

## Tempo and Tension

MAYA DEREN

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

But relatively little attention has been given to the circumstance that he is also required to be his own cutter; and the fact that he must fill both functions can result in far finer filmmaking 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 does not consist 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 that of 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 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 the cutting process, then, duration not only serves to show or identify something; it is also a statement of value, of importance.

To determine 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* (1945). 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 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 that 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 therefore 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 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 the person 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 the person 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 close-up 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 either by cutting off 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 by holding the long shot until he has started to pull out the chair, and letting the close-up cut in after the chair movement has 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 close-up 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 close-up (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 continuation 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* (1946). 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 the 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 an earlier film, *At Land* (1944), it was necessary to extend the time of a girl climbing up a large driftwood tree root, far beyond the time the action would actually take. The girl climbed the tree three times, entering at the bottom 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.

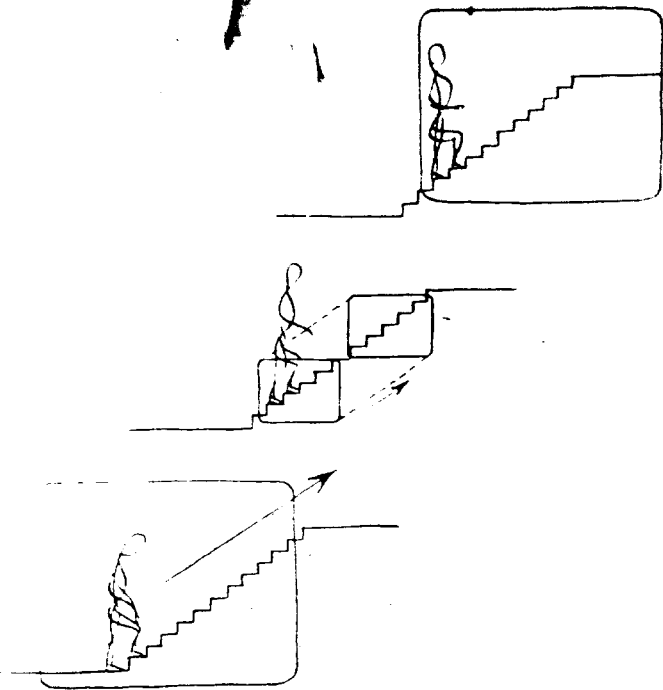
The furthest extension of this principle which I have thus far attempted occurs in the party sequence of *Ritual in Transfigured Time*. My idea was that the reason people go to parties is to establish personal, social relationships; that, if all the long static conversational pauses were omitted, there would emerge a sort of dance, consisting of people moving toward one another, passing one per-

son 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 that 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.

*Movie Makers*, May 1947



\* Device of camera viewpoint which enabled author to extend apparent length of stairway in scene made an ordinary flight in dwelling house.

**T**O MOST filmers there comes, sooner or later, the impulse to go beyond disconnected shots of children, pets, vacation scenery and friends and to attempt something in the way of an organized, imaginative movie.

The most common trap that one who follows the impulse is likely to fall into is that of a false start. Having mastered the rudimentary, obvious skills of composition and sequencing, he ceases to reflect about them and, all too frequently, does one of three things. He plans more ambitious scenarios; he develops his inventive powers by constructing "gadgets" and making trick shots; or he works toward the purely technical perfection of his camera handling and is preoccupied with exposure, filters and the like.

Two equally competent filmers, given similar equipment and the same story, will not turn out equally effective films. The inequality will result from the fact that one person has *used his camera* more effectively, and the other less effectively. By "effective" I do not mean efficient. Let us see why.

*Emotion through framing.* The term, "framing," we may define as the conscious selection of a viewpoint for the camera that will evoke a particular reaction from the beholder of the finished movie. Framing can be either elementary or imaginatively intelligent and complex. Elementary framing can be simply holding the camera level and centering in the viewfinder the object to be filmed.

# Efficient

MAYA DEREN

It is merely efficient. On a little more advanced basis, it can mean the choice of a pleasing view that follows the time tried rules of graphic composition. But really effective framing may call for tilting the camera, providing a shifting viewpoint with a moving camera or placing an important object off center. In the first instance, efficient framing plays a passive, minimum rôle in the film. It competently shows the object which is to be seen on the screen. In the last instance, effective framing plays an active, maximum rôle.

As an example of how creatively important framing can be when it is used inventively, I should like to refer to a sequence from *Meshes of the Afternoon*, made by Alexander Hackenschmied and myself. The problem was to convey a sense of endless climbing upstairs, with all the fatigue and frustration implicit in such an experience. The stairway which was available was a single, rather short flight, such as might be found in any home. The first shot was taken with a wide angle lens. It included the floor of the room at the bottom of the stairs. It showed the stairway in most of its length, but with a most important omission. It did not show the top landing. In this shot, a girl enters the scene at the bottom of the stairs and goes up, disappearing at the top. Now comes a shot, taken with a three inch lens, from below the action, which lets us see the girl's feet as they travel upward. This shot shows neither the bottom nor the top landing. A last shot, taken from above, presents, for the first time, the top of the stairs. It does not show the bottom of the flight. In it we see the girl coming up the stairs into the camera. In this third shot, the girl travels all the length of the stairs, excluding the few at the bottom which are eliminated in order to prevent the bottom landing from being registered in the scene.

When these three shots are edited into a sequence, the effect on the beholder is that of an endless climb. Actually,

\* At the left we see the effect of speed, secured by filming close action at right angle with telephoto lens; center, the human eye for which camera's lens substitute in really effective filming; frame at right shows use of wide angle lens, to give both an object in closeup and a background in well defined focus.

16mm. scenes by Maya



## Efficient or effective?

[Continued from page 211]

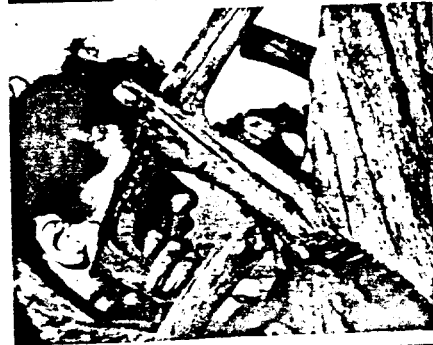
ing the point of view of the eye. we shall see readily that any departure from a position with which the eye could easily identify itself must be handled with great care. The exaggerations of a very low angle are effective in conveying a sense of the power of a person or object, but the filmer must make sure that the impression will be, "What a tall man!" and not "What a low angle!"

Angles are very useful to emphasize direction of movement and to extend actual space. In the film, *At Land*, I wanted to increase the time that was required for a girl to climb a dead tree trunk. The first shot was made from a high angle, showing the ground beneath and the girl climbing upward. The second shot was made with a level camera, and it showed a horizon—part land and part sky—with the girl climbing into the scene and on out of it. The third shot, from a low angle, showed only sky in the background, and again the girl climbed into the scene and up through it. The same section of the tree trunk was used for each shot, and the whole action in each of the scenes took place only about three feet from the ground. Yet, because of the succession of viewpoints, one gained the impression on the screen that the girl climbed from the ground, up through eye level and still upward over the head of the beholder—or over the camera's eye.

Angles can establish relationships between people or objects. The conversation of two persons becomes more convincing if A is filmed from slightly to the side and from behind B (with B or a part of B's face in the foreground) and if the method is reversed to film B. Angles can produce extension of action if they are combined with imaginative editing. A person can be filmed reaching for something, with the camera at an angle behind him, so that his arm stretches away from the camera, reaching to the edge of the scene. We then see a shot taken with the camera in front of the person, which shows the object of his reach dominant in the scene and his arm coming toward it and toward the camera. The movements of the arm would actually overlap. That is, in the second movement, the arm would cover part of the same area that it covered in the first, but the difference in angle would make the movement appear on the screen to be continuous rather than repetitive.

*The scene area.* Another important factor in effective framing is the determination of the scene area. It involves both the selection of the lens to be used and the distance of the subject

also depends upon the emotional intent, because what is included in a scene will affect the emotion aroused by it. If a person or an object is of primary importance, a closeup is in order, as it concentrates the entire attention of the audience on a facial expression or a particular object, eliminating meaningless and distracting details. Too often a person is so filmed that he is seen from the head down to the waist, even if the face alone is important. But the decision of what to include or reject is a delicate one, since, under some con-



• Angles from sequence, in order from top to bottom, showing climbing scene on beach.

ditions, the clothes worn by an actor—or the movement of his clothes in the wind, for instance—may make a real contribution to the mood of the scene.

Sometimes a clear relationship should be established between objects in the scene or between a person and the landscape. Here, a long, inclusive shot would be needed. Again, both the facial expression of an actor and the locale in which he is placed should be evident. The combination of closeup and more extended view is best filmed with a wide angle lens, as it preserves the size and clarity both of the distant background and of the actor close to the camera.

Decisions about scene area and the

lens to be used in recording it have real weight in film planning, and they should not be made arbitrarily or superficially.

*Movement within the scene.* Movement can be given an increased emotional effect, depending on the relation between the moving object and the background of the scene. If it is desired to accentuate the effect of any movement by a marked increase in what would be its normal speed on the screen, it can be remembered that the more nearly at a right angle to the camera the movement takes place, the more quickly will the moving object travel from one side of the scene to another. Consequently, if a person passes through the scene close to the camera and directly across the scene, he will appear on the screen to be moving more rapidly and determinedly than if he is filmed in a long shot and if he moves at an acute angle.

If the fact of moving is what the filmer wants to emphasize, this right angled direction will be helpful. It can also serve to give the impression of extended traversing, without actually covering large areas. A series of closeups in which a figure passes through the scene, filmed from angles that will conceal the repetitiousness of the background and edited with a continuity of direction and movement, will create a screen impression of increased travel.

Maybe emphasis is sought for the destination of the movement or the conditions surrounding it. Then it would be most effective to include the destination or condition in the scene, either by a long shot which includes both the person and the place, or by pointing the camera at the condition—such as a stony, tortuous path—and letting just the feet of the actor move through the scene. To render the loneliness of a man on a beach, a long shot in which he is small and the background is dominant would be very effective. If a man is angry and we wish to show his determination to walk out of the scene, a long shot in which he recedes from the camera, diminishing in size as the distance increases, would convey the emotional intent.

In these situations the selection of the lens from the standpoint of the perspective which it affords is of primary importance. The wide angle lens, with its exaggerated perspective, will make the man diminish in size and recede in distance much more rapidly—that is, taking only a relatively short film footage—than would a longer focal length lens, in the use of which the person would have to walk for some time while the camera is running, before he would appear on the screen to have gone far away.

*The moving camera.* All these considerations have dealt with the effective use of framing when the camera is

## MOVIE MAKERS

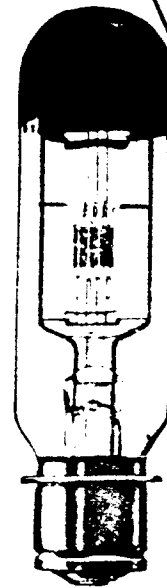


self stationary. The possibilities of truly effective framing with a moving camera are most interesting, especially if we remember that the camera can be considered as an eye, and that an eye is part of a mobile body, a body whose direction and speed are often motivated by what the eye sees.

In the "dolly shot," where the camera is most completely mobile, we can achieve a purely cinematic effect, in the sense that the dolly shot can create on the screen apparent motion in the scene which did not take place in reality, but motion which serves an effective emotional purpose. A painting or a photograph can, if necessary, give you a fairly accurate idea of movement within the area which is presented. A motion picture of the usual kind, made with a stationary camera, can show actual motion. But only the dolly shot can simulate the changing position of the moving beholder, who thus progresses both in space and in time. Although the long established movie transition of the cut from long shot, to medium shot, to closeup takes the audience along in space, it carries with it the desired unity of time only because we have come to accept a convention that this kind of sequencing is intended to represent continuous action. Actually, the cut, according to another convention and in another context, can represent an unpictured lapse of time. In the dolly shot, the illusion depends upon no convention. It is a true time and space relationship, by means of which the filmer can control not only how many spatial situations shall be presented, but, as well, the exact time in which they shall be offered. It is limited, of course, by the feasible speed and distance of the dolly's travel.

When a person sees something that interests him, he usually goes up to it to get a closer view. The dolly shot simulates the action of the curious person and it gives to the object approached a reality and an interest that transcend those supplied by usual cine transitions. It is a perfect example of the method of projecting into the movement of the camera the emotion which the filmer wants his audience to feel. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a number of inanimate objects were of considerable symbolic importance. Since they could not, themselves, move in an important way, their importance was created by having the camera approach them in a dolly shot. In some cases, the camera discovered them in a "pan" shot, coming to rest on the object singled out for attention. These objects achieved an active quality which is not usually thought of in connection with still life.

The dolly shot can be used not only



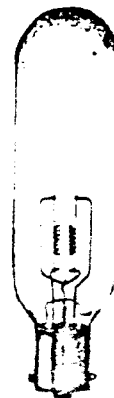
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son. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, for example, it was necessary to bring a girl down the stairs of a two story house. Instead of filming her as she descended the stairs, the camera "dollied" down—it was carried in the hand—as if from her point of view, and her descent became a sensation of plunging, which was emotionally appropriate at that point in the picture. Although she is not seen in the shot, her presence in it is all the more real.

The much criticized "pan" shot can be given really meaningful use. The pace of the shot plays an important rôle, as does the lens that is employed. A panorama executed with a wide angle lens will convey a much more leisurely and relaxed impression than one made with a long focus lens—even if the filmer covered the same total area and moved the camera at the same speed. The wide angle lens, by including a greater area at all times, gives the sort of overall picture which projects the sensation of the unhurried, wandering eye. The long focus lens, on the other hand, introduces one surprising detail after another, with relative rapidity, thus creating a sense of tension or search. The pace of the "pan" can be even further exploited for special situations. If, for example, a fire broke out and a person were desperately looking for something with which to extinguish it, his eye would slur from one object to another very rapidly, and a very quick, blurred panorama, culminating in a rapid succession of montage like cuts, would be more effective in conveying the sense of urgency than would a "pan" which dutifully permitted each inch over which it passed to register with equal emphasis. Here, the way the camera moves contains within itself the reason why it moves, and the rapidity conveys the sense of urgency. Similarly, a slow "pan" conveys the boredom or the laziness of the eye which looks for something to amuse it.

The "swing pan" (also called the "swish pan") can be considered either as an extension of the simple panorama or as an entirely independent development. In *Meshes of the Afternoon* there is a sequence in which a girl, running rapidly, is trying to catch up with another person who, it happens, walks in slow motion. The sequence is made in this way. There is first a slow motion shot, from behind, of the person followed. The camera watches him for a moment, as he walks away from it; then it swings very rapidly to the left. The scene cuts to a shot which begins with another rapid swing to the left, coming to a stop on the girl who runs toward the camera at normal speed and on out of the scene. This action is repeated several times, with the person who moves in slow motion shown farther from the camera each time. Here

the "swing pan" (made by cutting the film at the point where the rapid swing blurs out the objects) performs a number of functions. First, it gives the illusion of merely condensing the space which could be covered by a simple panorama. From a practical viewpoint, it allows a change of camera speed; it makes possible the filming of each of the persons on different days (a necessity in this instance); it permits the repeated use of the same stretch of road; it creates a "chase" relationship (including the illusion that the girl could not catch up with the other person) and a "chase" timing between the two persons which would otherwise have been very difficult to achieve.

The possibilities of the moving camera are infinite. There can be the scene that tilts from side to side, suggesting a rocking motion. There can be the panorama which catches up with another moving object, giving the sense of pursuit or discovery on the part of the audience.

The search for effectiveness—beyond mere efficiency—marks the truly alert filmer. Whatever the camera does—whether it moves or stands still, shows much area or little—it will be effective only if each technical device is employed for a real purpose and not because it is a curious and interesting thing in itself. It can never be used successfully without thought. It should always convey in visual and cinematic terms the emotion or idea which is required at just that precise point in the plan of the film. Clear, creative thinking and an exact use of equipment produce good movies.

**The clinic**

[Continued from page 220]

background—especially near the borders of the screen—are not present. They have learned to examine a scene to be filmed in color with especial attention to the possible appearance of distracting elements in the projected picture. Not only do they give thought to the general guides to good composition for all pictures, monochromatic or colored; they also watch the borders of the scene in the viewfinder for objects and colors that will bring confusion to the screen.

Getting rid of these unwanted parts of a scene cannot be taken care of entirely by the control of light, because colors may be so falsified by this method that they will be equally distracting, even if they are thrown into shadow. The only certain way to make Kodachrome filming artistically selective is to make sure that, in the scene to be filmed, distractions are absent. Hard, yes, in many instances; but the rewards of excellent Kodachrome scenes are adequate compensation for watching the borders.



# RITUAL IN TRANSFIGURED TIME

**R**itual In Transfigured Time is the fourth film to be made by Maya Deren who has achieved a unique reputation for creative, experimental work in the movie medium. Miss Deren's first film, made in 1943, was entitled *Meshes of the Afternoon* and dealt with the subconscious emotional experience of a single protagonist. It was produced in collaboration

with her husband, Alexander Hammid, eminent in the field of documentary films. Miss Deren's second picture, *At Land*, centered on "the effort of the individual to relate himself as an identity to a fluid, apparently incoherent universe." *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* was her third production. Approximately three minutes in length, it treated cinematographic space as an active element of the dance. The dancer shared responsibility for the movements with the camera and the cutting to create a dance which could not have been performed otherwise than on film.

Miss Deren's latest production, recently shown for the first time at Prov-

one actual dance sequence, a duet between Rita Christiani and Frank Westbrook, is a stylization of the gestures occurring throughout the film





**an experimental film  
which creates a dance  
with non-dance  
elements by  
choreographic use of the  
movie medium**

**by MAYA DEREN**

incetown Playhouse in New York, runs sixteen minutes and is a picture without plot or story line. Except for the two principle performers, Rita Christiani, who has toured with *Carmen Jones*, and Frank Westbrook, who has worked with Valerie Bettis and the Humphrey Weidman group as well as appearing in Broadway musicals, the picture was made with non-professionals. Photographed on 16 millimeter film, the picture took ten months to produce at a cost of \$900. The camera was handled by Hella Heyman who also gave technical assistance on *At Land*.

By combining a series of non-dance movements within a film pattern, Miss Deren has realized a dance in terms of the effects which are the unique property of the movie medium and has achieved more poetry of motion and emotion than is customarily found on the ballet or modern dance stage. In its exciting use of the camera, *Ritual in Transfigured Time* serves as a criticism of 99 per cent of the Hollywood film product.

Although Miss Deren's motion pictures have evolved no new cinema technique and although they derive their inspiration from the classic screen works of D. W. Griffith and other pioneers in movie-making, her productions are distinguished by qualities too rarely found in films today. By creative use of such facets of the film vocabulary as the closeup, slow motion, cutting, and use of negative, she is able to set forth her cinematic thesis in terms of vivid and incisive imagery. Hers is still another vindication of the screen as an art at a time when art is rapidly disappearing from the film scene. The following paragraphs are Miss Deren's own comments on her new picture, its technique and intent.

*Editor's Note.*

THE previous film which I made, *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*, was an effort to remove the dancer from the static space of a theatre stage to one which was as mobile and volatile as he himself. It was, actually a duet—between Talley Beatty, who danced, and space, which was made to dance by means of the camera and cutting.

*Ritual in Transfigured Time* carries many steps further this concept of creating dance out of non-dancing elements. Except for Rita Christiani and Frank Westbrook, none of the other people who appear in the film are dancers; and save for a brief sequence, the actual movements are not themselves dance movements. What makes this a dance film, or a film dance, is that all the movements—stylized or casual, full-figured or detailed—are related to each other, both immediately and over the film as a whole, according to a choreographic concept.

For example, if one were to omit from an actual party all the long conversational pauses, there would be left mainly that constant moving pattern of smiling, social anxiety; each person seeking to reach someone at the other end of the room, or moving, tentatively, to meet someone new, or embracing an old friend, or edging away from someone dull towards someone interesting. Taking this general theme as the choreographic motif of a party sequence, I have joined together a shot of one person beginning a movement and another person continuing it and still another completing it. These shots are held together not by the constant identity of an individual performer, but by the emotional integrity of the movement itself, independent of its performer. Or I have photographed a complex group movement of cross-purposes, which could only happen in that special way once, and then

By use of the camera, the gestures of hands and arms are choreographed into a rhythmic dance pattern. Left: The protagonist, Rita Christiani, at the opening of the imaginary film ritual which will transform her from widow to bride. Right: Shots from a sequence at a party where a living dance is created from movements of a whole group.

used it more than once. In the film itself I would sometimes use only the end of the movement the first time, and then the whole of it later, for that peculiar shock of discovering the history of an episode which one imagined one already knew completely. Towards the end of that sequence these repetitions follow rapidly, one upon the other, so that the party becomes increasingly "un-natural" and so leads to the next sequence in which the movements themselves become stylized.

In the actual dance passage, Frank Westbrook collaborated with me in the effort to design dance movements which would not be suddenly new, but which, in their stylization, would seem but the climactic extension of the ordinary, casual movements of the party scene. The transitions into and out of the dance duet between Frank Westbrook and Rita Christiani had to be accomplished so imperceptibly that, in the end, it would be difficult to say just when the individual movement joined with the film pattern of the whole to become dance. At the same time, even the dance movements themselves were planned, again, (as in *A Study in Choreography for the Camera*) with the active participation of a volatile film-space and of the camera which could contribute its varying speeds, angles, lenses, etc., towards the creation of a filmic dance.

Obviously the realization of such a complex series of concepts would have been impossible without the sincere creative effort of both Miss Christiani and Mr. Westbrook to free themselves from the habits of their long stage experience in order to enter a new idiom of dance creation.

However, even the two dancers do not themselves dance throughout the film, for the main effort has been to create dance out of non-dance elements by filmic manipulation. In this sense,





Left: The dance duet which culminates the party scene turns into a statue sequence. Frank Westbrook, who plays a role which resembles that of the high priest of tribal rituals, terrifies the widow, Rita Christiani, who flees as he changes from statue to man. Right: Her widow's weeds of the party scene become a bridal gown in film negative.



the pattern, created by the film instrument, transcends the intentions and the movements of the individual performers, and for this reason I have called it *Ritual*. I base myself upon the fact that, anthropologically speaking, a ritual is a form which depersonalizes by use of masks voluminous garments, group movements, etc., and, in so doing, fuses all individual elements into a transcendent tribal power towards the achievement of some extraordinary grace.

Such communal efforts are usually reserved for the accomplishment of some critical metamorphosis, and, above all, for some inversion towards life; the passage from sterile winter into fertile spring, mortality into immortality, the child-son into the man-father. So, at the end of this film, the widow in her black weeds of the first sequence becomes, by use of a nega-



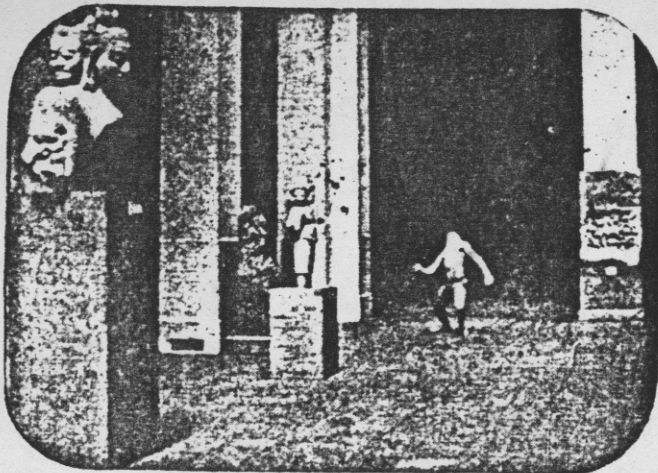
tive, the bride in her white gown. Being a film ritual, it is achieved not only in spatial terms but in terms of a Time created by the camera. Time, here, is not an emptiness to be measured by a spatial activity which may fill it. On the contrary, in this film it not only actually creates many of the actions and events, but constitutes the special integrity of the form as a whole.

*Ritual in Transfigured Time* develops even further the special emphasis upon form which governed, to an increasing extent, my previous films. It has become necessary to provide this now clarified emphasis with at least a tentative name, for any recourse, out of sheer expediency, to such familiar terms as "surrealist" or "abstract" might inhibit understanding of the films themselves by prejudicing the anticipations of

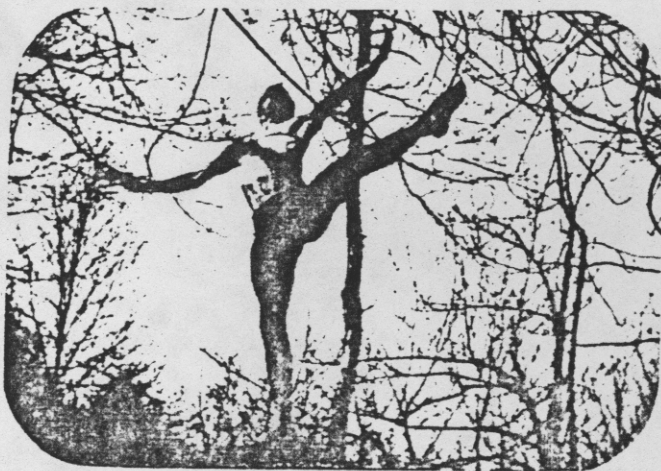
the spectator and distort his perception by fixing attention (and so confining it) upon some single aspect which, when isolated, might bear superficial resemblance to films of another nature. These films employ elements of reality—people, places and things—and so are unlike abstract films which may also, at times, employ such elements but primarily for their plastic values. They are equally distant, if not more so, from the surrealist method of spontaneous self-expression. I would like to use the word "classicist" to describe *Ritual in Transfigured Time* precisely because it does not define according to the elements of the content—factual, fictional, abstract or psychological. It is a concept of method: a controlled manipulation of any or all elements into a form which will transcend and transfigure them.



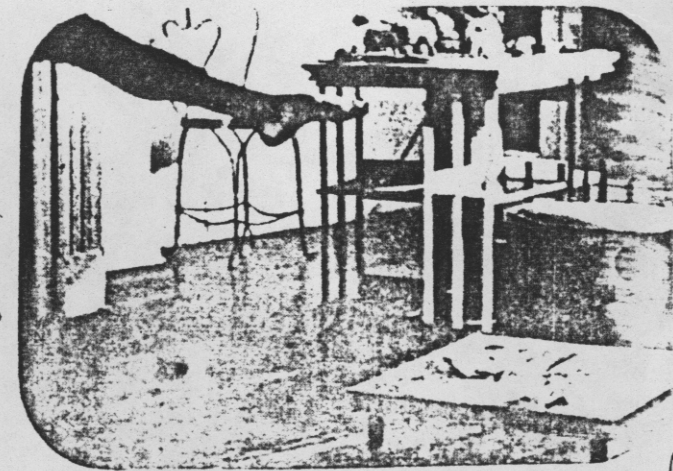
15  
**A NEW DIMENSION—TIME**



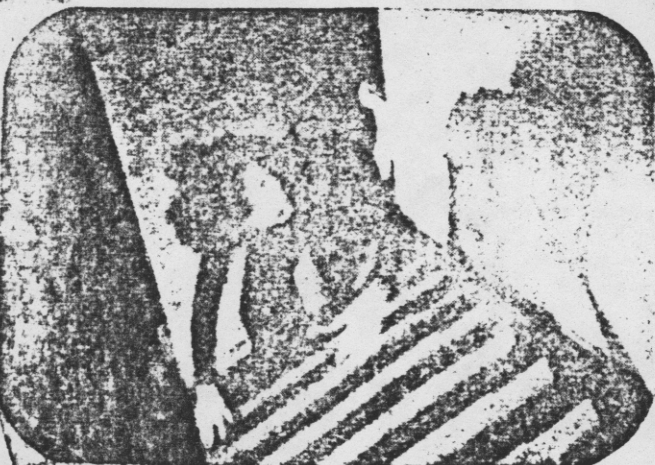
In this third frame from her film, Maya Deren shows Beatty at the end of what appears to be a very deep hall. Actually it is shorter than it seems. Miss Deren, wife of film documentarian Alexander Hammid, stresses ideas over technique.



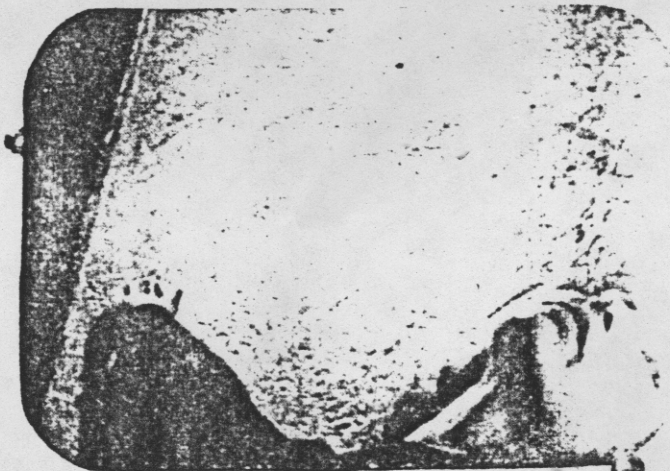
In the second of the series, the dancer has begun to lower his leg. It is then that Miss Deren uses the continuity of rhythm and pacing of human movement (plus a bit of careful editing) to bind together two otherwise unrelated locations.



In the third, the movement is completed—only the background has changed to that of a living room. The editing technique used gives the film a dream-like quality . . . that an action begun in one setting has been completed in another.



SWills from "Meshes of the Afternoon" show how emotional effect can be secured with camera tilting. The girl, who attempts to climb the stairs, is frustrated by the rocking of the stairway. She appears to be pitching from side to side.



Actually, the girl (it's Miss Deren) threw herself to one side while the photographer (Alexander Hammid) tilted his camera in the opposite direction. Movements were so synchronized that the girl appeared lurching from side to side.

By  
**MAYA DEREN**

*Holder of Guggenheim Fellowship for film work analyzes new creative fields within the scope of the ciné camera for average amateurs . . . and emphasizes that technique should be subordinate to good ideas*

The location of this particular shot is the Egyptian Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Hall (which has natural illumination through a glass roof) is square, and small enough to permit a dancer to travel its length and back in a short period of time. If I had used the regular one inch lens, the shot might have been pleasing but hardly startling. However, I used a wideangle lens—my main purpose in doing this was not so much to solve the follow-focus problem, as it was to use the exaggerated perspective of a wideangle lens to achieve a startling relationship between time and space.

Through the lens, the dancer—moving towards the back of the hall—seemed to become distant in terms of size without

**Editor's Note:** *Maya Deren—who authored this article for us is a rather remarkable young woman with a somewhat different approach to film making. She is at the present time a holder of a Guggenheim Fellowship for creative film work. Much of her time is spent in lecturing on the moving picture and in showing her films, three of which she talks of in this article. Her audiences do not feel a need for sound as they watch her pictures which are concerned with using the moving picture as a visual art form, not as an audio-visual form. Miss Deren is married to Alexander Hammid, film documentarian, whose still work has recently appeared in POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY. They live in New York's Greenwich Village.*

taking a normally long time to do so. In terms of normal vision, the dancer would have had to run much longer and farther. But in a matter of seconds, with the aid of the wideangle lens, through which the hall appeared much deeper, the dancer, starting in closeup, danced into the depth of the hall where he looked tiny and distant, and, returning rapidly became large and close again. A still photographer, photographing a dancer in the Egyptian Hall, would have had entirely different considerations in mind.

Concern with the time elements of film is important, also, in the handling of the camera frame. For a motion picture camera presents one with all the potentialities of a moving frame. For example, in *Meshes Of The Afternoon* (another of my pictures) a camera tilting from side to side was used to give the impression of a rocking stairway. This scene comes at a moment in the film in which it was necessary to convey an impression that even an ostensibly inanimate staircase conspired (as do other objects in the film) to frustrate a girl in her effort to arrive somewhere. The figure which had preceded the girl climbed the stairs with ordinary ease. But those same stairs became active and seemed to throw the girl back when she tried to follow.

To shoot the scene, Alexander Hammid photographed with the camera hand-held, standing at the top of the stairs, and I.

who happened to act in this sequence, started up the bottom of the stairs, towards the camera, simulating a heavy, uneven fall first to the right and then to the left. We so synchronized our movements that when I fell to my right, he tilted the camera to his left and vice versa. Thus, my falls seemed to be induced by a pitching of the stairs.

Here again, no special attention was paid to the spatial composition within an individual frame, but the movement over a series of frames was composed for a period of time. And note that the tilting was not merely a display of the technique virtuosity of which the motion picture camera is capable, but that it was used as the best method through which a particular emotion could be described.

The moving frame of a motion picture camera also makes it possible to determine not only what the audience sees (which is the completed intention of a still photograph) but also when they see it. This function can be used to portray not only the emotion of surprise and discovery—as when a room is revealed bit by bit during a panoramic shot—but it can also be used to conceal a manipulation of the camera. In one sequence of my film *At Land*, I wished to establish the continuity of a girl walking down a road, and at the same time her relationship to a person walking with her, to her right, while the identity of that person remained fluid and uncertain. It is really a "change of identity" scene similar to the common dream in which one person's identity changes to another's before our eyes.

The scene begins with a long-shot of a deserted country road. A girl walks towards the camera, and when she has advanced into a closeup, the camera begins travelling with her, keeping her in a front view at a constant distance. When the camera shifts the view to the girl's side, it reveals a boy walking with her, also in medium closeup (although when we saw the girl at a distance, he was not there). He starts talking to her, and the camera shifts back to her as she answers him, and then back to him—except that now it is another boy. He picks up the conversation, the camera pans to her as she answers, then back to the right, but it is now still another boy. This same thing happens a number of times.

The effect was achieved very simply. The first boy fell in step with the girl while the camera held her in closeup. The other, alternating men, waited behind the camera, on the right side of the road. As the girl and first boy advanced towards them, the camera panned to the girl. Meanwhile, on the right side of the road, which was now out of frame, the first boy ducked behind the camera while the second boy took his place, so that when the camera returned to the right side of the road, it found another person there. Thus, the almost unreal effect, the almost dream-like quality, was easily achieved.

The fact that a camera can be moved from one location to another, and that the various shots can follow each other immediately, in the process of editing, is also a capacity unique to motion pic-

tures. In the dance film, *A Study In Choreography For Camera*, I took a shot of the dancer Talley Beatty as he began to lower his leg in a birch-tree forest. Then I took a shot, in closeup, of the leg being lowered into an apartment. When these two shots are cut together so as to keep the leg movement continuous, it seems as if he steps, without pause, from a forest exterior to an apartment interior, and conveys a sense of movement through space. In other words, I have used the integrity of a human movement—its continuity of rhythm and pacing—to bind together locations which are



In her film, "At Land," the author makes use of the versatility of the cine camera to depict a day-dreaming quality.

otherwise unrelated. This is obviously a use of the time potentialities of film, in that it rests upon the rhythm of movement and upon the fact that two separate locations can be cut together on the strength of that rhythm.

The same technique was employed in *Meshes Of The Afternoon*, where the girl rises from a chair and begins a walking movement forward. This is followed immediately by a series of closeups of the feet as the first stride lands on sand, the second on grass, the third on pavement, and the fourth on a rug. In walking across the room, the girl has covered the immense distance from ocean, through all the other elements, to another chair.

Still another manipulation of the time element in film—and its relationship to space—is made possible by the fact that the motion picture camera records as it runs, that the running can be interrupted at any moment, and resumed on the same frame. This is a camera function that can be used to express a quality best described as follows: All of us are given to day-dreaming as we walk down streets or roads, across fields and beaches. We may walk several blocks without noticing how much space we have covered, how many stores we have passed by, how many buildings—which have not become a part of our conscious thought. That is the emotional reaction I wanted to reproduce in a part of my film *At Land*.

The sequence takes place on a series of sand dunes. It begins with a long-shot of the dunes as a girl enters from the left edge of the frame, climbs a dune in the foreground, and disappears behind a dune on the right of the frame. At this point the camera stops, and great care is taken that it does not jar while it is not running.

Meanwhile, the girl walks on a considerable distance, and then disappears

behind a dune much further along. At this point the camera motor is again started, but since it starts on the spatially identical frame as it stopped upon, there is nothing to indicate that the running was interrupted. As soon as it starts, it begins panning towards the right, as if it had followed her while she was hidden behind the dune. However, instead of seeing her emerge from that dune, it discovers her emerging from a dune much farther away. When it discovers her, the camera stops panning while she again climbs one dune and disappears behind another. Again the camera is stopped, again the girl walks ahead to a further dune. Then the camera starts again, pans, and discovers her—this time a mere speck, very far away.

Since the spatial location is not interrupted but is kept in continuity—that is, since the starting frame of the second part is identical with the stopping frame of the first shot—the action seems continuous. But it is not continuous in time, for it is actually interrupted to permit a certain activity—the long walking—to take place unregistered. And so the girl, who started out so near us, has, in a magic way, become rapidly distant. The alienation is out of proportion to the actual movement, just as in the course of personal relationships there grows, between two persons, a coolness which cannot be traced to any action on the part of either of them.

By these few examples, taken from my own work, I have attempted to explore new creative fields within the scope of the motion picture camera for the beginning film-maker. True, it is fun to picture the baby's third birthday party exactly as it occurs; but it is stimulating and exciting to translate the magic of thoughts and dreams to film. My purpose is to call the attention of all potential film makers to those creative elements which are unique to the motion picture camera, so that their efforts may result in new discoveries and new forms, rather than in imitations of the forms created by other mediums.

It is possible that people may take exception to the basic premise of my work. They may feel that it is the function of the photographer, or of any artist, to reproduce life as we see it. My opinion is that there is no particular value in duplicating something which already exists—except, of course, for purposes of personal or historical record (as birthday parties or new events), or of greater circulation (as travelogues of countries which few people have had an opportunity to see at first hand). I am bored, frankly, and I believe most persons are, with repetitions and reiterations. And I am immensely grateful when someone creates, out of his talent and effort, something which I never could have experienced except through his creation of it.

The desire to discover and to experience something new is responsible for growth and development in the individual, progress in civilization. And so it seems to me that a labor which results in something created, to add to the sum total of the world, is infinitely more valuable than a labor devoted to the repro-

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duction of something already familiar. Thus, the fact that the motion picture camera is capable of creating new relationships between time and space, different from those of any other medium, is what has led me to this emphasis upon the temporal considerations of film making. But, remember—whatever the technique, it must serve the form as a whole, it must be appropriate to the theme and to the logic of its development, rather than a display of method designed to impress other movie makers.—

**NUN IS CINE ENTHUSIAST**



Sister Francis, superintendent of the medical and surgery department of the Little Company of Mary Hospital at Evergreen Park, Illinois, is an avid 16 mm movie enthusiast. She has been shooting an average of 1,000 feet of film a year for the past four years—filming nurses' graduating classes, covering ground-breaking ceremonies in connection with additions to the hospital, shooting dedication exercises, and many other formal and informal happenings about the hospital. Sister Francis is shown with her Bell & Howell 16 mm magazine load camera. She also has a Keystone.—Herbert McLaughlin, Phoenix, Ariz.

**PAPER PUNCH IS CINE AID**



Movie makers will find a paper punch a handy accessory to have. It can be used by the amateur who processes his own movie titles. He can punch a hole in the leader of the film, slip an elastic band through the hole, and attach band to the developing drum to keep the film taut on the drum when contraction or expansion takes place. When editing, the cine amateur can use the punch to quickly mark frames that he wants to delete.—Sidney Pott, Victoria, B.C., Canada.