

Selections from an interview with Helen van Dongen

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“For LOUISIANA STORY [1948, directed by Robert Flaherty] we didn't have a finished script that determined which individual scenes were going to be filmed and where they would find their final place in the story. Instead we had a visually and cinematically written script with our main goal to make the story comprehensible. For example, Flaherty described the opening scene as follows:

“We are deep in the Bayou Country of Lower Louisiana. It is the time of high water —half of the country is flooded. We are moving through a thick forest. Wild birds everywhere—in the air, on the water. We are enchanted by the life of the wild animals and the secrets of the wilderness before us...”

An incredible amount of diverse material was shot for this sequence, not only when we were actually taking pictures for the sequence but throughout the entire time of the shoot, whenever we discovered something that could possibly be suitable to describe the atmosphere and geography of the land. (37 hours of footage were shot for this film, which ultimately was just 78 minutes long). ¹Almost everything could be considered, and indeed almost everything was filmed. Like flowers rising from a swamp, our images sprawled without bounds. We had scenes with alligators sitting on their nests, gliding through the water, warming themselves in the sun or sticking their ugly heads out of a mud-hole in the swamp; iridescent, exotic birds were sitting in treetops or on shrubs springing out of ponds full of lilies; snakes were gliding up trees, lotus petals were reflected in clear water, dewdrops clung to leaves, a spider wove her web, Spanish moss dangled from giant oaks, [there were] fish, rabbits, fawns, skunks, and so many others — too many to list them all individually.

Naturally, such an abundance of the most diverse footage — temporarily filed under the heading "Introductory Scene"—meant to address the theme "Atmosphere

¹ The original text reads:

“60.000 Meter wurden so für einen Film verdreht, der schliesslich eine Länge von 2.400 Metern hatte.”

The original was changed to numbers of hours to make it easier to understand. The film was shot in 35mm.

60,000 meters is 197,000 feet, and in 35mm that's almost 37 hours of footage.

The final film runs 78 minutes, which in 35mm is 2,400 meters or 7,100 feet.

of Swamp and Forest"—presented challenges of its own for the editor. At a first run-through the material seemed rather incoherent to us. In this jumble, what had happened to the main topic that we wanted to develop?

[As the editor, I] had no precise script that would say: "We are beginning with the close-up of a lotus leaf, which stands out as a silhouette against the water; then comes the shot with an alligator crawling over a piece of driftwood..." Instead there was only a general description of the locations, of the atmosphere and the emotions that were supposed to be expressed. ("We are enchanted by the life of the wild animals and the secrets of the wilderness before us...")

The editor has to understand the director's idea, to visualize it and to regard it as an instruction for the cut.

The crucial point for choosing and sequencing the scenes should be their emotional content, their deeper meaning. Once the desired emotions and moods are conveyed throughout the entire sequence, and a balance between form and content has been achieved, then the metric and rhythmic values develop all by themselves.

"You will be led astray if you try to impose your will or your theory on a scene. You really have to go from image to image and see what each image is telling you."

"When you scrutinize image after image, what these images are telling you has a lot to do with your own ideas because ideas determine what an image tells you."

"It is not our task to tell the audience what we are thinking but to show them what we have discovered in these scenes as reality. All we can do is to turn the audience into observers so that they see, that they think, and then form their own opinion."

Translation by Claudia Steinberg for the van Dongen entry on the website "Edited by":

<http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/van-dongen-helen/>

Schnitte in Raum und Zeit by Gabriele Voss.

<https://www.amazon.de/Schnitte-Raum-Zeit-Filmmontage-Dokumentarfilm/dp/3930916754>