

BEHIND THE SCREEN

HOW FILMS ARE MADE

EDITED BY

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THE CUTTER

By MARGARET BOOTH

IF you remember that a film is composed of thousands of tiny photographs arranged in a certain order to tell a story, you will realise that to assemble them in the most effective sequence is an exacting and delicate task. I think it has also a claim to be called an artistic one.

This shaping and editing of photographs into dramatic narrative form is the function of the film editor. He or she juggles with photographs as another kind of editor does with words—to make them tell a story.

The cutting-room, which is my workshop, is a very important department of the studio. It is also traditionally a notorious chamber of horrors where, according to actors and actresses, all their best work is hacked by the editor's scissors, where the most beautiful photographs of themselves lie discarded on the floor. The favourite alibis of Hollywood are "You should have seen it before it was cut" and "It is all on the cutting-room floor."

My workshop is a small compact room with an adjacent projection-room, where I review the result of my work, bit by bit.

The procedure is briefly this. When the director has finished shooting a scene he usually orders several prints to be developed. In these he may have the scene taken from three angles—"long shot," "intermediate shot," and "close up," terms which explain themselves. The question

for the cutter is how to intermingle the best of each version of each scene so that its dramatic value is enhanced.

First of all the film is developed in the laboratory and the prints, still unedited, are seen on the screen, usually the next day, by the director, the producer, the cutter, and sometimes members of the cast. These unrelated strips of film, simply the record of the day's work, are known as "rushes."

The best features of each of these prints are discussed and pointed out to the cutter. But the work of the cutting-room really begins from a basketful of jumbled celluloid fragments—the raw material of the finished film. Out of these the cutter must fashion a motion picture. His work can do irreparable damage, or incalculable good.

My first principle, as a film editor, is to aim for smoothness and rhythm. The constant changes of camera position which give the modern motion picture its action must not be noticeable. There must be no jerk or break to hamper illusion or impede the telling of the story. But there is something subtler than that. A good picture has an underlying rhythmic beat, almost like music. Only good editing can bring that out.

If the editor lays claim to being an artist he or she must also accept the necessity of being a showman, for showmanship is one of the secrets of good cutting. A line spoken by a character in a long shot achieves much greater importance if it is stressed and underlined with a close-up. If there is danger of a scene dragging or remaining stationary too long, so that the audience may become impatient, the restorative of interest lies in quickened action. The means of achieving this are in the cutter's hands. A "pan" shot (derived from "panorama"—when the camera moves with the moving scene) fade-outs or fade-ins (the opening or

closing of a scene without a sharp cut)—these are some of the methods used to infuse new life and action into a film.

So the task of the cutter goes on, like solving a huge jig-saw puzzle, made more difficult by the fact that there is no absolute right and wrong, except what his own taste and judgment dictate.

There are, of course, tricks of the trade. If you have a close-up of an actress who looks up when the door bell rings, you first show the person entering the door from her angle. That is the natural transition, to turn from one character and see what she is seeing through her eyes. Nowadays the audience accepts that kind of thing without thought—which is as it should be—but if the cutter did not observe these details it would not take the audience long to be aware of resultant jerkiness.

Naturally, the cutter does not edit the whole film at once. He assembles the pictures which go to make a scene or a little series of scenes, which form a complete section of the story. The edited sequences are shown to the producer and director. It is their film, theirs is the last command, and they may tell the cutter to go back and make changes and corrections.

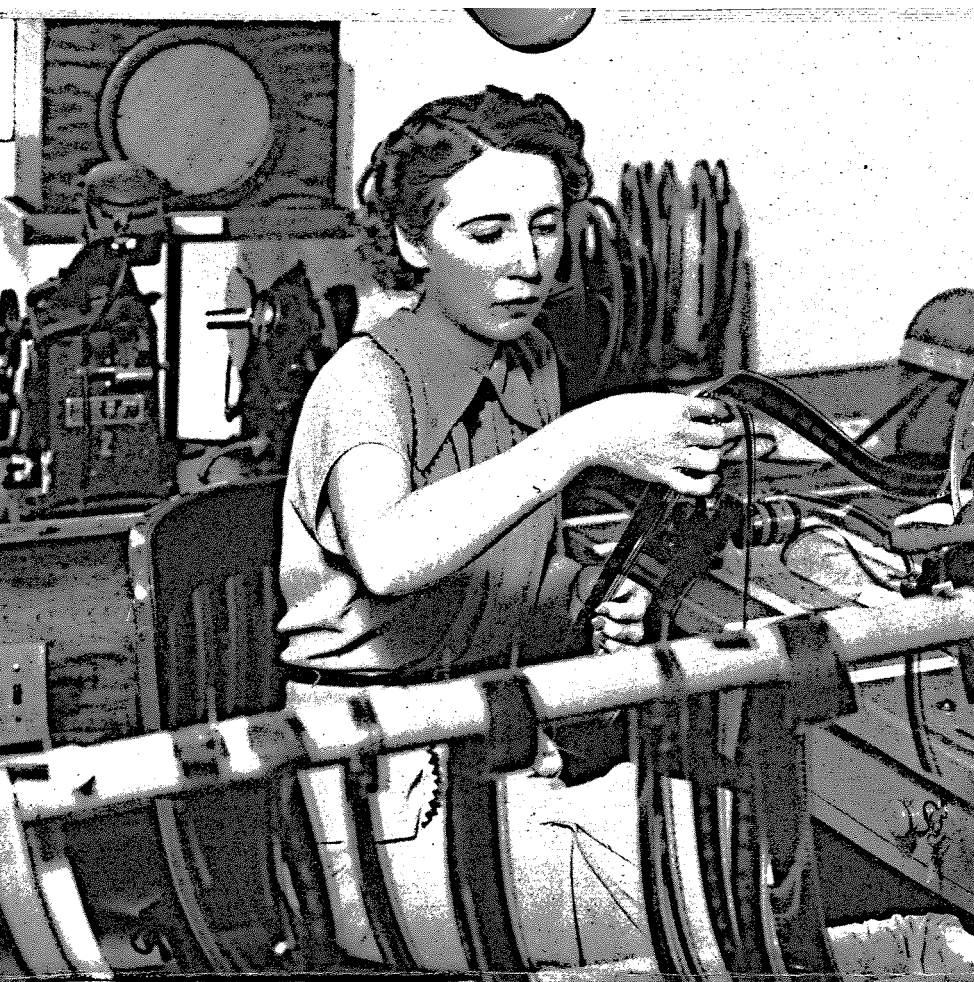
As close co-operation is essential between director and cutter, almost every director has a cutter he prefers, one who, he feels, understands his technique and will give him what he wants. In the old days directors did their own cutting when production was finished. Now with the addition of the sound track—a thin celluloid strip which has to be synchronised with and added to the cut film—the work has become too arduous. But some of the most successful directors of to-day—Clarence Brown, Victor Fleming, and Josef von Sternberg, for example—served a thorough apprenticeship in the cutting-room. I am often asked how I pene-

trated into film-making on a side which is generally regarded as exclusively masculine. It is true that the work is physically hard and demands a degree of technical aptitude which comparatively few women seem to have. My answer is that film-making (apart from the acting side) is so largely a masculine affair that when the men find a feminine point of view available to them, they are very glad to have it. I have often felt that a director has preferred to have me working on his film rather than a male cutter of equal ability and experience, because in the throes of making some important decision over an emotional or psychological scene, he can turn to me and say, "How do you feel about that as a woman?"

In case this may seem to suggest that there is a great field for women as "feminine advisors" in such situations, I had better emphasise that what is being sought is the viewpoint of a woman, versed in the technical implications of any criticism she may offer, who will not only be prepared to put forward an idea, but to help to carry it out in practice.

I have spoken of the work of the cutter as being physically hard. The trying time comes between the end of "shooting the picture" and the date of the preview. During this time we often work twenty-four hours a day. Food is sent in from the studio restaurant and what sleep we get is taken in brief snatches on a camp bed in the cutting-room. The trouble is that once a cutter has started work on a film he or she can no more be replaced effectively, with justice to the picture, than can a good novelist in the middle of a book. Anyhow, fatigue or no fatigue, there is something creative about our job, which makes abhorrent the idea of anybody else taking it on.

The preview is a time of importance and anxiety to everybody concerned with the picture, but to nobody more than



Miss MARGARET BOOTH at work in her cutting room. For easy handling, films are wound on spools or kept in the basket in the foreground, with their ends over the bar so that each length may be quickly identified. At Miss Booth's back is the moviola through which she runs the film, while editing, to see it as it would look on the screen. On the left is a sound machine which reproduces the sound on the film (through the loudspeaker above) to enable her to know what sound accompanies each section of film as she cuts.

the cutter. The preview idea is that if a new film is slipped unexpectedly into the programme at some ordinary representative cinema one night, the producer will be able to get some idea of audience reaction. Then he still has a chance to make alterations before the film is finally issued.

For the cutter, the preview is sometimes the final court of appeal in unusually difficult problems of selection and rejection.

There are times when it is impossible for a cutter to decide which scenes are essential and should be left intact and which are not and should come out.

Approval of certain scenes may be clearly indicated by an audience, whereas the same scenes viewed in an empty projection-room are apt to seem very different. That is the prime reason for previews.

Comedy lines are generally regarded as the most difficult for the cutter to judge. "After the Thin Man" was so replete with them, the director, W. S. Van Dyke, and his cutter decided to leave the selection entirely to preview audiences. The result was that none were cut, even though the picture ran a few minutes over its appointed time. It was felt that the audiences would never know this, because of the highly entertaining quality of the film. In a case like this, if a decision had been made in the cutting-room and a scene scrapped, a piece of successful entertainment would have been lost for ever.

My own opinion is that courtroom scenes are hardest to edit. There are so many important factors to be played up—judge, jurors, witnesses, plaintiff, defendant, spectators. Each must be given its exact amount of dramatic significance.

A cutting-room, to the uninitiated, looks hopelessly cluttered up with reels of film—some piled in baskets, some lying in rolls, some in marked and numbered boxes. But

the cutters, in their minds, have every foot of it listed, tabulated, and memorised.

Each of the thirty-odd rooms of the department are lined with film racks containing reels, rewinders, sprockets for keeping film and sound track in correct juxtaposition and similar equipment.

Every cutter has an assistant to splice film and perform other detail tasks. The assistants, as they learn, usually become full-fledged cutters.

I believe that, like writing, good cutting cannot be analysed. It is intangible, like all branches of showmanship or artistry. Instinctively you know whether or not a scene is coming out right. If it is not, there is no way to patch up. There is nothing to do then but start again from the beginning.

The good cutter takes a pride in his work far beyond the glory of having his name among the titles of the finished film. It is not a business for the man or woman who seeks wide public recognition of work done. Cutting at its best produces a film flowing so smoothly that the audience thinks only of the entertainment and gives no thought to the mechanics that went to create it. A perfect film ought to give the illusion that it was all done exactly as seen on the screen, and that there never was any such person as a cutter.