unsteady camera, or is marked by unsharp focus or poor composition. (Be sure, however, to save and set aside all deleted scenes which later may have to be used, even if they are poor in quality.)

Now, view the remaining “best” takes, mentally re-organizing them in different order where necessary. To better visualize different combinations, hang the individual scene strips in front of a light box and actually re-arrange them in different combinations.

When the final arrangement has been decided, proceed to find the best points at which to cut from shot to shot. In every case, mark the proposed stopping point of one scene and the tentative starting point of the next, using a grease pencil.

Then, check and re-check to make sure that both shots will cut together well, and that they will contain the desired material after cutting. Then, when entirely satisfied, cut and splice. If several choices of equally good cutting points are available, cut the scenes in “long” at first, re-cutting (trimming and re-splicing) later if necessary.

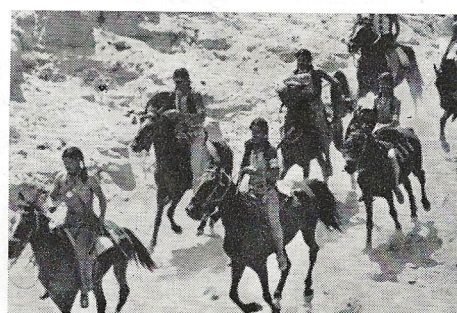
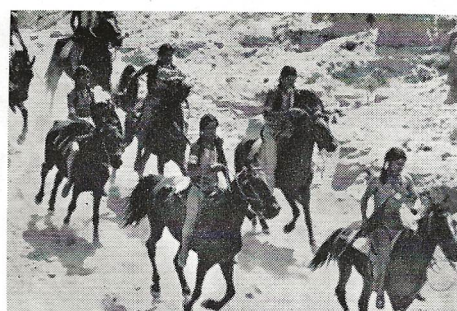
View the new arrangement and,



**THIS . . .**



**NOT THIS . . .**



**DIRECTIONAL CONTINUITY** is a key essential in a properly edited motion picture. This means that if the action is established in the initial shot as coming, say, from the left, then all succeeding shots relating to that action must show the actors traveling in the same direction. An incorrect cut from long to medium shot is shown in the two photos immediately above; the correct cut, in the photos above them.

if satisfied, proceed to add the next shot by the same method of procedure.

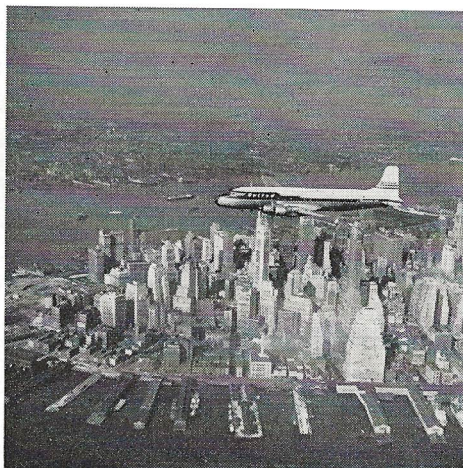
### Bringing The Editing To a Finish

“I don’t think any editor ever does finish an editing job,” a veteran film editor remarked recently. Which is probably true, when one considers that there are always so many possibilities afforded in the editing process that it could be practically endless.

There is a time, however, when the decision must be made that “This is it!” and the editing of a film frozen at that point. To reach that point it is necessary to continue editing, thinking in terms of single cuts within sequences, and adding sequence to sequence until the whole film is finally cut together.

After cutting is completed, the next step is indicating on the work

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GIVEN A NUMBER OF TAKES of the same or similar action, the film editor must exercise great care in selecting the cut to match the cuts that precede and follow it. Several factors help him determine this: directional continuity in the scene, camera angle, time of day scene was shot, etc. In the three photos above, each was shot at a different

time of day, so that the sun’s changed position is quite apparent; and one shot was made both at a different time of day and several miles distant from location of shots 1 and 2—although in the same approximate area. Sharp eyes and good judgment are necessary in selecting and cutting such scenes.



print with a grease pencil all the transitional optical effects that will be required between sequences. These markings should show during screening. As the work print is projected, notes should be made of all rough-looking cuts, overly-long scenes, and awkward transitions. Also, during this or a subsequent screening, the narration script should be read against the picture, or the narration track, if already recorded, played back with the picture. At this time, the editor should decide which scenes or sequences should be shortened and where any additional shots are needed to smooth continuity.

In a nutshell—cut, view, re-cut and re-view until satisfied or until you can say "This is it!"

## Judgment In Creative Editing

It is but natural to assume that if editing is one of the most vital processes in the construction of a motion picture, the editor must be a highly skilled and creative person. The question is often asked: "Where does one go to school to learn how to become a skilled and creative film editor?" There is but one school where the art and science of film editing can really be learned—the school of *experience*. Invariably, editing competence is the result of cutting thousands of feet of film, of applying available basic techniques and the refinements that result from trial-and-error procedure.

A film editor invariably is called upon to make a wide range of decisions: He must judge what footage is good and what is bad; he must choose between all the possible ways of arranging the shots in sequence; he must select the most appropriate cutting point at every scene change; and he must objectively evaluate his decisions in view of the total film and revise his work so that the parts have the correct proportion to the whole.

The basis for the editor's creative decisions is the whole art of film-making. While the choices in every case are intimately related to the peculiarities of the film under construction, still, some rough generalizations are possible concerning the way judgements are made in creative editing. Also, some handy rules-of-thumb for typical situations can be suggested:

## Judging Good and Bad Footage

Throw out the obviously unusable footage first if it is technically bad or doesn't show what it is supposed to show.

When several takes of a scene are available for comparison, compare them *technically* for exposure, composition, steadiness and focus; *content-wise*, for naturalness of expression, economy of action, favorableness of viewpoint, and for continuity with surrounding scenes.

When judgment involves sync sound, choose between the sound takes on the basis of best pronunciation, emphasis, and rate of delivery. Then check the photography on the best sound takes.

## Sequence Arrangement

In choosing the arrangement of shots in sequence, aim to orient the viewer (or audience) regarding the subject or its environment. Here, the following



*What kind of strange man-beast is a film editor?*

*We don't think he can be stereotyped. Each one has his own method of working and his own idiosyncrasies. All have something in common—the good ones, at least. Invariably they are patient, creative persons with an eye for seemingly minute detail. Beyond this they have an insight and feeling for film movement, which gives direction to the pattern of cutting-and-splicing, cutting-and-splicing.*



cutting procedures are recommended:

For straightforward story telling: LS-MS-CU-LS.

For slow pace, gradually increasing interest: LS-MS-MCU-CU.

For fast pace, excitement, shock: LS-CU.

For suspense, drama: CU-CU-CU-LS.

To preserve a sense of reality, match action carefully and maintain screen direction (exit left, enter right, etc.). Use cut-aways or reaction shots to bridge jumps in the action.

Good cutting anticipates the viewer's expectations; so show him the next thing he expects to see. Is it the chain of events or the actor's reaction? After action, show reaction, and vice versa.

Give a hint, or artistic preparation, or unusual things to come. For drama, increase the emotional load by holding back the view of the inevitable.

When cutting dialog scenes, use closeups when important sentences are spoken. Use medium shots generally, thus saving closeups for emphasis. Show the listener when his reaction is important.

## Selecting the Cutting Point

With matched action:  
Cut on irrelevant but eye-catching movement.

Show whole action without cutting if it is significant.

Cut to the better viewpoint just before an action occurs.

Have actions and cuts evenly spaced for a rhythm of occurrences which maintains the viewer's interest.

With dialogue:  
Cut in the pause between sentences or ideas.

Cut in the middle of a sentence to show a reaction.

Lead the conversation; show the person before he talks.

Cut late for interruptions.  
Cut sentences tight to quicken pace, loose to slow the pace.

With narration:  
When picture and narration are closely related, start narration after picture appears.

Start narration immediately (6-8 frames after picture) for fast pace.

Hold narration back (20-30 frames after picture) for leisurely pace.

If scene is unusual, describe it immediately.

If picture and narration are loosely related, start picture well after the narration.

For a change of subject, allow plenty of old and new picture between sentences to close one idea and establish the next.

Where optical effects and a subject-change occur together, make sure narration is finished before the effect occurs, and start new sentence only after picture is again clear.

Where optical effects are used with two scenes related to a given subject, tighten the narration to the edge of the effect; or, preferably, let the narration run completely over the effect.

When cutting between sentences concerned with the same subject, determine the proper pause from previous sentence breaks. Start the new picture about two-thirds through the pause. That is, allow about twice as much



time for the old picture to finish as for the new picture to start.

When introducing a surprise, let the cut to the picture coincide with the start of the key word.

#### Re-evaluating The Total Film

Following the initial editing of the first rough-cut of a picture, the next step is to review it carefully and look for opportunities to improve it. Here are four important points to consider:

Is the rate of presentation of each sequence appropriate to the surrounding sequences, and to its location in the first film? If not, the long, slow sequences will need tightening.

Is the emphasis placed on a given sequence (by unusual photography or editing) appropriate to the attention the subject or sequence deserves? If not, the striking sequences must be shortened or the unusual scenes removed.

Is the style of editing consistently appropriate to the subject matter? If not, the off-beat sequences must be re-edited in a more sympathetic style.

Is the film too long for a given task or a given budget, or does it present the subject too hastily? If so, it must be re-edited extensively. It is better to have the film too long at first, because it can be shortened more easily than it can be lengthened.

As the reader may gather from the foregoing, there is—as stated earlier—a lot more to editing a motion picture than splicing scenes together in sequence. The truly creative editor doesn't become proficient at his trade through theory. He achieves proficiency by working with film, although theory and reading up on film techniques are good starting points. Film editing calls for making hundreds of decisions with confidence. Not all may be the right decisions, for even the best and most experienced editors will make an occasional mistake. Indeed, there probably is not a film editor in the industry who doesn't learn something new with each new film he cuts. ■

(To be continued)

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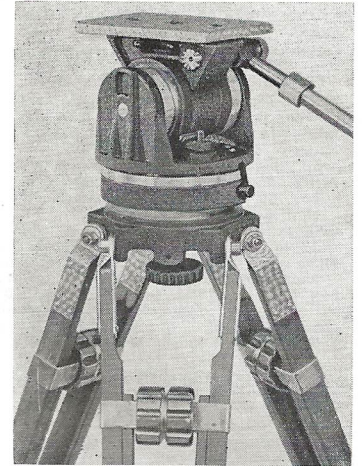
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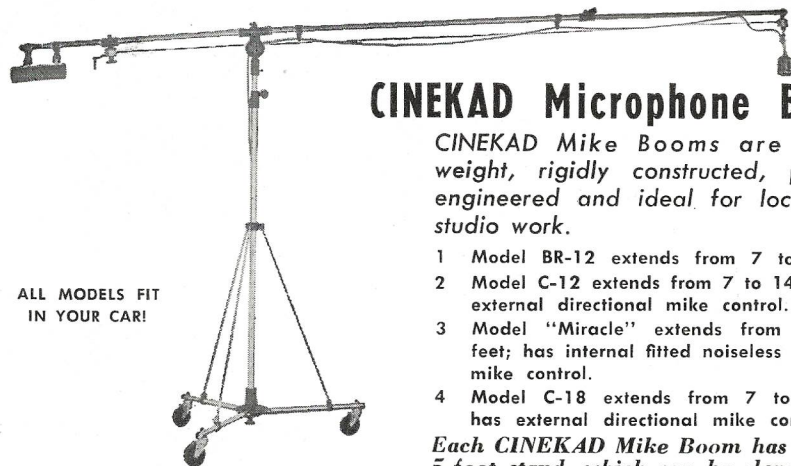
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