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
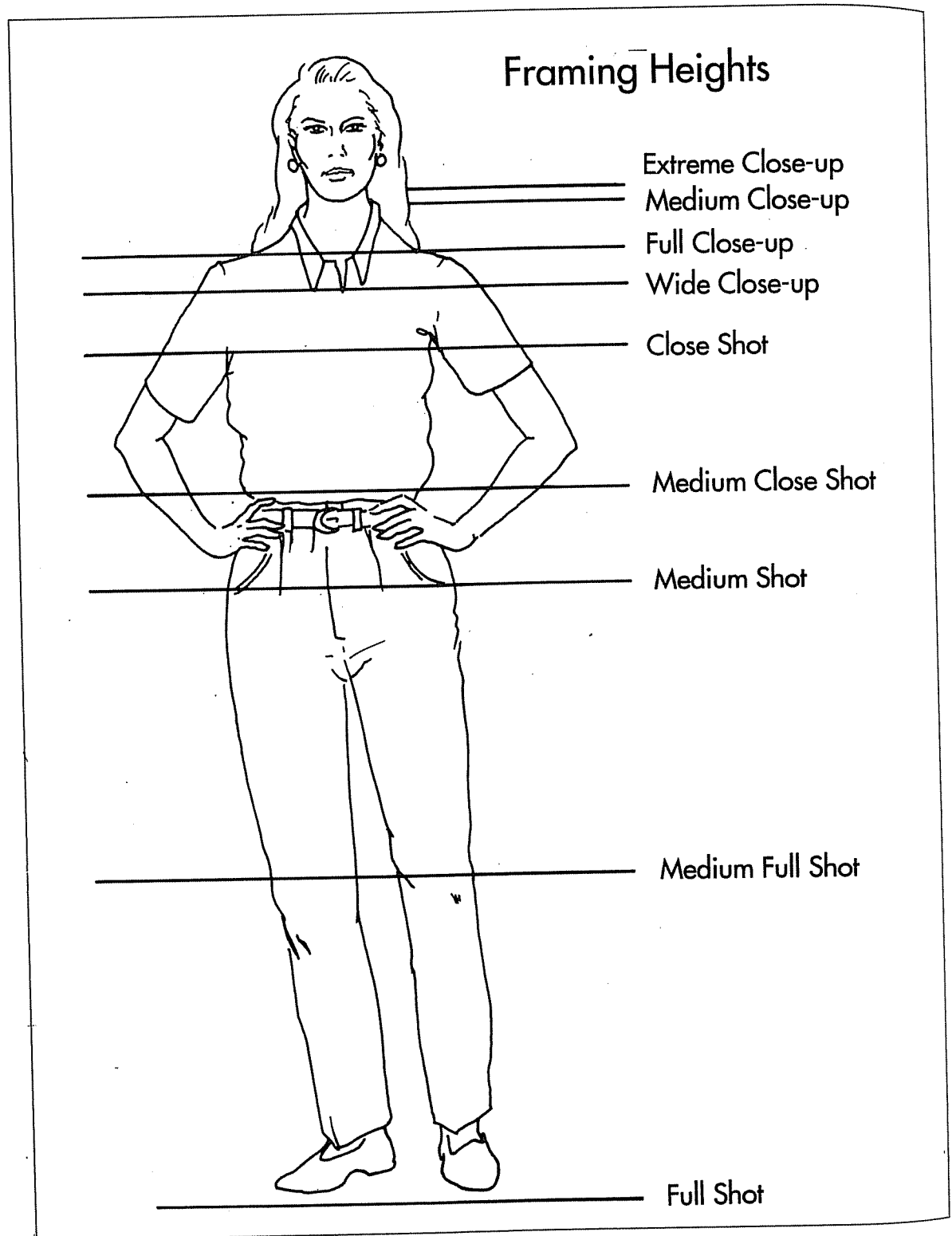
Framing Heights

- Extreme Close-up
- Medium Close-up
- Full Close-up
- Wide Close-up
- Close Shot
- Medium Close Shot
- Medium Shot
- Medium Full Shot
- Full Shot

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 eye-line 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

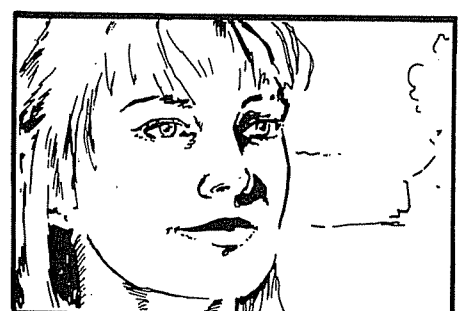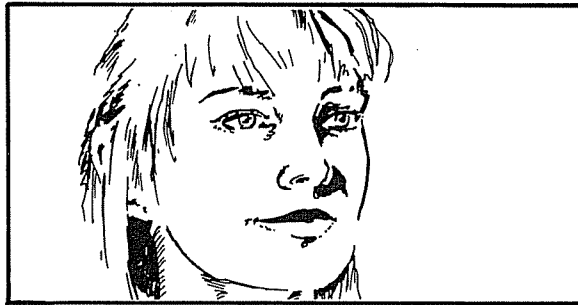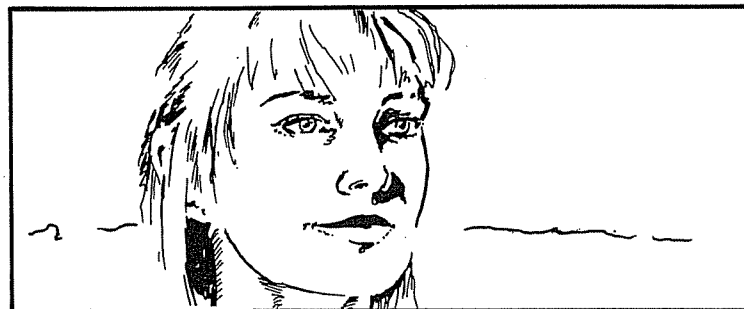**Figure 6.2: Close-ups in three aspect ratios.**
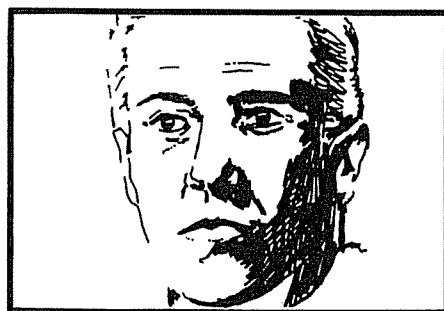
5

6

7

8

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
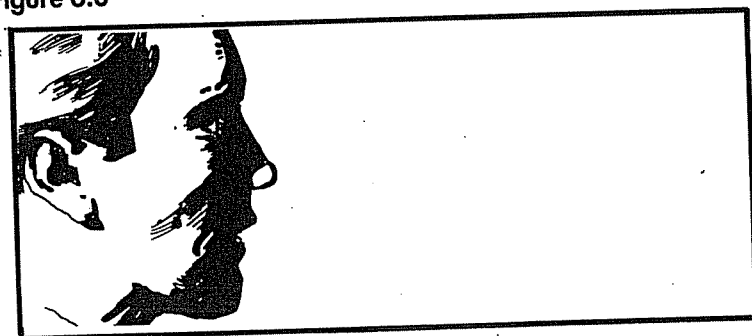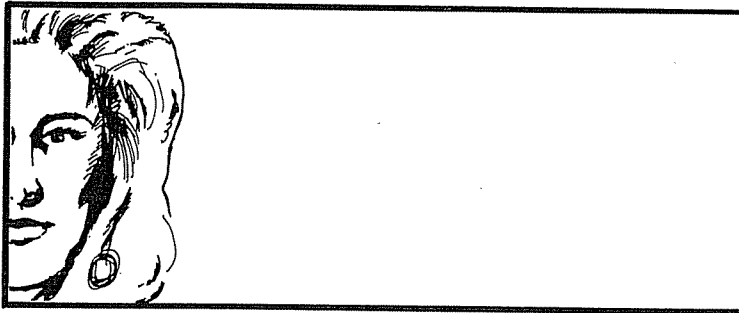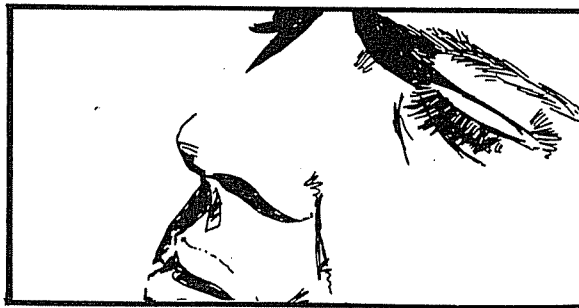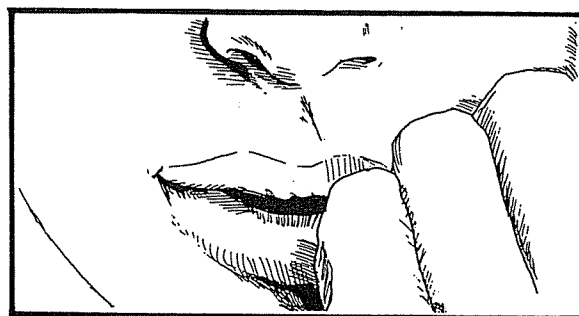
Figure 6.3

4

5

6

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 every-one 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 pri-mary 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
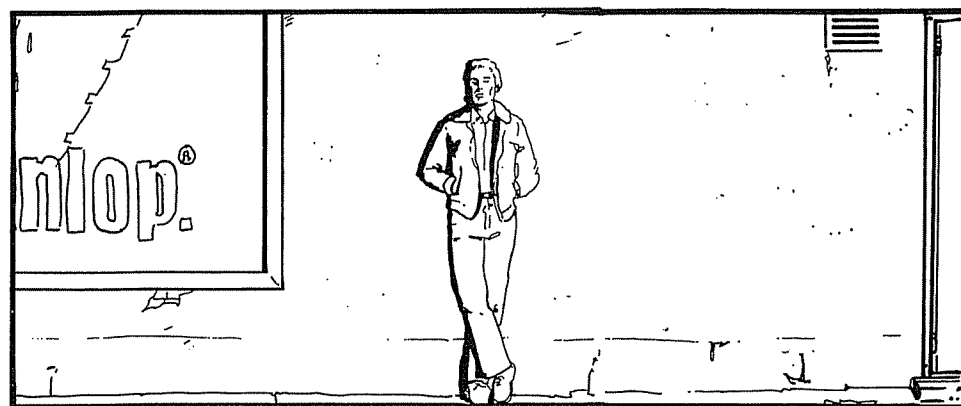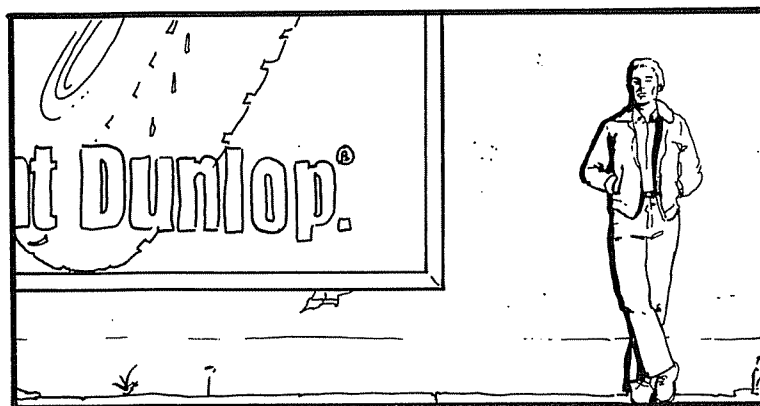
Figure 6.5: Frame balance.

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
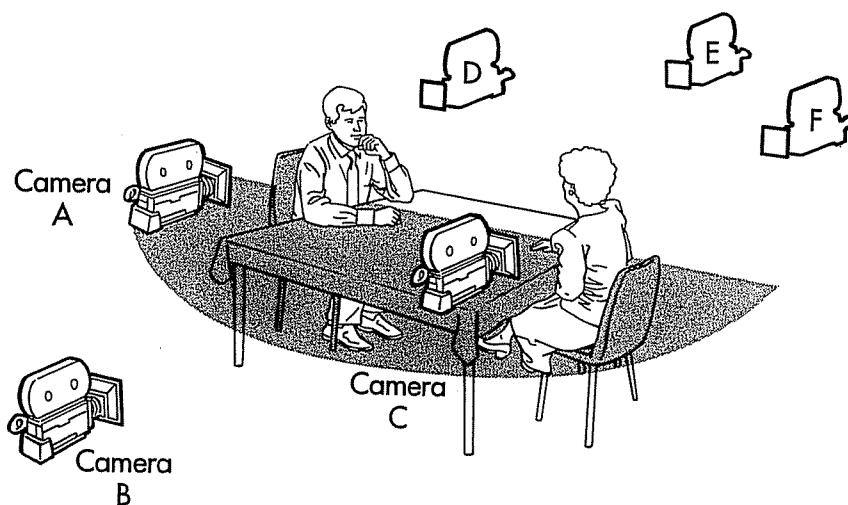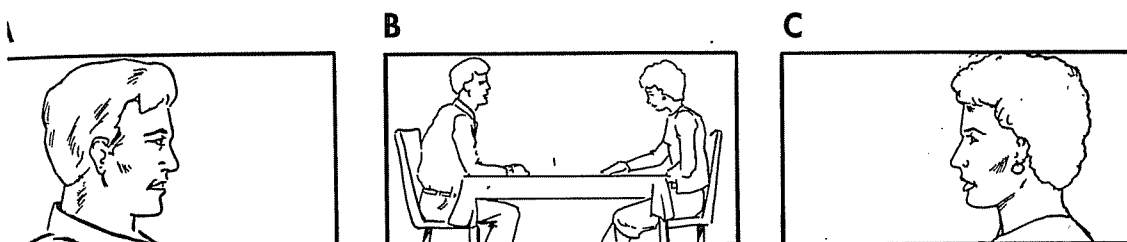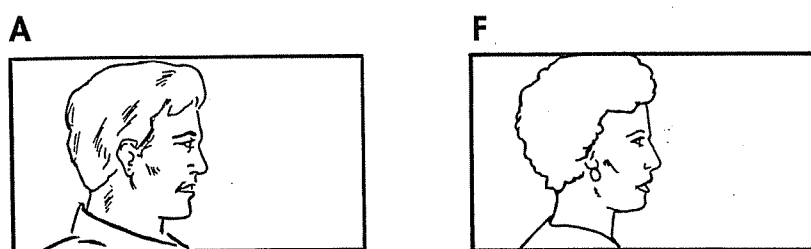
Figure 6.6

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
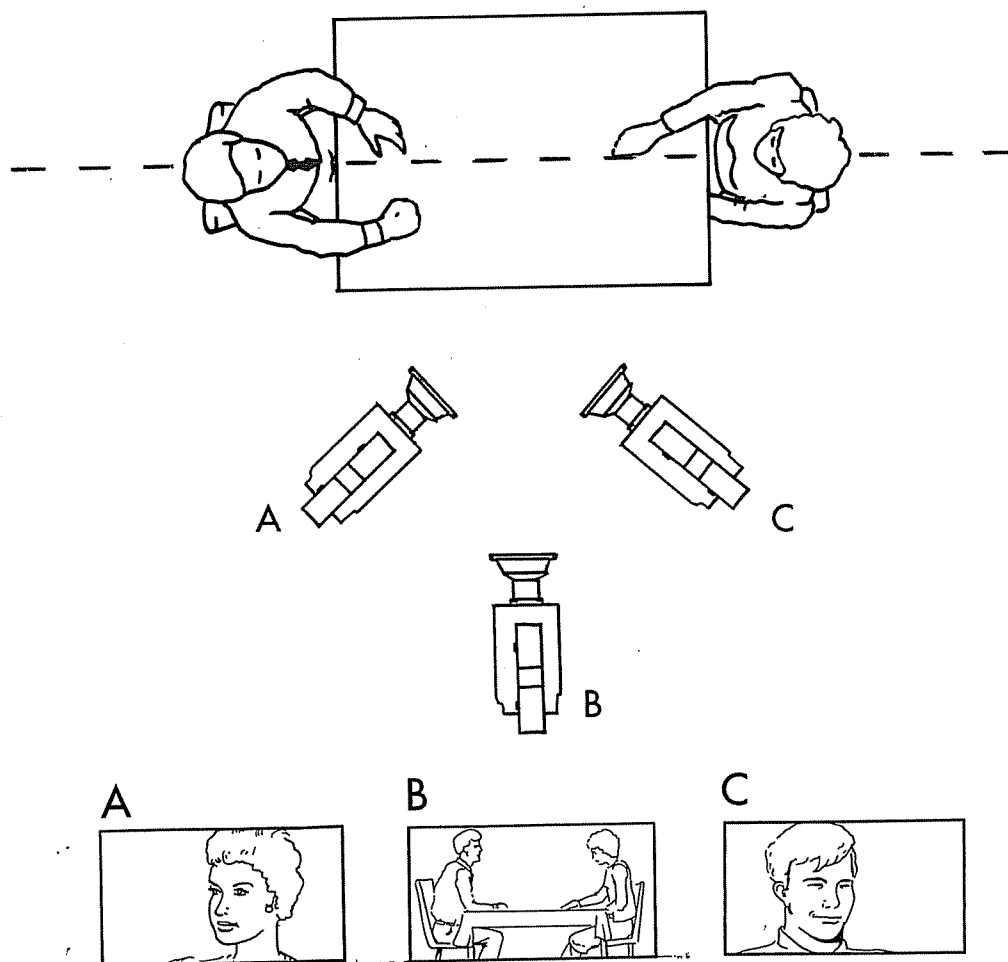

Figure 6.9

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

Camera A   Camera C
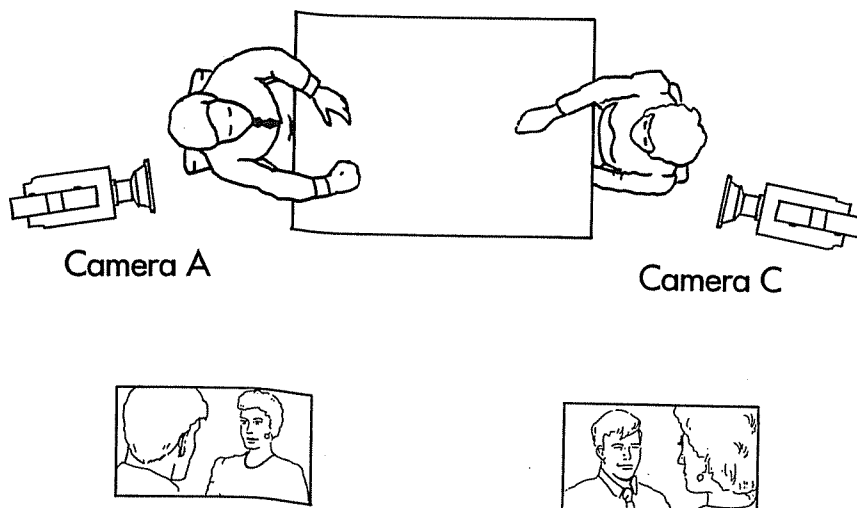

Figure 6.10

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
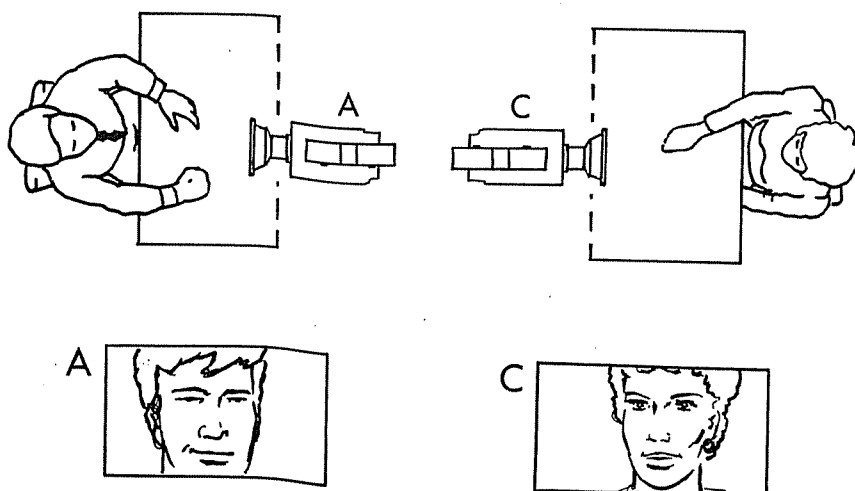

A   C

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.
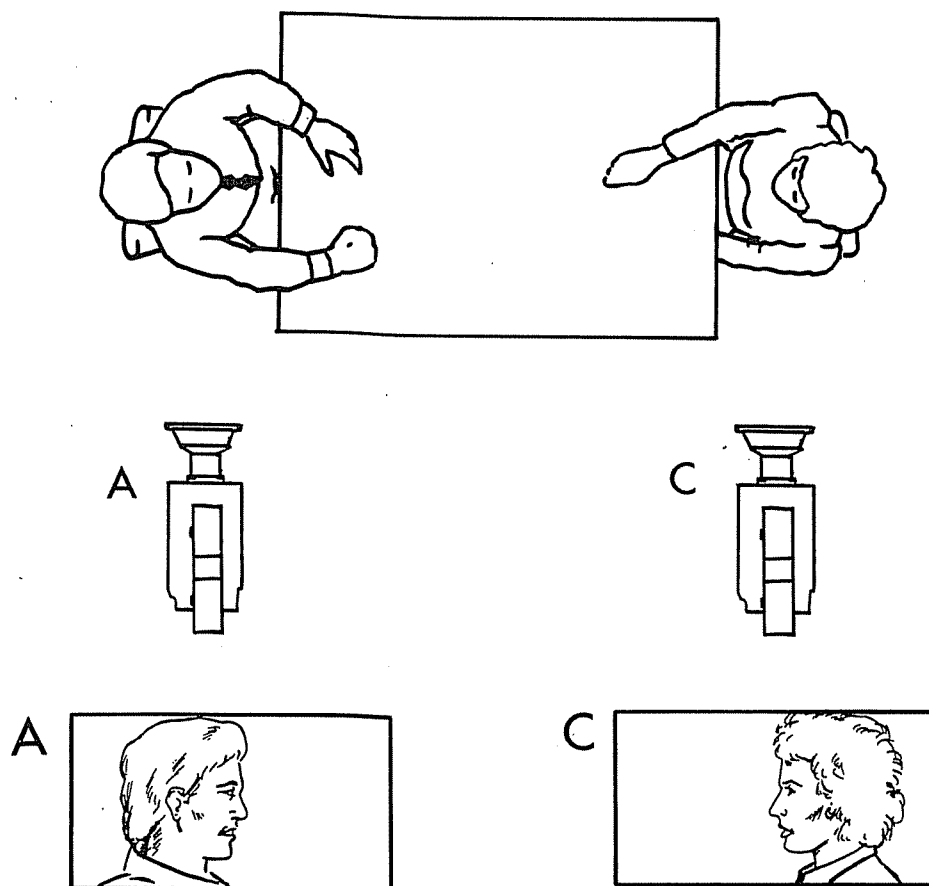
PROFILE SHOTS

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-
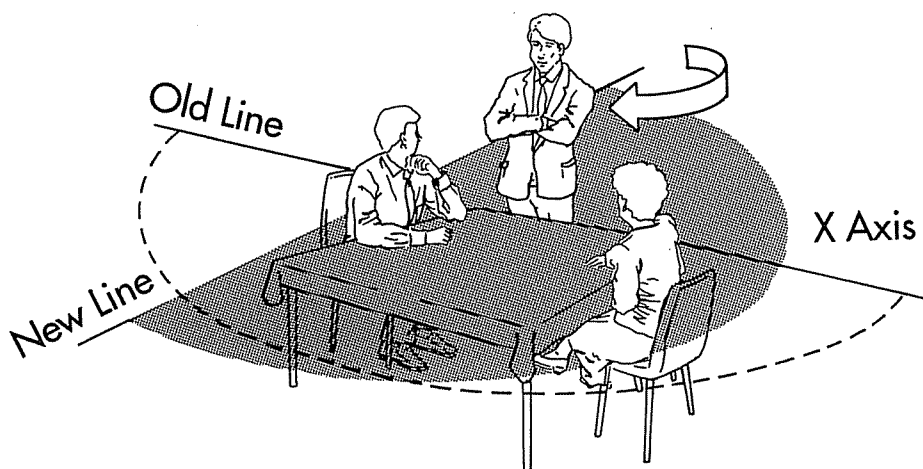
ESTABLISHING A NEW LINE

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
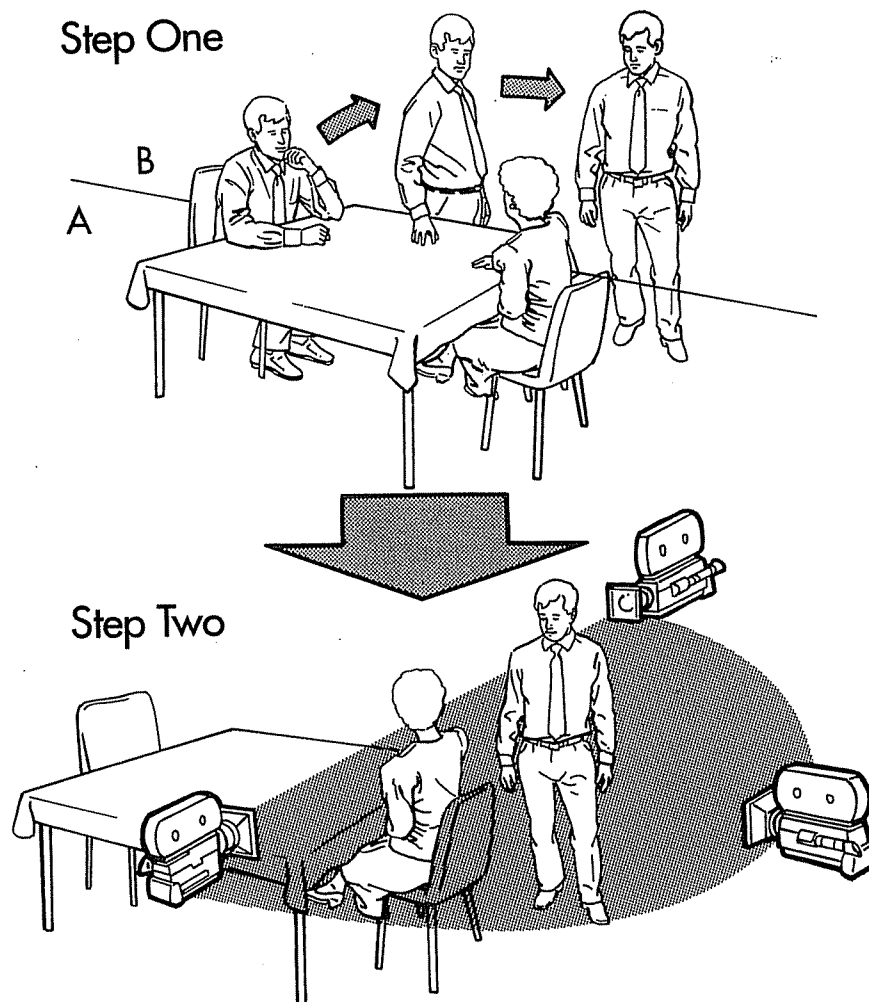
Step One

B

A

Step Two

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
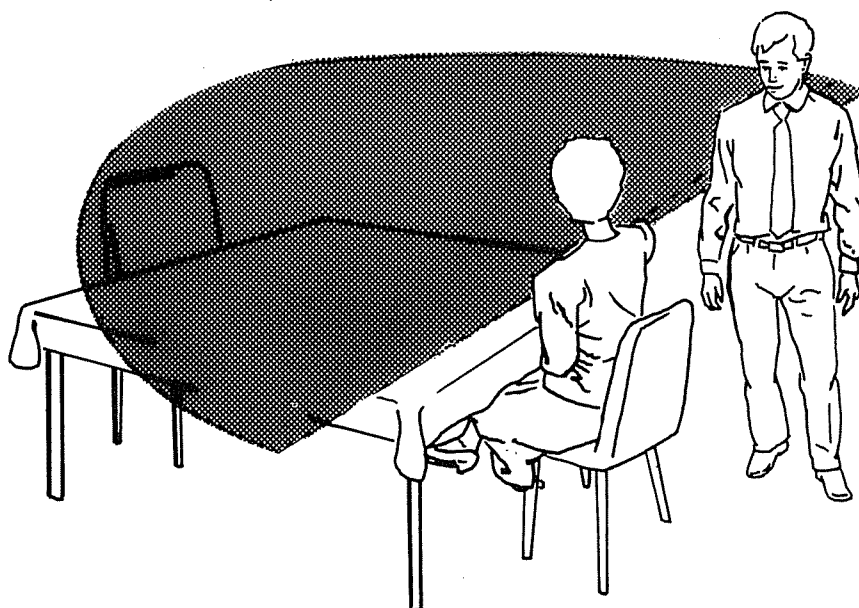
ALTERNATIVE WORKING SPACE

Figure 6.15

Part One

Pivot Shot
(Your Choice)
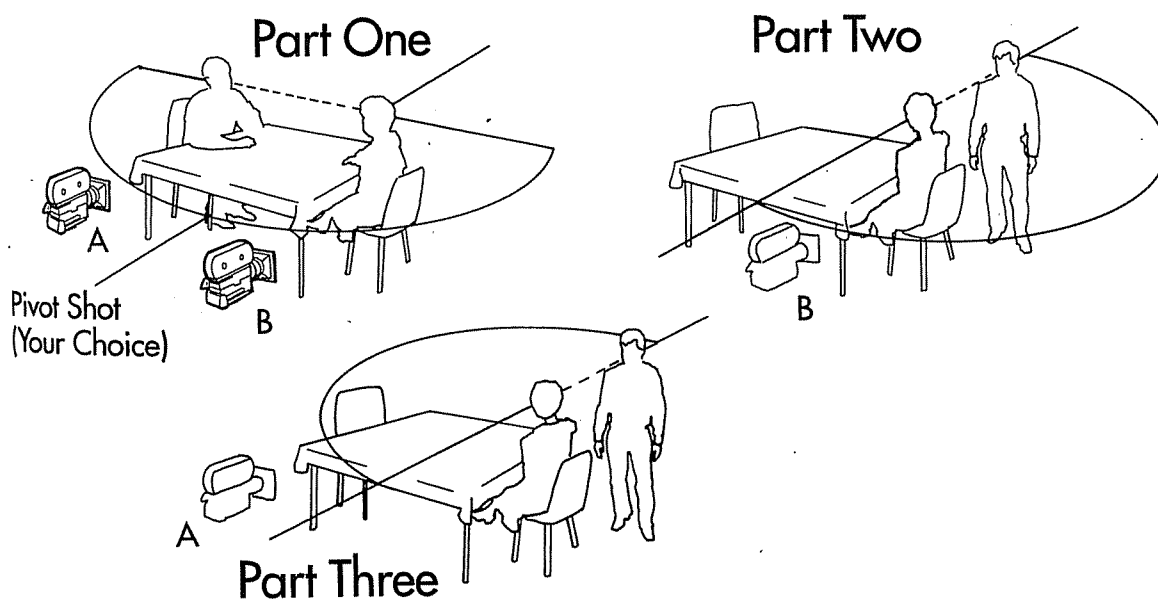
A

B

Part Two

B

Part Three

A

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
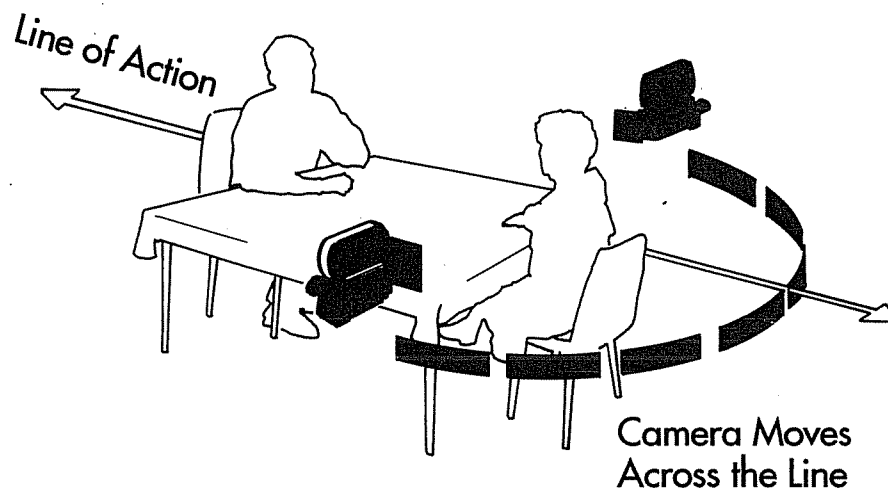

Figure 6.17

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

for a scene. They could best be described as a series of daydreaming sessions based on, but not restricted to, the script.

Let's apply the different methods of planning shots to a hypothetical script, *Appomattox*, based on the surrender of Robert E. Lee to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House at the end of the Civil War.

After reading the script many times and working on a final polish with the writer, the director has a general sense of how most of the scenes should be staged. He has written notes in the margin of the script detailing specific ideas and ultimately transfers these to a separate notebook, which includes photographs, sketches and other reference material he has gathered. Later, he visits Appomattox Court House and other location sites and takes photographs at each place. Now the director is ready to begin working out the shot by shot plan for each scene.

Creating a shot plan means describing the staging of the action, the size of the shot, the choice of lens and the camera angle. If the director uses a shot list, it might read: "Wide shot, using a long focal length lens to compress the foreground and background. The camera is looking down on the Union line from a modest high angle with trees in the immediate foreground. The camera pans with a horseman who enters the right side of the frame."

These are all traditional descriptions of the graphic quality and photographic quality of a shot. The director, however, is ultimately interested in how the photographic qualities of a shot determine the narrative effect of the scene. The following exercise is a good way to heighten your awareness of the relationship between visual and dramatic elements by rephrasing traditional shot descriptions in dramatic terms. In the four categories listed below graphic qualities are matched with equivalent narrative qualities, posed as questions.

1 Graphic — Where is the camera stationed?
   Narrative — Whose point of view is being expressed?

2 Graphic — What is the size of the shot?
   Narrative — What distance are we from the subject of the scene?

3 Graphic — What is our angle of view?
   Narrative — What is our relationship to the subject?

4 Graphic — Are we cutting or moving the camera?
   Narrative — Are we comparing points of view?

All these questions overlap somewhat, but answering them individually is a technique that forces you to see the material in new ways. Now we can see how they might be applied to the script excerpts from *Appomattox*.

Shot Plan—First Draft

After the director has visited the locations a second time and made preliminary production choices based on the budget, he makes a shot plan