Katz, Steven D. Film Directing Shot by Shot. Michael Wise Production, 1991 – Chapter 6 and Chapter 7

film directing

shot by shot

visualizing from concept to screen

by steven d. katz

6 COMPOSING SHOTS: SPATIAL CONNECTIONS

Shot Size

As we all know, the universal units of composition are the long shot, the medium shot, and the close-up. These shots are a development of the continuity system insofar as they are overlapping portions of a single space and only make sense in relation to one another. That is, they are used together to create a consistent spatial/temporal order. Though they can be used to describe spaces as large as the solar system or as small as the head of a pin, we always know approximately how large an area is being framed when these terms are used. That's because the shots are scaled to the subject and related to one another proportionately.

A long shot of the World Trade Center frames all of the twin towers and a generous piece of Manhattan; a medium shot of the building would lop off some of the lower floors. Moving in for a close-up, a single window might fill the frame. There are no absolute rules in the use of these terms and even the terms themselves vary. In Figure 6.1 on page 122 the basic framing heights are shown for the human figure.

The change of size from shot to shot varies but is determined by the limits of identification. As long as we recognize that each shot is an overlapping portion of the wide shot, the change in scale is permissible. Actually, even this definition must take into account the change in editing styles over several decades. The move from wide shot to close-up was considered too radical a jump for audiences during the first five decades of motion pictures unless a medium shot was used in between. Hollywood editors were forbidden to juxtapose a wide shot with a close-up lest they confuse the audience as to where the close-up was taking place. Today, after several decades of familiarity with Hollywood conventions, audiences easily accept extreme changes in scale. If anything, it is likely that the conservative editing rules of the past lagged behind audience understanding.

Visual recognition between shots, however, is only half the strategy of the continuity style. Most often the relationship between shots is one of implication or inference. For example, we see a wide shot of a man approaching a door. This is followed by a cut to an extreme close-up of the man's hand turning the doorknob. Even if the doorknob was too small to attract our attention in the wide shot, we *expect* that it is connected to the previous shot since it makes logical sense, even though we could be looking at another doorway in a different place and time. Narrative logic and the visual connection between shots cooperate to create a

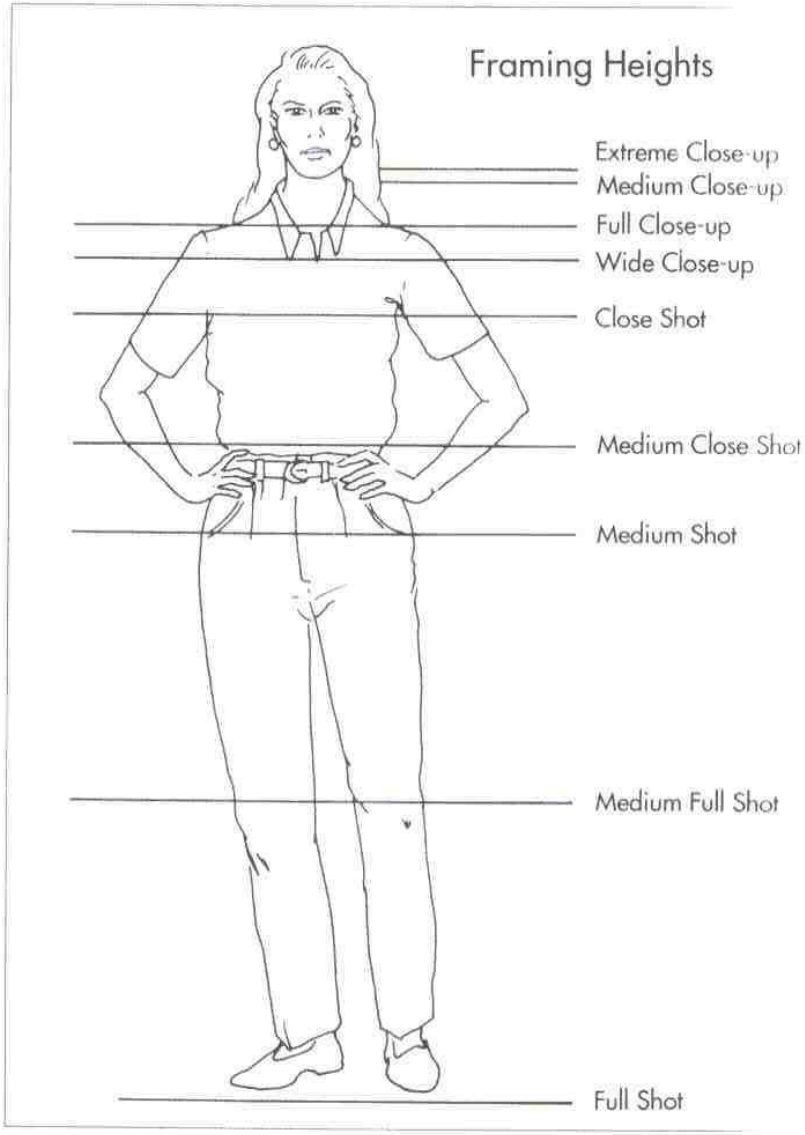


Figure 6.1: Basic Framing heights for the human figure.

sense of continuous space. This pair of ideas, cause and effect and spatial recognition, provide the organizational basis of the continuity style.

Long shots, medium shots, and close-ups can describe any subject or location but are most often used to describe the human figure. The terms take on special meaning in this connection. Here the change in scale between shots is not related by logic or visual recognition alone. Instead, framing is determined by conventions of post-Renaissance art or what are generally considered pleasing and balanced compositions.

The Close-up

Television has greatly increased the use of the close-up. To compensate for the small size of the screen, the close-up is used to bring us into closer contact with the action. For dialogue sequences the shoulder-and-head shot has become the predominant framing. Cost-minded producers like the tighter shots because they are easier to light and can be joined to almost any other shot, reducing the amount of coverage needed. The preference for the close-up has been carried over to feature films as more and more film directors graduate from television to the big screen.

In film the eyes have it. Jean-Luc Godard once said that the most natural cut is the cut on the look. The powerful suggestiveness of this gesture helps explain film's love affair with winks, glances, stares, tears, squints, glares and the whole range of language that the eyes command. The eyes are perhaps the most expressive feature of the human face, communicating silently what the mouth must do largely with words and sounds. A look can tell us that an object out of frame is of interest, and it can tell us in which direction the object is located. In the same way that the focal length of the lens and the angle of the camera can place the viewer in a definite relationship with the subjects on the screen, the eyeline of a subject clearly determines spatial relations in the scene space. Viewers are particularly sensitive to incongruities in the sight lines between subjects who are looking at each other and in most situations can easily detect when the eye match is slightly off. The use of lens-axis teleprompters has come about largely because audiences are aware when a performer is looking at a cue card that is only a few inches off center.

The close-up can bring us into a more intimate relationship with the subjects on the screen than we would normally have with anyone but our closest friends or family. Sometimes this capacity for inspection can be overdone, and the close-up becomes a violation of privacy by forcing a degree of intimacy that should only be shared by consent. The camera, however, does not require consent, particularly if it is equipped with a telephoto lens. Television news cameramen frequently pry into the lives of families during moments of grief, using extreme close-ups. Viewers may find themselves uncomfortable watching scenes that they would normally have the tact to turn away from in their daily lives.

In every culture there are customs of privacy, physical contact and accepted behavior based on the distances permitted between people in various situations. A filmmaker can use the camera to record these social distances in such a way that we react to them as if they were happening

within our own personal space. Not only can the close-up reveal the intimate, it can make us feel as if we are intruding on moments of privacy or sharing a moment of vulnerability—as if the person on the screen has opened himself up to us. We can be made to feel detachment or an emotional involvement with events and subjects on the screen largely through the manipulation of space with the lens of the camera.

Figure 6.2 features a series of eight close-up framings in three aspect ratios, Academy aperture, which is the same as 16mm and television (1.33:1); wide screen (1.85:1); and the anamorphic Cinemascope process (2.35:1).

The images are shown in pairs as they might appear together in a sequence because the balance or imbalance of any frame is dependent on the shots that come before and after it. In the first two frames the subjects are positioned dead center. If you move your eyes over these frames, "reading" them as though they were edited, you will see that there is no rhythm in the shot change since the eyes remain focused on the center of the screen. Compare this with frames 3 and 4. Here the off-center compositions in alternate close-ups creates a left/right eye motion that is dynamic. This effect becomes more pronounced as the width of the screen increases. Here we have a good example of what is meant by sequential art, since compositions are not judged individually but by how they combine in a sequence.

Conventions in western art favor portraits that position the human face slighty off-center to avoid disturbing symmetrical compositions. The customary solution is to leave extra space on the side of the screen the subject is looking at and more space at the bottom of the frame than at the

Figure 6.2: Close-ups in three aspect ratios.

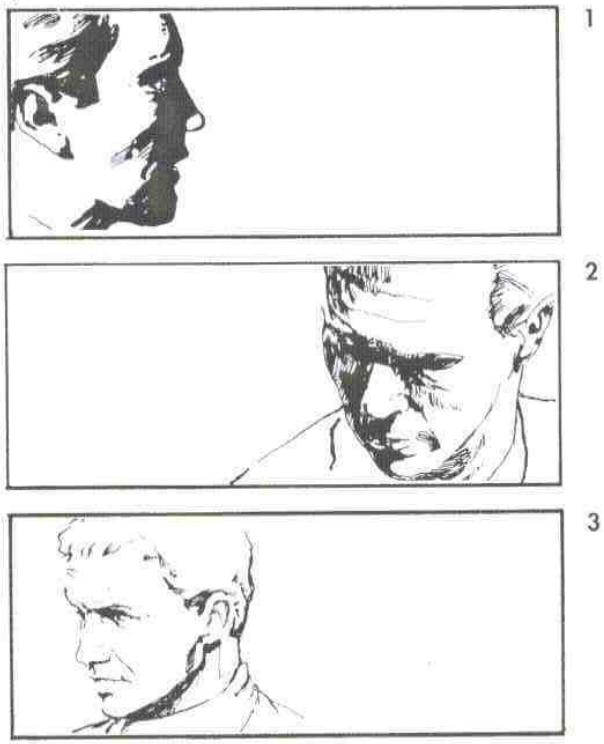
top. In film, the use of off-center compositions becomes more common as the screen widens. But don't let this stand in the way of experimentation. There is no reason for filmmakers to accept these limitations if they do not suit their sense of design. The following examples illustrate common and uncommon framing proportions.

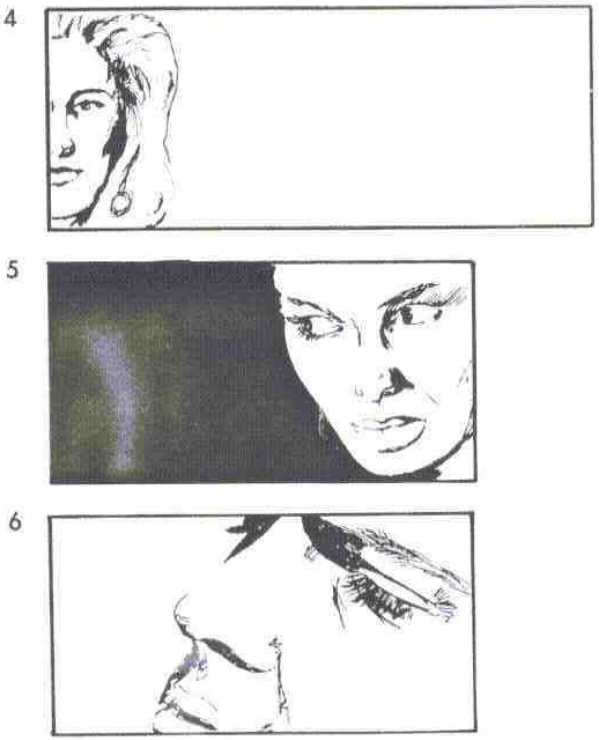
Extreme use of screen width is possible as shown in Figure 6.3, illus-

trating unconventional treatments of portrait composition. Sharply off-center framing is possible in any aspect ratio though the effect becomes more pronounced the wider the screen. This type of composition has become quite common in television commercials recently, influenced by print graphics in advertising. This has had a subtle influence on the movies, which tend to absorb techniques from the other arts.

The eyes, mouth and ears are frequently given extreme close-ups of their own, usually to advance some specific part of the narrative. For example, a shot of a woman walking home alone at night on a lonely street might be followed by an extreme close-up of her ear, as faint footsteps are heard. A similar setup might utilize a close-up of her eyes indicating her fear. These are familiar devices and there are many more ways that you can utilize macro close-ups if you begin to experiment. Three versions of extreme and macro close-ups are shown in Figure 6.4 on page 128. In all cases, the viewpoint was from the front or side of the face

Figure 6.3





favoring the features. This is just one more convention that need not limit your individual style. Unconventional viewpoints, framing and shot size can be used to explore portraiture through texture, light and the infinite varieties of form. This does not mean that you have to give up traditional methods. They are by no means exhausted and can be as communicative, startling and moving as more experimental techniques.

The Medium Shot

Before television began emphasizing the use of the close-up and extreme close-up, the medium shot was the workhorse for dialogue scenes throughout the sound period. Combining valuable qualities of the full shot and the close-up, it is still widely employed in television and feature films. Like the full shot, the medium shot captures an actor's gestures and body language, but is still tight enough to include subtle variations in facial expression.

The medium shot is also the general range in which group shots are

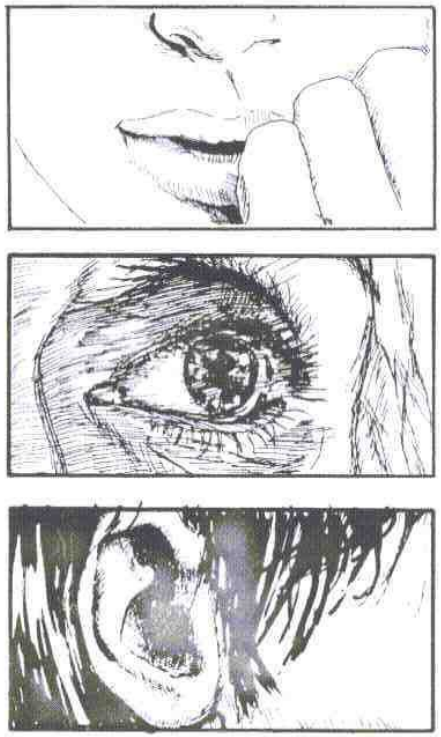


Figure 6.4

composed for dialogue scenes. The two-shot, three-shot, four-shot or five-shot are the typical groupings. With more than five players in the frame the camera often must pull back into the full-shot range to include everyone if the figures are not significantly overlapped. The medium shot shares the honors with the close-up for popularity at the present time but only insofar as it is used in conjunction with close-ups—not as the primary setup for a scene. We will pass over examples of medium shots in this section and cover them in depth later in the workshop section of the book.

The Full Shot

The full shot as an alternative to the medium or close-up has fallen into disuse in the last twenty years, relegated to the function of an establishing shot when it is necessary to connect a character and a location in a single shot. Filmmakers seem to be reluctant to play a scene wide if a close-up

or medium shot can be substituted. One of the reasons the full shot is underused is that it requires dialogue scenes to be played in long takes. This is because the full shot usually frames all the speaking characters in a scene, making a cutting pattern of medium and close-up shots unnecessary. If the long shot is used with these two tighter framings, the editing pattern invariably moves in close and does not return to the full shot. While the medium and long shots can encompass the action in a scene without resorting to other shots to fulfill the narrative, a close-up generally must be accompanied by other close-ups, medium or full shots to fulfill the narrative requirements of a scene.

One of the full shot's most attractive qualities is that it allows the actor to use body language. This type of physical expression has all but disappeared from the movies since the silent period. Again, television and tight-fisted producers are to blame since there is nothing as inexpensive to shoot or to light as the close-up. This is most clear in the way dance is photographed in music videos, which rarely show the full figure in extended shots.

Compositionally, the long shot of a single figure offers many of the same opportunities for asymmetrical framing as the close-up. The vertical line of the standing figure easily fits into designs that stress graphic patterns particularly in the wider formats.

Figure 6.5 on page 130 features two full shots illustrating frame balance. Slightly off-center framing is so common today that a centered subject is nearly as powerful as a drastically decentered composition.

The Line of Action

The general approach in this book is to encourage the development of solutions that are adapted to the individual needs of the filmmaker. Many of the solutions that will be shown are part of recognizable strategies, but the filmmaker's personal vision can at any time overrule systems, accepted practice, traditional wisdom or convention. Having said that, we can look at the most basic rule of camera placement that the continuity system observes: the line of action.

The purpose of the line of action is quite simple: It organizes camera angles to preserve consistent screen direction and space. It's also useful for organizing the shooting plan. Because the set has to be relit every time the camera is moved to a new angle, it makes sense to gang shots sharing a similar angle of view together, so that they can be shot at one time. This avoids having to light any camera position more than once.

We can think of the line of action as an imaginary partition running through the space in front of the camera. It was originally devised to make sure that if multiple angles of a scene were shot, they could be cut together without a confusing reversal of left and right screen space. This way, subjects moving through the frame in one shot continue in the same direction in a subsequent shot. The line of action is also called the "180-degree rule" or the "axis of action," illustrated in Figure 6.6 on page 131. To maintain consistent screen direction of the two people seated at the table, the continuity system proposes that an imaginary line of action be drawn

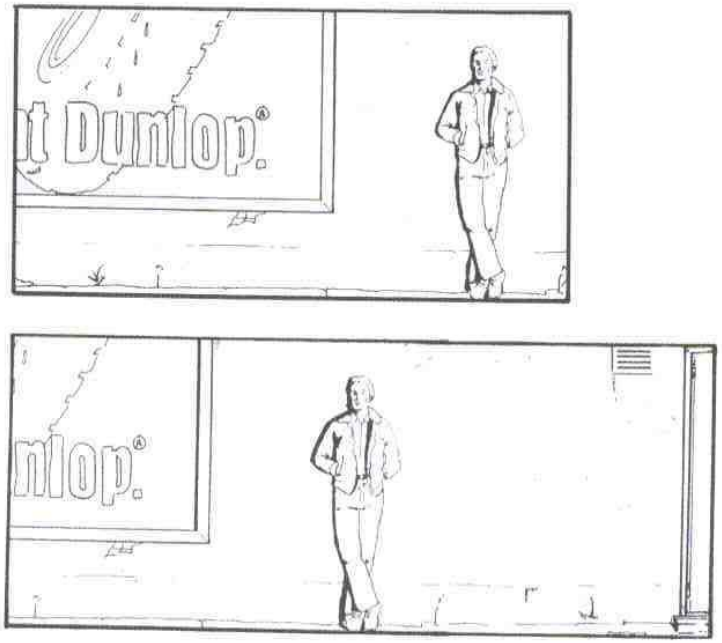


Figure 6.5: Frame balance.

between them. The direction of the line can be anywhere the filmmaker chooses, but it is usually the line of sight between subjects featured in a scene. Once the line is determined, a working space of 180 degrees (the gray semicircle) is established. For any scene or sequence, only camera positions within the established semicircle are permitted. The result is that the screen direction of any shots obtained from one side of the line will be consistent with each other. This is illustrated in Figure 6.7, which shows the shots obtained with cameras A, B and C of Figure 6.6. Camera positions that are outside the gray working space are said to be *across the line* or *over the line*. Figure 6.8 shows what happens if we edit shots from both sides of the line together, in this case, cameras A and F. The result is that the man is looking at the back of the woman's head.

The Triangle System

When the line of action is in use, another convention, the triangle system of camera placement, is a shorthand way of describing camera positions on one side of the line. The system proposes that all the basic shots possible for any subject can be taken from three points within the 180-degree working space. Connecting the three points, we have a triangle of

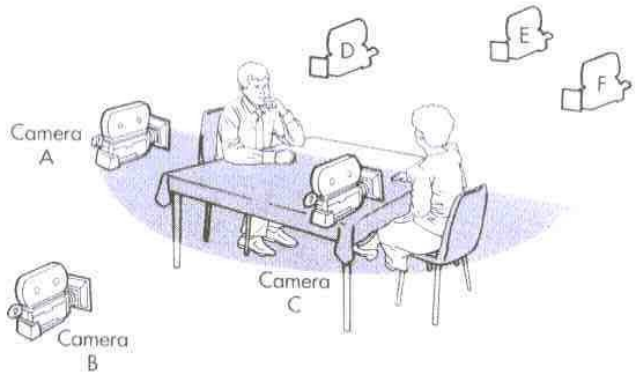


Figure 6.6

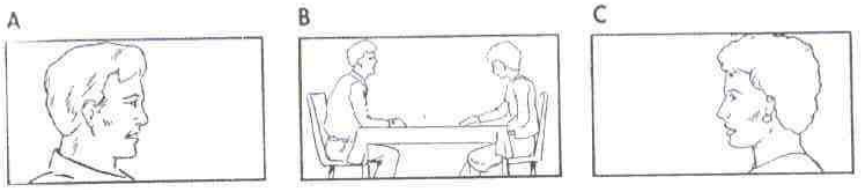


Figure 6.7

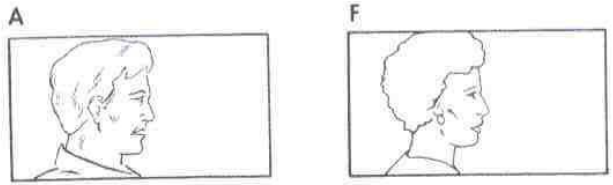


Figure 6.8

variable shape and size depending on the placement of the cameras. Any shot can be joined to any other shot in the triangle system of setups. The system includes all the basic shot sizes and camera angles used for dialogue scenes in the continuity style. The triangle system is employed for all types of situations, including single subjects and action scenes. It is used extensively for live television programs such as quiz shows, sports programs and sit-coms. Even though three cameras are pictured in the

following examples, a single camera can be moved to each point along the triangle and the different setups obtained individually. This is often the case in feature films. However, the triangle system lends itself to the multiple camera setup as long as extensive staging or camera movement is not required. This would create the problem of one camera moving in front of another. There are five basic camera setups that can be obtained within the triangle: Angular singles (medium shots or close-ups), master two-shots, over-the-shoulder shots, point-of-view singles (medium shots or close-ups) and profile shots.

In Figure 6.9, camera positions A and C are angular shots of the two subjects seated at the table. Position B is a two-shot. The framings accompanying each camera position, of course, could be varied, and the shot size for cameras A and C can be any size from an extreme close-up to a full shot.

Figure 6.10 is the second triangle setup for over-the-shoulder shots. Cameras A and C are moved into the over-the-shoulder position. Camera

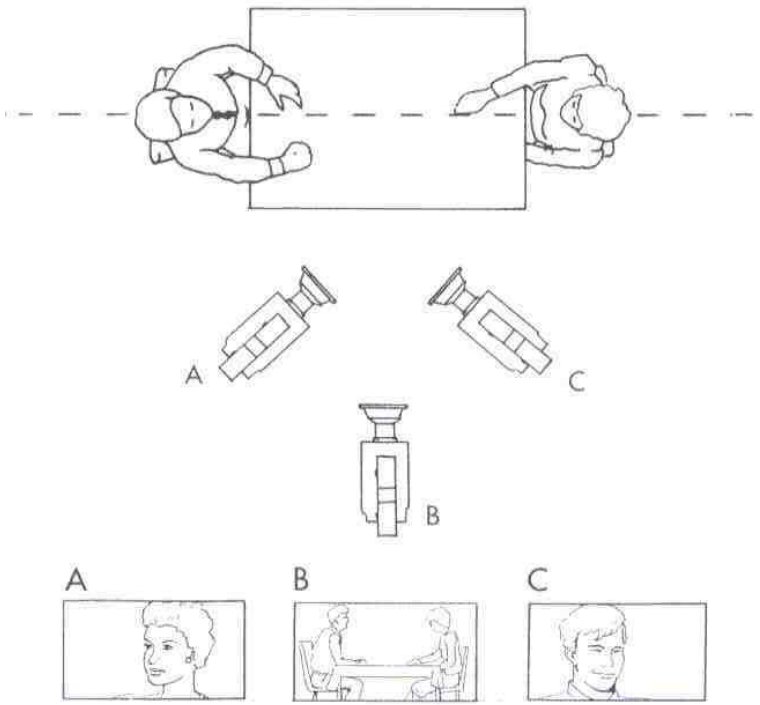


Figure 6.9

B always obtains the two-shot as in Figure 6.9 and so is not included in the subsequent examples. Variations are only obtained with the outside or wing camera positions.

OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOTS

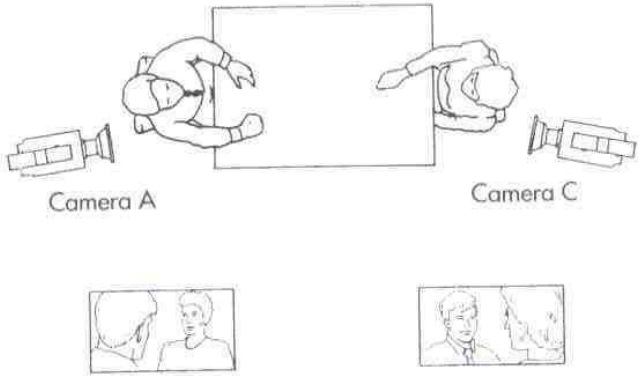


Figure 6.10

In the setup pictured in Figure 6.11, cameras A and C have been moved just inside the line of action or, more appropriately, the line of sight of the subjects. Camera positions A and C are now used to obtain close-ups from each subject's point of view. In this case, the subject not

POINT OF VIEW CLOSE-UPS

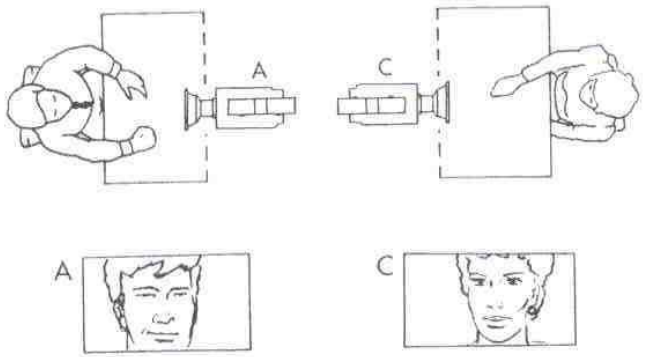


Figure 6.11

being photographed would be moved out of the way to place the camera in position. This is indicated by the broken line.

Figure 6.12 shows the last possible setup within the triangle method—profile shots using cameras A and C. Naturally, the exact angle of the shot, composition and shot size are infinitely variable within the triangle as long as the line of action is not violated.

PROFILE SHOTS

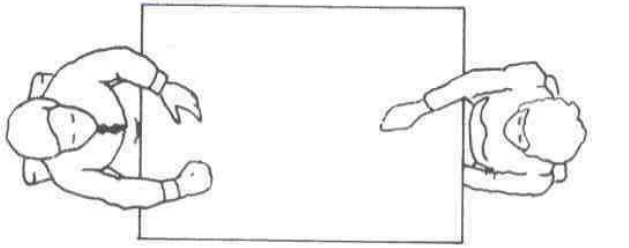


Figure 6.12

Establishing a New Line of Action With a New Sight Line

The only time the camera is permitted to cross the line of action is when a new line is established. One way to do this is shown in Figure 6.13. In this example, the old line is established between the couple seated at the table. A second man approaches the table and the seated man turns his attention to him. This new line of sight establishes a new line of action and a corresponding 180-degree working space for the camera. This is indi-

ESTABLISHING A NEW LINE

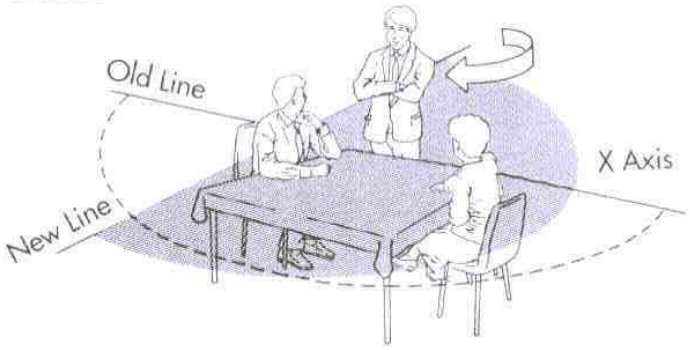


Figure 6.13

cated by the gray semicircle. The establishment of a new line is usually set up with a shot of a person who turns his attention to a new area or person within the frame. This *pivot shot* joins the two lines of action.

Once the new line of action has been set up, the camera can move across the old line of action anywhere within the new working space *as long as the sight line remains with the two men.* You will notice that this space also includes the woman. Even though it is permissible under the 180-degree rule, a camera will not be placed in quadrant X to photograph the woman. The next time she is seen in a shot, the camera will be located according to the *old line of action.* This is called a reestablishing shot. Conventional wisdom advocates reusing lines of action and the corresponding camera setups so that a consistent sense of space is reinforced through repetition. Once the basic editing pattern (and shot geography) has been established, a return to an old line of action does not have to be motivated by the pivot shot since the viewer has a general sense of the spatial relationships between actors.

The business of changing lines is considerably less complicated in practice. The shooting plan is arranged so that all the shots from a given angle are consolidated even if dialogue is shot out of order. Later, the shots are edited into the proper dramatic sequence. On screen, the changing line of action may appear to follow a far more complex scheme than was actually the case.

Establishing a New Line When a Player Crosses the Line

A second method of establishing a new line is to have one of the players in a scene cross his own line of action. This is shown in Figure 6.14 on page 136. As before, the line of action is between the seated couple; the working space for the camera is on the near side of the line (A). In Step One, the actor gets up from the table and moves to a new position over the line into

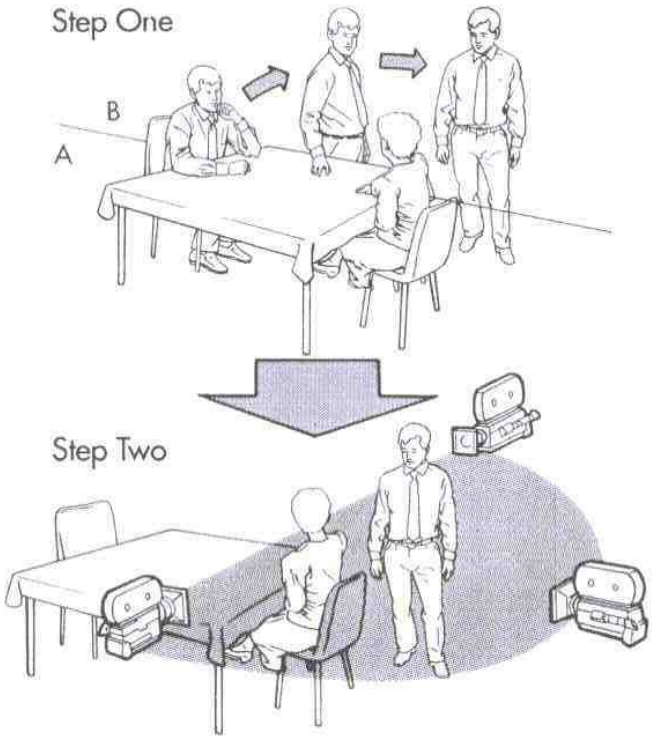


Figure 6.14

space B. As soon as the man reestablishes eye contact with the woman in Step Two, the new line of action is established. The new line overrules the old line, which is no longer in effect. Again, a working space of 180 degrees is created. The only requirement for this strategy is that the actor's relocation must be seen clearly in a shot that permits the viewer to reorient himself.

Another factor to consider when establishing any new line is which side to use for the camera. Figure 6.15 on page 137 illustrates an alternative setup to the one in Figure 6.14. This time the working space for the camera is on the opposite side of the line. *Either choice is permissible as long as the new space agrees with the pivot shot taken from the previous line of action.* This is shown in Figure 6.16. Part One shows the line of action and corresponding semicircular working space for the camera. The line bisecting the semicircle is the new line of action that will be established when the

ALTERNATIVE WORKING SPACE

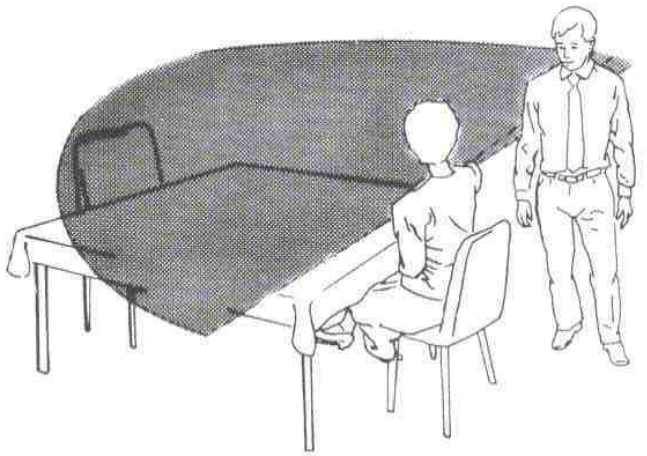


Figure 6.15

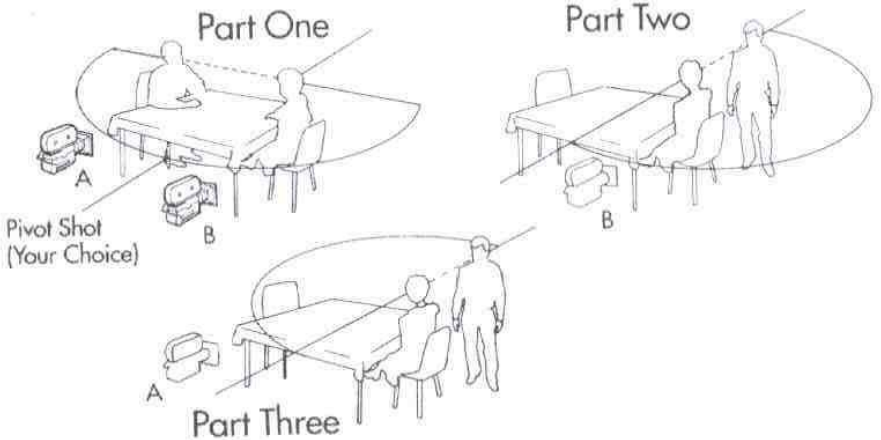


Figure 6.16

man moves to the standing position to face the woman. Cameras A and B represent the choices for the pivot shot used to record the man as he moves to the new position. Part Two of the diagram shows the 180-degree working space that you would use if camera position B were used

for the pivot shot. Part Three shows the 180-degree working space if camera position A were used for the pivot shot.

As a rule, the working area chosen for each new line of action keeps the camera in the center of the group when shooting dialogue situations at a table or in a confined space.

Moving the Camera Over the Line

Not only can a player cross the line and establish a new one, but the camera can pan, dolly or make a crane move to a new space and a new line of action. This is easily accomplished as long as the camera movement is uninterrupted. In this situation, an eyeline does not have to be established and the camera can move from one side of the line of sight between two players to the other without confusion. Figure 6.17 shows

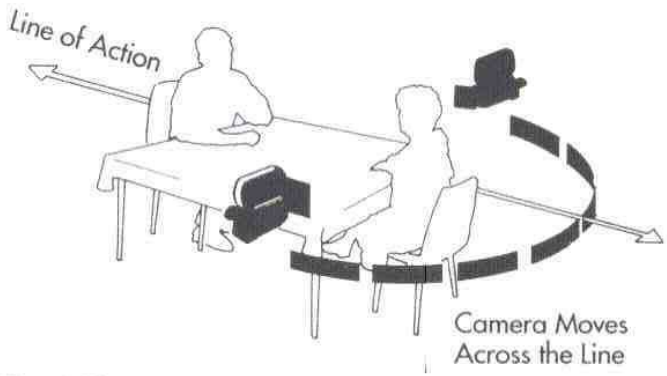


Figure 6.17

one version of this strategy with a curved camera path (black dotted line) crossing the line of action.

Cutaways and Bridge Shots

Another way to cross the line to another part of the scene is to interrupt the geography of a sequence with a shot that is clearly related to the action, but not the geography of the scene. For instance, let's say that we have established the line of action in a scene in the classroom of a school. We want to cross the line, but none of the strategies we have looked at in previous examples will work within the action of the scene. In this case, we photograph a close-up of a student's notebook or other pertinent detail. This cutaway serves the same purpose as the pivot shot. When we return to the main action, the camera can be moved over the line and a

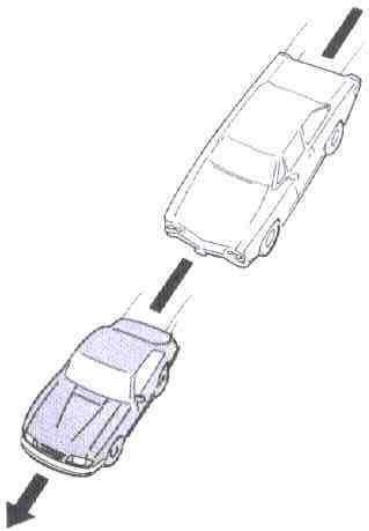


Figure 6.18: Line of action follows direction of motion.

new line established. This solution is generally used as a quick fix in the editing process when problems of continuity arise.

The Line of Action for Moving Subjects and Action

In my opinion, the line of action is most useful when used to organize the photography of multiple-player dialogue sequences. Though screen direction would seem to be crucial to understanding the relationship of fast moving subjects—for instance, cars in a chase sequence—unquestioning observance of the line of action may actually stand in the way of more interesting arrangements of shots. For one thing, continuity editing is not the only way of organizing film images. Other methods, such as kinetic or analytical editing, may be in conflict with strict continuity and yet provide better solutions to creative problems. For another, today's viewers are so visually sophisticated that they are able to "read" unconventional editing patterns with relative ease. Be aware that more dynamic results may be obtained in some sequences if the line is crossed and screen direction is reversed. Later we'll be looking at other types of editing more closely, but for now, as we continue to explore the line of action, keep in mind that there are alternative ways of organizing shots.

Action Sequences

In action sequences there is frequently no line of sight to establish the line of action. In this case, the line of action follows the dominant motion of the subject of the shot. If one car is pursuing another, the line is the path of the cars, as shown in Figure 6.18. If the two cars are alongside each other, an *additional* line of action can be established between the cars. I call this the *implied sight line* because even when the drivers of the cars are not prominent in the shot, the cars become the symbols of the drivers and their line of sight. This situation is peculiar to cars, boats, planes or any other conveyance that has a driver. Both lines are shown in Figure 6.19. Shots photographed from both sides of the line of motion (camera positions A, C and B, D) will result in a reversal of screen direction when cut together, as shown in the accompanying storyboard panels. The implied sight line is a special case and only overrides the line of motion temporarily. Otherwise, the line of motion is the prevailing rule. While this may seem like the type of situation that the 180-degree rule was devised to prevent, it is actually a common editing pattern even in dialogue scenes where there is a line of motion and an implied sight line.

This is the case in *The Godfather Part II* when the young Vito Corleone

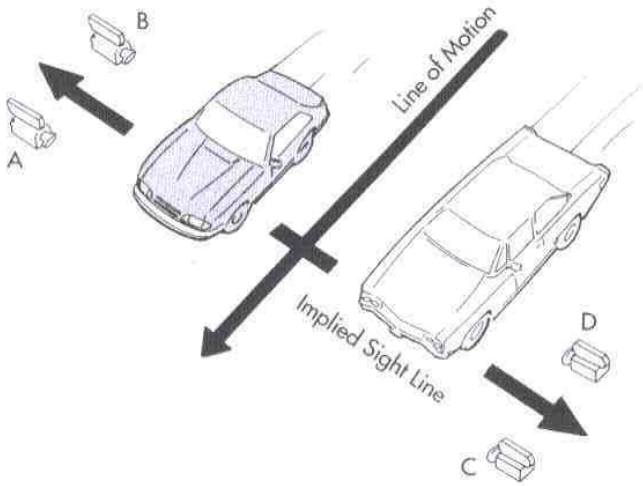
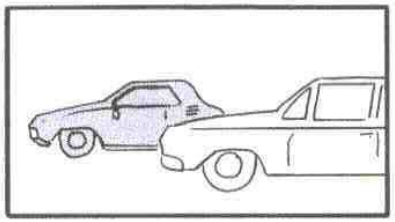
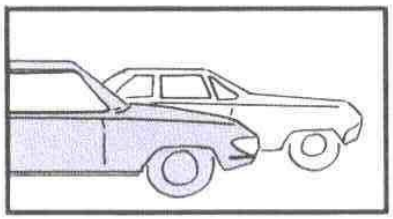


Figure 6.19, Part 1: Two possible lines of action.



SHOT FROM CAMERA POSITION C



SHOT FROM CAMERA POSITION A

Figure 6.19, Part 2

is driving a small truck along crowded New York streets. Fanucci, the local crime lord, is seated next to Vito, and they have a conversation as the car moves along. Two tracking shots are used, one on each side of the car, framing a good deal of the car and the moving background. Cut

together the shots form a pair of very wide over-the-shoulder shots. Each time there is a cut during the conversation, the background reverses direction. The abruptness of the cut could have been softened if the shots were tighter, so that Vito and Fanucci filled the frame. As it turns out, the shot change is not bothersome and so stands as an example of the latitude possible within the 180-degree rule.

Crossing the Line in Action Sequences

The strategies for "properly" crossing the line in nondialogue situations are essentially the same as those illustrated for dialogue scenes, beginning with Figure 6.13, page 135. The only difference is that the principal line of motion is substituted for the sight line. To recap, there are three basic ways to establish a new line of action/motion:

1) A subject (car, horse, person, etc.) can cross the line establishing a new one by the direction of his new line of motion.

2) The camera can cross the line either following a subject to a new scene space or merely traveling for graphic variety to a new viewpoint.

3) A new subject can enter the frame and become the dominant line of motion in contrast to the first. This is analogous to the situation in Figure 6.13 when a new character entered the scene establishing a new line of sight.

Crossing the Line While on the Line

The closer the camera is to the line of action, the more difficult it is to detect when the camera has crossed the line. In Figure 6.20 camera positions A and B are on the line of action, so when they are edited together there is a reversal of screen direction. This type of sequence would probably have been avoided 60 years ago; but today, audiences have no problem understanding the geography of the scene space in this editing pattern. This reversal is somewhat more startling than is sometimes the case when shooting on the line since the subject is in profile. When the subject's sight line is the same as the line of action, we get front and back views, which help the viewer differentiate the shots.

When actually filming, it usually turns out that it is rarely necessary to go through elaborate staging and logistical analysis to find a way of establishing a new line of action. My basic belief is that if the filmmaker has a solid understanding of cinematic geography, has a good overview of the scene, has kept thorough notes on what he is going to shoot and has already shot, then he will probably not encounter any major difficulties with continuity.

Conclusion

The 180-degree rule is only a rule if you accept it without question. My

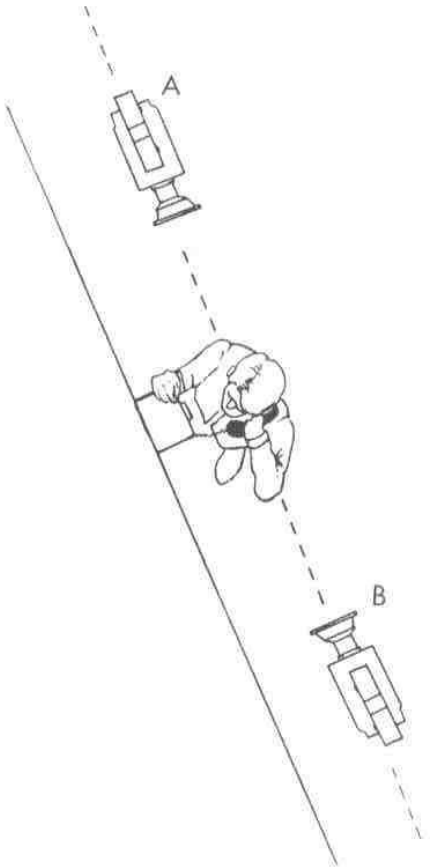


Figure 6.20, Part 1: The line of action. When edited together, shots obtained with cameras A and B reverse screen direction.

own feeling is that many of its assumptions are overstated. Audiences have turned out to be far more astute in understanding the spatial relationships in films than they are generally given credit for. Directors like Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer developed narrative techniques that frequently violate the conventions of continuity filmmaking to achieve their aims. While demanding in other respects, the viewer is not confused by their visual styles. Unlike Godard and the radical film movement, these direc-

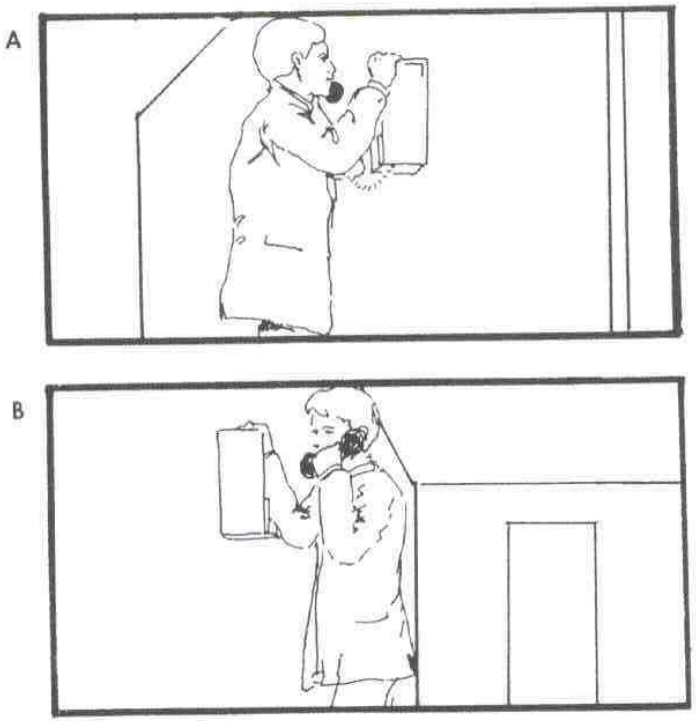


Figure 6.20, Part 2: The line of action. Any of the camera positions shown above can be edited together without disorienting the viewer.

tors were not reacting against the continuity style, and their visual solutions to thematic concerns are more varied and particular than the often mannered style of the left.

Ten years ago a defense of the line of action would have been considered reactionary, dismissed out of hand by virtually every film movement outside of mainstream features. It is probably still too soon for a fair reevaluation of the continuity style. But after four decades of concentrated criticism on the left analyzing the limitations of traditional narrative technique, it might restore some balance to the argument to state my own view that no style of filmmaking is superior to any other. If you feel that a particular style, or combination of styles, is appropriate to your work, there is no reason not to experiment. If anything is true of the arts, it is that there are no rules.

7 EDITING: TEMPORAL CONNECTIONS

In 1920 the Soviet filmmaker and theorist Lev Kuleshov performed a now famous experiment demonstrating that the meaning of shots in sequence can be created entirely through editing. Kuleshov used a close-up shot of the Russian actor Moszhukhin's expressionless face as a reaction shot in three different sequences. The actor is seen "reacting" to a bowl of soup, a woman in a coffin and a child playing with a toy bear. Audiences viewing the scenes marveled at Moszhukhin's sensitive performance in each situation, though in every instance it was the same close-up.

While the power of the editing process to shape meaning is undeniable, this type of wholesale invention is a special case. In most narrative films, shots are rarely neutral building blocks as Kuleshov used them, but have been composed to express an idea and tell a story according to the script. Each shot, together with the accompanying soundtrack, contains narrative and graphic information that predetermines key editing decisions such as the length and order of shots. This view of editing emphasizes the director's and the writer's roles in shaping the storytelling logic that provides the basis for any decision the editor makes.

When we speak of storytelling logic, we are actually referring to the structure of shots, sequences and scenes. Structure controls the order in which the story information is given to the viewer. It is as important to the storytelling process as the actual information being presented. Since structure in films can be presented in a storyboard in ways that a screenplay cannot convey, the visualization process can be considered part of the writing and, ultimately, the editing process.

The Narrative Impulse

Novelist E. M. Forster's often quoted definition of plot is a good place to begin understanding the kind of structural logic that motivates editing choices. Forster began by describing a series of events that were not a plot: "The King died and then the Queen died." But, as Forster observed, if we say "The King died and the Queen died of grief," we have described a plot because there is a causal connection.

In the course of any story this cause and effect relationship is the underlying scheme that involves the reader. It does this by asking the reader to become involved in making the logical connections between events. Forster's example is simplified to make a point and doesn't show us how an author might reveal the relationship between the King and Queen. For

instance, in the early chapters the Queen might be portrayed as indifferent to the King's death. As the story progresses, however, the author might reveal small details that would explain that the Queen, having assumed the throne takes care not to reveal her feelings for fear of being seen as weak by her subjects. Or we might learn in chapter one that the Queen has died and not discover until the last page of the story that the cause of her illness was the King's death. In both cases, the reader is provoked into speculation by the order and manner in which the plot is revealed even though the same basic events are being related in each version of the story.

In fiction, cause and effect is frequently set up as a question and answer scheme that encourages the reader's participation. The cliff-hanger ending in a serialized story, where the answer to the question of what will happen next is withheld to create suspense, is an example of the most exaggerated exploitation of this device.

Stories that use a question and answer strategy may be set up in many ways. A question may be answered through the accumulation of detail over several dozen pages or it might be answered succinctly shortly after it has been posed. In fact, the question and answer presentation of information usually occurs on every page of a story operating on several levels simultaneously. This is as true for a screenplay or film as it is for a novel or short story. Continuity editing is based on these types of question and answer strategies, though we usually speak of them as connections. Listed below are the three most basic types of connections found in continuity editing:

> Temporal connections: We cut from a man dropping his drinking glass in one shot to the glass breaking on the floor in the second shot.
>
> Spatial connections: We cut from a wide shot of the White House to a recognizable detail of the White House in a closer shot—for example, the portico and front door.
>
> Logical connections: We cut from a wide shot of the White House to a shot of the President seated in an office. No temporal or spatial connection is necessary in this combination. If we recognize the White House and we recognize the President, then we make the logical connection that he's seated in an office in the White House, even though there is no actual information presented to tell us we are in the White House.

As you can see, these types of connections create the illusion of a real, physical world. We can probably think of them as background connections that establish the environment of a film, but they also can be used to shape the plot and dramatic content as well.

Narrative Motion

To advance the narrative it is necessary not only to ask questions but to set up expectations. For instance, in the example of the two shots used to show the man dropping his drinking glass, questions and answers are only used to depict action. If, however, we know that one of the drinks at the party contains poison, we will be provoked into asking all sorts of who, what, when, where and why questions about the poison. Since we bring all sorts of knowledge and experience to any story we read or watch, we will speculate about possible answers to all the questions raised. Nearly all editing strategies in narrative film are devised to set up a framework of expectations in a series of shots. The result is narrative motion.

This way of arranging shots is fundamental in film editing. Even dialectical montage, which Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein felt was an alternative to cause and effect editing, exploited narrative motion by setting up expectations and asking questions. In Eisenstein's dialectical shot pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the first two shots ask the question "What is the connection between these ideas?" The answer, supplied by Eisenstein in shot three, is synthesis. In this analysis, Soviet montage and Hollywood continuity cutting are not polar opposites but variations of the same principle of question and answer strategies.

Q&A Patterns

The simplest question and answer editing pattern requires only two shots—for example, a shot of a person looking offscreen followed by a shot of the object the person is observing. Patterns are not limited by length and may require dozens of shots to complete a question and answer cycle. Or, the patterns can be varied by changing the order of the shots. Though we do not speak of their storytelling in this way, much of what we appreciate in the films of directors like Buñuel, Hitchcock, Godard, Welles and Truffaut are the ways in which they develop question and answer patterns that challenge the viewer.

Context

The meaning of any given Q and A pattern can be further extended or modified by changing the context that frames it. For instance, in the Kuleshov experiment, our understanding of the man's reaction to the soup, coffin and child is framed by our assumption that the man is sincerely moved in each scene. If a new scene is added establishing that he is faking his responses, then we will interpret the original sequences differently. While this may seem like rudimentary plotting, the manipulation of these

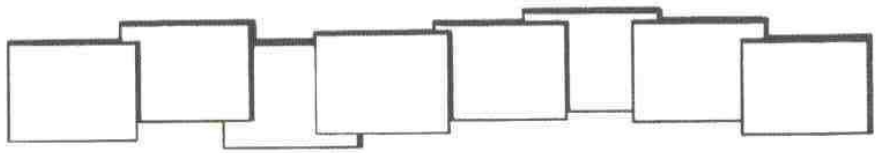


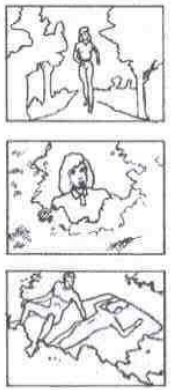
Figure 7.1: Question and answer relationship between shots links them into an overlapping chain.

types of narrative elements was crucial to the way Alfred Hitchcock created suspense or Buster Keaton constructed a gag.

Using the Patterns

For me, the main concern for the visualizer is not the pictorial elements of a shot or sequence, but the structure of the sequence—or, to put it another way, what the viewer knows and when. As it turns out, interesting compositional ideas are usually the result of narrative invention rather than daring pictorial experimentation.

This first series of examples illustrates how the narrative context and question and answer pattern determine how we read a scene.



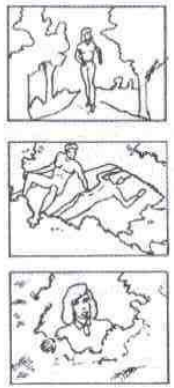
Example One
Narrative context: Our scene takes place in the woods on a summer day. Laura, a teenager, is looking for her older brother Tom. At this point in the story we have not yet seen Tom and so we do not know what he looks like.

Shot A: Laura enters the woods.
Question: "Where is Tom?"

Shot B: Laura stops short a few yards from a clearing.
New Question: "What has she found?"

Shot C: Tom and a girl lying naked on a blanket in a clearing.
Answer: "Laura has found her brother."

This is a straightforward question and answer editing pattern, and the viewer can easily anticipate the outcome. If, in the next example, we change the context slightly so that we know what Tom looks like, then shot C becomes an answer to shot A and simultaneously raises a new question.



Example Two

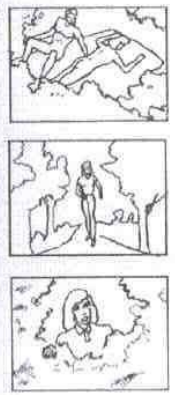
Shot A: Laura enters the woods.
Question: "Where is Tom?"

Shot C: Tom and a girl lying naked on a blanket in a clearing.
Answer: "Tom is here."
New Question: "Will Laura find Tom?"

Shot B: Laura stops short a few yards from the clearing.
Answer: "Laura has found Tom."

Now, if we were to prolong the time before Laura's arrival in shot B, the viewer would share a secret with the filmmaker by knowing that Tom is nearby in a compromising situation. This editing pattern places an answer before the question, thereby creating suspense. We can do this by changing the order of the shots and adjusting the context.

Example Three
Let's change the narrative context again. This time we know that Tom's



sister is looking for him. However, we have not seen her in the story at this point and do not know what she looks like. The context, set in a previous scene, leaves Tom's whereabouts unknown. As the scene opens we receive our first answer.

Shot C: Tom and a girl lying naked on a blanket in a clearing.
Answer: "Tom is here."

Shot A: A girl enters the woods.
Question: "Is this Laura?"

Shot B: Laura stops short a few yards from the clearing.
Answer: "This is Laura."

By revealing Tom in a compromising situation in the opening shot, a suspenseful situation is established for the remainder of the scene. When Laura enters the woods in the second shot, the fuse is lit, and we know that a potentially embarrassing meeting is possible. Hitchcock frequently sets up a scene this way by placing the audience in a privileged (and uncomfortable) position by providing them with information that the protagonist desperately needs but cannot obtain. A further embellishment of the same idea might undermine our expectations by letting Laura find other couples making love in the woods before discovering Tom. These earlier encounters would be designed to momentarily encourage us to believe that Laura has found Tom before revealing to us that the couples are strangers to Laura. This would make us unsure of our ability to second-guess the narrative and more susceptible to the surprise of the actual meeting.

In addition to the narrative context created by the filmmaker, the audience brings certain assumptions to their understanding of any scene that the filmmaker uses. These assumptions might include popularly held notions of morality or familiarity with storytelling conventions. The filmmaker can play with these assumptions by supporting or subverting them.

Hitchcock did this rather perversely in *Psycho* by killing off the person that for the first third of the film the audience believes is the protagonist. This was completely unexpected, breaking all the rules of conventional narrative. The result is that the audience feels completely abandoned, as indeed they were, by any kind of moral reason in the fictional world they are watching. The point of these examples is this: Editing patterns and the narrative context do not necessarily lay the events of a story out in simple chronological order.

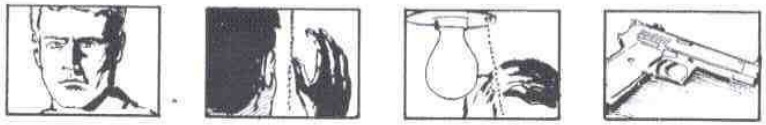
More Q and A Variations

In addition to altering the order of question and answer patterns, the rhythm and timing of the patterns can be varied by withholding some or all of expected narrative information for a few shots or for several scenes. It is also possible to have more than one question or answer raised within a

single shot or combined within a shot. Using a mini-noir scenario we can look at a few examples:

• A question can be raised in one shot and answered several shots later rather than in the following shot.

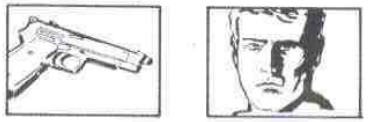
Sequence A



In this case the look in the first shot would ordinarily be answered by a shot of the gun. However, the answer has been postponed while shots 2 and 3 show the man turning on the light.

• An answer can be given in a shot and the question raised later.

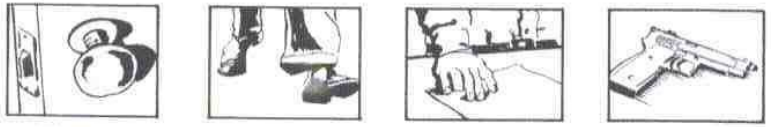
Sequence B



In this version the cut on the look has been reversed so that we see the object of attention before the look.

• A question can be raised and elaborated on in a series of shots before being answered in a single shot or in a series of shots.

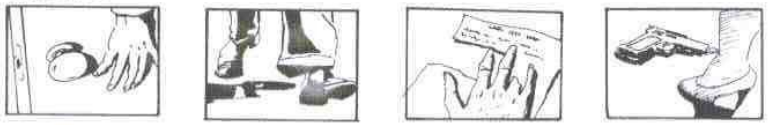
Sequence C



The question in these shots, of course, is who is the person coming through the door and why. The partial answer is that it is a man, and in frame 3 we see that he has one finger missing. In frame 4 we learn that he is there to find the gun.

• There can be more than one question raised in a shot or shots. Consequently, more than one answer can be given in a shot or shots.

Sequence D



In frame 1 two questions are raised: Who is coming through the door and whose hand emerges from behind the door? When the person enters the room in frame 2 we receive a partial answer, learning that the person is a man. But frame 2 also raises the question of the significance of the pool of black ink on the floor. In frame 3 the man puts his hand on the sheet of paper on the table. This answers the question of the man's identity since we now know it is the man with the missing finger, but a new question is raised: Why has part of the letter been carefully removed? Finally, in frame 3, we learn that the gun is on the floor. However, a new question is raised: Who is the woman standing over the gun?

Compared with the previous examples, this last series includes far more information in the same number of shots. This is an exaggeration of Q and A patterns, but the subtle use of these same strategies was exploited by Bergman, Kurosawa, Dreyer and many other filmmakers to shape psychological fiction and implicate the viewer in the moral dilemmas they presented.

If we try to imagine a graphic representation of the question and answer relationships we have been looking at, the shots do not appear connected end-to-end as the editor arranges the actual film stock, but rather they resemble a series of overlapping panels—like a deck of cards that has been fanned out. Figure 7.1 on page 147 shows the narrative relationship between shots in a series. Each is connected to the next by some cause and effect relationship. Some shots are more prominent narratively than others, while some shots remain in the background without answering questions or raising new ones, simply supporting existing information with additional detail.

The Limits of Clarity

Because question and answer storytelling techniques frequently relate information in a roundabout way, this indirectness may appear confusing to the uninitiated when described in a screenplay, shot list or storyboard. Screenwriters, directors and editors may be encouraged to avoid unusual Q and A patterns because it is mistakenly believed that the results will be clearer to an audience. An example of this is the classic establishing shot at the opening of a scene. For instance, a scene ends as we learn that an understudy in a play is on her way to the theater to replace the ailing lead. In the opening shot of the next scene we see the theater. This familiar pattern merely shows us what we already expect and does little to raise expectations or contribute to narrative motion. If, however, the introduction of the theater is composed of separate shots that raise questions, then the viewer is engaged in connecting these pieces to form a meaningful statement. Consider this sequence of shots as a way of introducing the theater location:

A CU of a few crumpled theater programs on the ground.
+ A CU of stage flats in a garbage dumpster.
+ A CU of an empty marquee with most of the letters taken down.
= A closed show.

This is a storytelling alternative to an establishing shot showing the front of a theater with a banner across the lobby doors with the word "closed"

printed across it in big letters. Both versions are familiar strategies, and the lesson is not the specific solution, but the overall notion that storytelling should engage the viewer at every point.

As narrative editing patterns become more complex and syncopated, it is increasingly difficult to execute them without considerable planning. As we have seen, challenging patterns often mean that questions and answers overlap from shot to shot. This precise interrelationship between shots tends to limit the cutting options to a carefully designed plan. On the other hand, the cutting options that are eliminated are nearly always stock solutions. In a sense, business-as-usual editing strategies are easily interchangeable precisely because they lack the connective relationships of complex question and answer strategies. This brings us to the subject of coverage of action.

Camera Cutting vs. Coverage

Theoretically, a fully developed storyboard can show a director all the shots he needs for a scene. If the director and cinematographer shoot the boards exactly as they appear on paper even the lengths of shots can be estimated. Later, the editor only has to trim shots here and there to make them all fit neatly together. This method of shooting is called cutting in the camera and presupposes a perfect script, perfect storyboard and the perfect execution of each shot. Optimism may be a virtue, but to disregard the things that can go wrong in filmmaking—and they are many—is foolhardy. Cutting in the camera is like working on a high wire without a net.

The alternative view supposes that perfection is unobtainable and, therefore, not worth pursuing in the first place. Directors who believe this, and who are unsure of how to visualize, shoot sequences by resorting to a programmed formula of camera setups. This system, usually based on the triangle system of camera placement, is called coverage and employs several camera setups for every action, ensuring that a logical sequence can be cut together in the editing process. A formulaic selection of wide, medium and close-up shots is usually sufficient for a basic rendition of any scene and places a great deal of emphasis on the editor's contribution. While coverage is an extremely safe way to shoot, it is also uninspired, because visual strategies designed for the specific needs of a scene are discouraged unless all the coverage shots have been obtained first. Unfortunately, there is often only enough time within the shooting schedule for the coverage with the result that many interesting visual approaches are never attempted.

Each method, camera cutting and coverage, has advantages and disadvantages and is rarely used exclusively in feature filmmaking. For this reason, "getting coverage" can refer not only to a system of camera placement but also to shooting extra backup shots (in addition to those storyboarded) if time permits or if the director has gambled on an unusual approach to a scene. Once a set is lit and blocked and the essential shots needed to convey the story have been photographed, the attitude of director and cinematographer is generally "We're here, so we might as well get some backup shots just in case." Any filmmaker will know how practical this is, since moving the camera to pick up extra angles can be done fairly rapidly in comparison with the time it takes to light a set and block a scene. Once the technical and dramatic needs of a scene are set, directors are often tempted to get as many shots as possible before tearing down lights and moving on to the next scene. Besides, film stock is relatively inexpensive compared with the total production cost for a full day's shooting. Even when using a storyboard, the same attitudes are at work, and just how many extra shots are filmed depends on the confidence and experience of the director. And finally there is the enthusiasm factor. Many directors just like to take pictures. Even after all the necessary shots are in the can, if the weather is right or the lighting and set are great, it can be very hard to call it a wrap.

One of the more useful aspects of coverage is that action is played out in full for most setups even if the director expects to use only a small portion of a particular take. This is most useful when filming dialogue. For instance, a scene consisting of a father speaking to his children is storyboarded so that the father does all the talking. In the storyboards the father is pictured in a three-shot that dollies past the kids and ends up in close-up on Dad. The entire scene is played in one long take. Though everyone on the creative team might agree that this is the way the scene should be photographed, it would be unwise to rely on this one shot and not get reaction shots of the children at the same time. The director would then be covered in case there is a problem with the tracking shot that doesn't become clear until the film is seen in dailies.

Now let's suppose that instead of using the long dolly shot indicated in the storyboard, the director elects to use camera coverage instead. He would probably shoot a medium shot and close-up of the father and the same setups of the kids. That would be six shots. He would probably also shoot a three-shot OTS of the kids and a reverse OTS of Dad. That would be a total of eight setups. The amount of time it would take to light and photograph all these shots could easily mean that the dolly shot would have to be sacrificed. That is the practical choice between coverage and camera cutting.

It should be clear from this example that the balance between the two methods depends on the situation. Some scenes are obviously easier to film than others for dramatic or technical reasons. Sometimes it's possible to get considerable coverage *and* complex dolly moves or other time-consuming setups. Be assured, however, that many of the shots will not be used in the edited version. Part of learning your craft as a visualizer is having a good sense of what will work before the camera rolls. All directors leave a margin for error and cover themselves, but knowing what works in advance translates into a high *average* of usable shots. The payoff is not the money saved by shooting fewer setups, but the extra time that can be used to take greater artistic chances with more ambitious staging, shots and performances.

Composing Action for Editing

So far this chapter has focused on editing for the visualizer, stressing storytelling and narrative motion. A full discussion of editing techniques

for the film editor as well as editing room procedures can be found in several excellent books listed in the recommended reading section in the back of this book. However, a brief overview of these techniques is of value to any filmmaker visualizing a sequence.

Cutting On Movement

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, edit points are "placed" in the shot or at least anticipated by the director in the staging of action. There are three ways in which an edit can be made to preserve the continuity of action when two or more views of a subject are being combined. Suppose we have a shot of a boy running across the front lawn of his home and jumping over

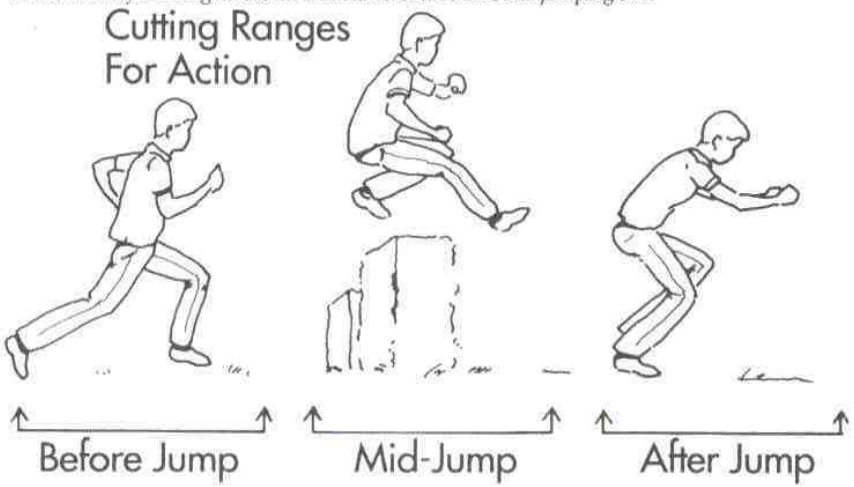


Figure 7.2: Cutting ranges for action.

a hedge onto the sidewalk, as shown in Figure 7.2. The first shot runs the entire length of the action. Now we decide to cut to a new angle somewhere into the first shot. Here are the three options: 1) We can cut to the new shot at the point where the boy reaches the hedge and begins to jump. 2) We can cut to the new shot while the boy is in midjump. 3) We can cut to the new shot after he lands on the ground.

These are all acceptable edit points, but the common practice in the continuity style would locate the cut somewhere into the action rather than before or after the boy has left the ground. This tends to hide the cut and make the transition to a new shot invisible. The exact point of the cut is dependent on the subject and the editor's sense of movement.

Cutting on the action is found in virtually all types of sequences whether the subject of the shot is lifting a drink to his or her lips or merely turning his head or moving his eyes. Filmmakers mindful of this essential

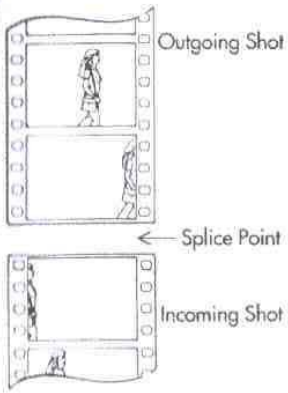


Figure 7.3

editing strategy will stage action so that it will overlap an anticipated edit point between camera angles.

Exits and Entrances

When the subject of a shot moves into or out of a frame it is common practice to make the cut while the subject is still partially within the frame. Figure 7.3 shows the position of a subject in an outgoing and an incoming shot. The effect on-screen is to make the cut smoother and to speed up the flow of action.

Clearing the Frame

This is an alternative strategy to cutting on movement when joining different angles of the same subject. Instead of cutting while the subject is within the frame, the subject is allowed to exit the frame before the cut to a new shot is made. It is customary in this strategy to hold on the empty frame of the outgoing shot for a moment. Figure 7.4 shows an example of this strategy. In the outgoing shot birds fly into the frame, which gives us action to view while holding the clear frame for a minimum of 1-2 seconds at the end of the shot (in our diagram the last frame is symbolic of what would be 24 or more actual film frames).

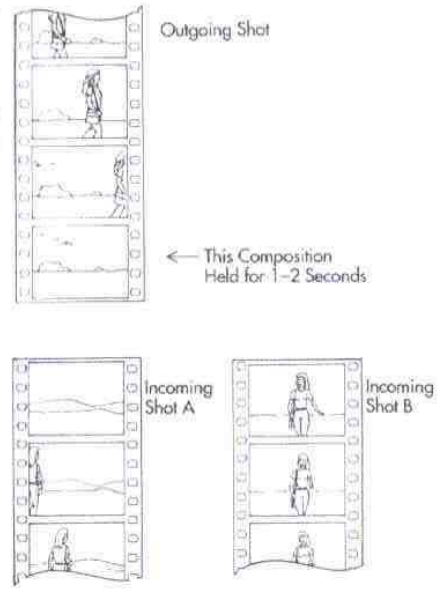


Figure 7.4

There are several options for cutting to the incoming shot after clearing the frame, depending on how long the clear frame is held in the outgoing shot. One option is for the incoming shot (A) to open without the subject in the frame. This opening can vary in length depending on the action in the shot before the main subject arrives. If we open on a busy park or a trickling stream in the woods the opening serves the purpose of an establishing shot and could be held for several seconds. A second option is for the incoming shot (B) to open with the subject already in the frame. This is not a common practice in the continuity style since it is somewhat abrupt. A third alternative would be to cut on the subject partially in frame, as shown in the previous figure (7.3).

Clearing the frame can be looked at in two ways. First, it is a method for joining shots of the same subject in different backgrounds. In this case it serves a function similar to that of the dissolve and indicates a passage of time. The second use for clearing the frame is as a substitute for the cut on action so that an ingoing shot and outgoing shot represent continuous time. In

general, clearing the frame is an easy out for directors who are timid about preserving continuity, since it is almost impossible to make a continuity mistake with this technique. In fact, it is such a flexible cut that it can be used to join shots on opposite sides of the line of action.

One last strategy is shown in Figure 7.5. In this version the outgoing shot ends with the subject clearly within the frame. The incoming shot begins before the subject appears and holds on a clear frame for at least a second before the subject enters (again the clear frame in the diagram is symbolic of many more clear frames).

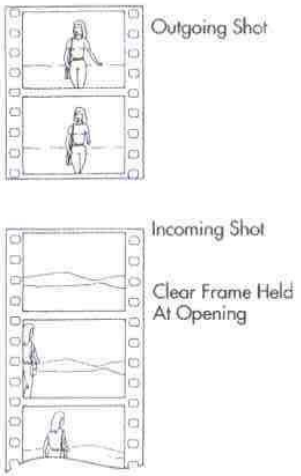


Figure 7.5

Editing and Visualization

One of the values of knowing conventional editing practices is that it gives the filmmaker a point of departure when he is visualizing. Staging, in particular, is made easier by an awareness of the types of movement that provide opportunities for cutting. In any given scene, the filmmaker will visualize how long certain actions should be viewed before moving to another shot. He will then try to plan action at that point so that editing is motivated visually.

This may sound far more mechanical than it really is. If these rules sound overly restrictive it should be remembered that they can be broken at any time in favor of a better idea. The value of understanding editing practices is that it enables the director to visualize an overview of required camera setups for an entire sequence, allowing him to turn his attention to the dramatic needs of the scene.

Part III
The Workshop