STAGING DIALOGUE SEQUENCES

When staging dialogue scenes for the camera, the director must fulfill two goals: the honest expression of human relationships and the presentation of these relationships to the viewer. The first goal is determined by the script and the actor's performance. The second goal is determined by staging, cinematography and editing. On the set, however, the director often finds that the actor's process and the practical and dramatic requirements of the camera are at odds. There is no right or wrong solution to this classical opposition, only what works best for the filmmaker in a given situation.

The visual challenge of staging is essentially a spatial problem—the ability to predict in three-dimensional space what will work on a two-dimensional screen. The spatial effect of a filmed sequence is particularly difficult to visualize because it is comprised of so many different fluid elements, such as the changing composition of the filmed image when the camera or the subject is in motion. Only a few dozen directors in the history of narrative film have exercised a recognizable staging style, and it remains a peculiarly elusive skill to acquire. The challenge is made more difficult by the lack of opportunities for practicing the craft.

A Method for Visualizing Staging

In the arts, technique is largely a matter of improved perception. In music, for example, this means learning to hear more accurately; in film it means learning to see more precisely. Specifically, cinematic "vision" relies on spatial memory and recognition, skills that can be learned and refined. This will be our goal in the next several chapters.

First, we will need a basic vocabulary of shots and actor placement. Any system of construction will suffice provided the filmmaker uses its elements consistently. For our purpose, the Hollywood continuity style offers a familiar set of solutions that can be broken down into a system of building blocks. This programmed approach, however, is not simply intended to offer stock solutions. By knowing the basic ways in which people position themselves in conversation and the accompanying camera setups used to record them, you will have a secure base from which to improvise, break rules and take creative risks, while fulfilling your basic responsibility to the actors, the script and your personal vision.

This spatial approach is made up of five basic areas:
Staging stationary actors
Staging moving actors

Using the depth of the frame
Staging camera movement
Staging camera movement and actor movement together

The first building blocks we'll look at are staging patterns for two subjects. In the photoboard examples camera angles, lenses and editing patterns will be compared so that you can see how slight adjustments alter our understanding of a scene. Once the staging patterns for two subjects are established, we can apply these same general principles to three- and four-subject situations in subsequent chapters.

Before getting to the actual examples, we should first look at some of the basic staging conventions found in narrative film with the understanding that they represent the starting point for new ideas rather than the limits of what is permissible.

Frontality

This is a basic convention of Western art. Frontality is just a way of saying that the subjects of a picture tend to face the viewer or, in the case of film, the camera. Many staging arrangements in the movies are basically frontal, meaning that subjects in conversation tend to face the camera rather than each other. This type of body positioning is not without precedence in real life, but in films it is often adjusted to the camera's needs.

A scene that stages actors in a frontal position can be recorded in a single master shot. If, however, one of the actors is turned away from the camera (partially or completely) more than one camera angle is necessary to see both actors' faces. This represents the two major editing approaches to staging: one in which the actors face a single camera setup and the other in which multiple camera viewpoints are edited together.

The Master Shot

The master shot is the one shot that is wide enough to include all the actors in the scene and that runs for the entire length of the action. When directors speak of the master, they usually mean that it is part of a plan of coverage that includes other camera setups in the triangle system that will eventually be edited together. But there are also times when the master shot is the only shot the director feels is necessary.

The Sequence Shot

Normally, the camera remains motionless in the master shot, particularly if cutting to other camera angles is anticipated. If the master is a moving shot, the camera is fluidly repositioned with a dolly throughout the course of the scene, essentially combining several camera angles that in an edited sequence would be obtained by individual shots. This approach to staging is also called the sequence shot and usually employs movement of the actors along with the traveling camera. Generally speaking, the sequence shot respects frontality more than an edited sequence. This is because editing

permits, and routinely links, shots that are opposed by as much as 180 degrees. The equivalent change in a sequence shot is very nearly impossible to do quickly, let alone repeatedly. Therefore, the moving camera in a dialogue sequence shot tends to maintain a general viewing direction. We will look at this more closely in the chapter on mobile blocking.

Shot Size and Distance

One version of the master shot, the medium two-shot, was so characteristic of American films of the '30s and '40s that the French call it the "plan Americain" or the American shot. In the early '30s the two-shot was used to cover entire dialogue sequences without resorting to close-ups. This was due in part to the advent of sound in pictures and the long stretches of dialogue that accompanied them. The cumbersome blimped cameras were less mobile than the cameras used for silent films and the two-shot reduced the need to move the camera. This technical limitation was quickly overcome, but the two-shot remained in use for years because it was found to be a relaxed framing device for comedies and musicals.

Personally, I like the distance and objectivity that two-shot and full figure shots afford. The body can be wonderfully expressive, and people often use body language to indicate their relationship to others: for example, by where they stand in a room or by their different ways of approaching a rival, friend or lover. The way a person moves can be as distinctive as his or her voice, and most of us can identify a friend at a distance by some characteristic gesture long before we see his or her face. Expressive body movement falls within the range of the full shot and the medium shot. Entire scenes can be staged effectively at this distance without ever resorting to a close-up.

The Shot, Reverse Shot Pattern

When players are seen in alternating close-ups, the shot, reverse shot pattern is one of the most useful solutions. No cutting strategy better represents the Hollywood style than this one. The popularity of this setup is that it offers the widest range of cutting options and includes two important advantages that the two-shot lacks. The first advantage is that we get to see a subject's isolated reaction to dialogue; the second is that the point of view changes within the scene. In addition, the eye-line match between one character and another helps to establish a sense of spatial unity.

Sight Lines and Eye Contact

In any shot of one actor the closer the sight line is to the camera the more intimate our contact with the actor will be. In the most extreme case the actor can look directly into the lens and make eye contact with the viewer. This very confrontational relationship can be quite startling.

The most frequent use of direct eye contact is in subjective camera sequences in which the audience is made to see things through the eyes of one of the characters. This is relatively infrequent in narrative film and most

of the time dialogue scenes are shot with the sight lines of the actors slightly to the left or right of the camera. In this case, it is common practice to maintain the same distance from the camera for sight lines in alternating

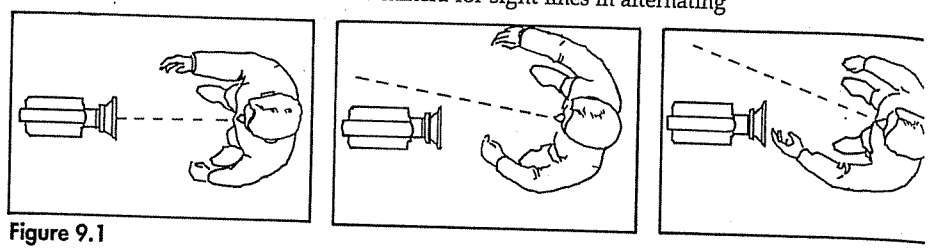

Figure 9.1

close-ups of two or more actors. Figure 9.1 is a comparison of setups for close-ups, each illustrating a different sight line relative to the camera.

Once you have acquired some feel for the psychological and dramatic implications of sight lines and eye contact, you will be able to make subtle shifts within a sequence for dramatic emphasis.

The Staging System

Unless a director spends a great deal of time training himself to see all the possibilities of setup and actor placement, he usually relies on a few all-purpose strategies for any scene. If he allows his actors greater freedom, interesting new options may arise, but unless he has a solid command of staging for the camera, the production process will ultimately undermine his experimentation. The director will find himself at odds with the cinematographer and producer, who won't understand why he keeps restaging a scene, with the consequent loss of time and, frequently, the spontaneity of his cast.

The skill this director lacks is the ability to visualize the actors and camera in space, and the composition that will result from any combination of these elements. This is where the pattern system of staging comes in.

Letter Patterns

The staging system we will be using from this point on identifies two categories of actor placement: pattern and position. We will discuss pattern first.

> Pattern: There are three basic *patterns* of figure deployment in a frame. We will call them the "A," "I" and "L" patterns. These are the letters that grouped players resemble when viewed from above.

The significance of the patterns is that *they are the simplest arrangement of actors according to the line of action.* Therefore, staging patterns relate to *camera placement.*

As you can see on the following page, the A and L patterns require three or more players to complete the letter shape. The only arrangement for two subjects is the I pattern. Figure 9.2 illustrates all three patterns.

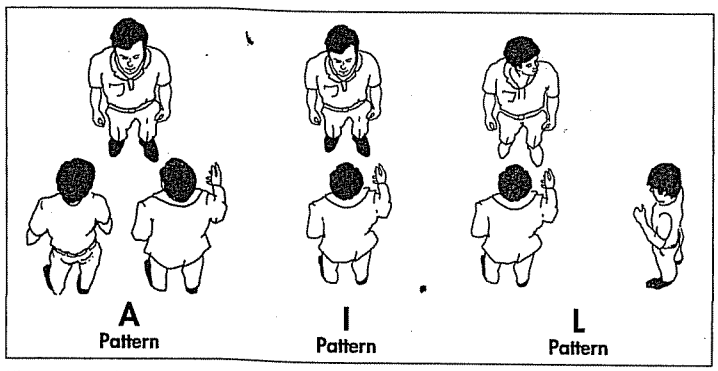

Figure 9.2: Patterns.

Position: This refers to the direction the subjects are facing within a pattern. For any given pattern there can be many positions.

Most importantly, position relates to the composition of the frame. This means that once the camera has been placed for a given pattern, the more subtle arrangement of the actors (the direction they face in the frame) is determined by their positions. An experienced director will consider pattern and position simultaneously, but in the beginning they are more easily understood as separate concepts. Three typical positions in the I pattern are shown in Figure 9.3.

One last point: **The I pattern for two players is the basic building block in our system.** This is because the line of action can be established between only two people at a time. When there are more than two people in a conversation, the line of action moves as explained in Chapter 6. This is good news since we will only have to learn the positions for two subjects in order to apply them to larger groups. From the cameraman's point of view, the I pattern is found in the A and L patterns whenever a series of close-ups and singles are required.

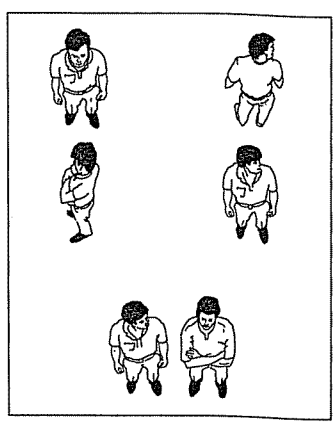

Figure 9.3: Positions. All the positions are in the I pattern.

Staging Dialogue for Two Subjects

For the sake of clarity, most of the photoboards in this chapter are shot in simple surroundings staged for the static camera. Later, we'll see how camera movement or movement by the players can be substituted for cutting. For now, the camera is locked down and the photoboard sequences represent multiple camera angles that have been edited together.

10 DIALOGUE STAGING WITH THREE SUBJECTS

Now that we have looked at the 10 positions for the "I" pattern, we can add a third player to our stagings, which will make the "A" and "L" patterns possible. Remember, our system is based on three assumptions:

- The I pattern is the simplest building block. It is found in the A and L patterns.
- Patterns determine camera placement based on the line of action.
- Position determines the placement of players in the frame based on the basic staging pattern.

The Difference Between A and L Patterns

Because actors are not always arranged in precise A or L alignment, it is not always easy to decide which pattern to apply. In this case camera placement is the determining factor.

For example, when lining up players for a three-shot you may find that two players are facing the third player. If the third player is framed between the other two, then the staging arrangement is the A pattern. If the third player is lined up outside the other two players, then the arrangement is the L pattern. This aspect of staging is called *opposition*. Figure 10.1 shows the various types of oppositions that can be obtained.

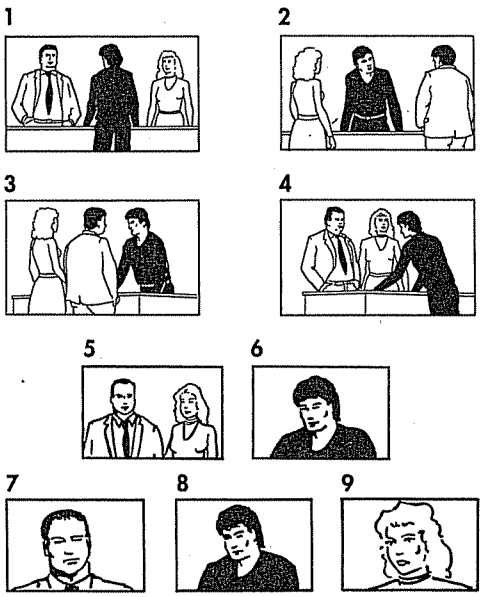

Figure 10.1: Frames 1 and 2 show one subject opposed by two others. Since the one figure in black is flanked by the other two, this is an A pattern. Frames 3 and 4 show the alternative setup for the three-shot in which the lone subject is isolated to one side. This is an L pattern. Frames 5 and 6 illustrate the type of opposition that can be obtained if we break down the three-shot into a two-shot opposed by a close-up. In frames 7–9 all the players are equally opposed in close-ups.

The Basic Patterns and Positions

In the two-player stagings of the previ-

ous chapter, the models in the photoboards were arranged in open space. Having established the basic positions in those examples we can look at stagings that are less precisely aligned.

By adding the additional player we have increased the number of pattern and position combinations enormously. We do not need to look at all of them since we know that any combination can be reduced to the 10 positions in the I pattern that we have already seen. Conversely, we can reverse the process and construct dozens of three-player stagings from the 10 positions. This idea is shown in Figure 10.2.

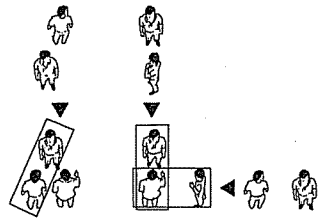

Figure 10.2: Here we see the boxed portion of the A and L patterns being replaced by the two alternate positions in the I pattern at the top of the figure. The box could just as easily be drawn horizontally or diagonally as long as two players are enclosed in the box.

Before looking at the photoboard examples, we can review the line of action as it pertains to three-player scenes. Figure 10.3 shows a typical staging situation in the A pattern.

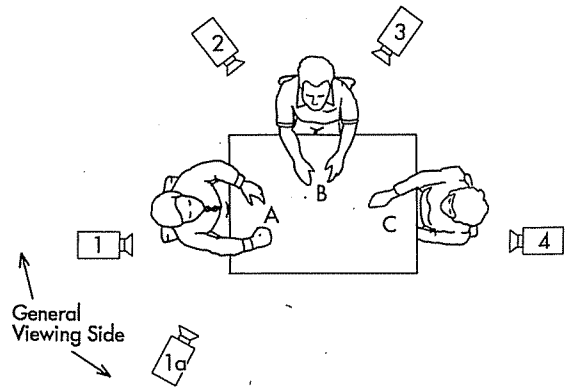

Figure 10.3: In this A pattern staging I first determined the general angle of view. Although the camera can move 360 degrees around the players, the scene should have a basic viewing orientation. The circumstances vary with the scene, but in this case the scene opens with a view from camera 1. The dialogue begins between players a and c. This establishes the line between them. Camera positions 1 and 2 for OTS shots are placed *outside* the line. Now player b speaks to player c, establishing a new line between them. On what side of the line do we place the camera? This is where the general view comes in. Rather than set up a new camera position *outside* of players a and b, as we did for players a and c, we stay on the same side of player a. Now when player b speaks to player c we stay on the same side of player b and use camera position 2. What about camera position 3? Do we actually need this angle? With the number of angles we already have, it may be unnecessary. This example can be handled in other ways, but the general idea is to reuse positions when possible rather than constantly creating new ones whenever a new line is established.

In the following examples we will consider some common and some not so common staging situations with three players.

A Pattern (Version One)

Here is the same staging situation we just looked at in Figure 10.3. Frame 1 is the only combination of setup and staging for this pattern that permits us to see all the subjects clearly. This makes it the obvious choice for a master shot.

In the first series of frames (2-5), single shots (medium shots and a close-up) are used after the opening master shot. This produces two results. First, it tends to fragment space, and secondly, it prevents us from seeing the player speaking and the players who are listening in one shot. Compare this with the next sequence.

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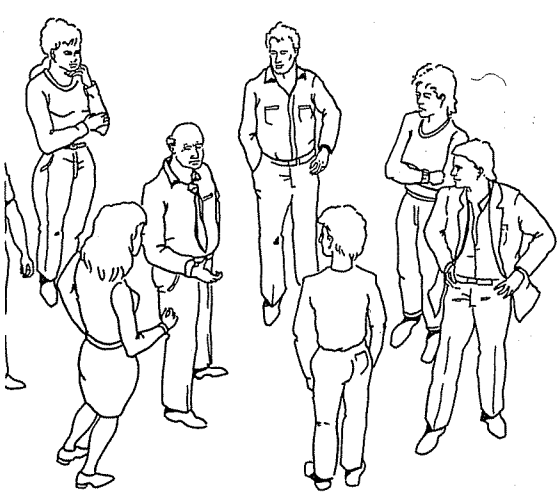
1 FOUR OR MORE AYER DIALOGUE 'AGINGS

Staging dialogue scenes with four or more subjects utilizes the same A, I and L patterns that we used for three-player dialogue scenes. However, as the number of subjects grows, so do the possibilities for individual shots or group shots. For instance, for a scene with five subjects, there are 5 possible CUs, 9 two-shots, 6 three-shots, 6 four-shots and 1 five-person master shot, or approximately 27 shots. Obviously, this is an overwhelming number of choices for any scene, and while some setups are clearly impractical, photographing groupings with more than three subjects is a matter of consolidation and simplification.

In nearly all cases, dramatic structure in fiction does this for us by representing a generalized view of the human situation through the actions of individuals. In practical terms this is found in any scene involving large numbers of people when we focus on the key experiences of the main characters within a compressed time frame. While these are dramatic conventions, they are similar to how we experience any large gathering of people in real life. At a dinner party, for example, people arrange themselves into small groups because it's simply too difficult to converse with more than five or six people simultaneously. Even when one person gains the attention of the other guests, it's basically a two-person arrangement: the speaker and his audience. When filming a large group where several players speak, close-ups are often used in favor of three- and four-player group shots, since this helps differentiate the players.



.1

If we look at Figure 11.1 we see one man surrounded by seven other people. It would be unusual for each of these players to have significant speaking parts. Even if

that were the case, one or two players would almost certainly emerge as the central players. The key to camera positioning is identifying which players are the central players in the scene.

Figure 11.2 shows the line of action established between the principal two players in the scene. CUs of all the other players might be used, but the basic staging preserves the line of action as established by these players.

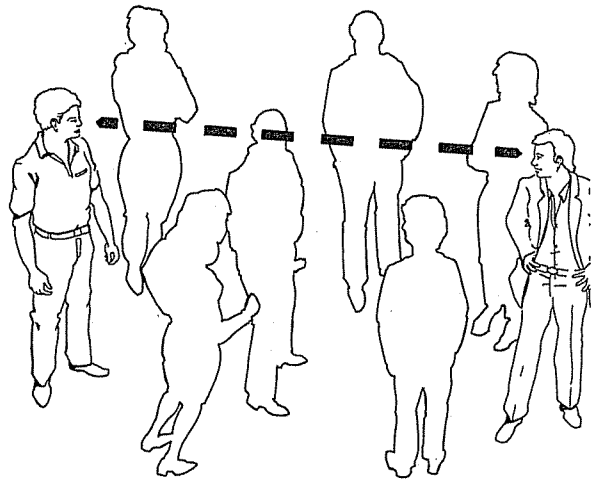


Figure 11.2

Figure 11.3 shows what happens if three players share the dialogue equally. In this case the A pattern applies and the camera can be positioned accordingly. As we learned in the previous chapter, even the A pattern is ultimately reduced to the two-subject I position when determining the line of action. The players who do not have dialogue may be included in the shot, but the camera position is restricted to the 180-degree working area on one side of the line of action.

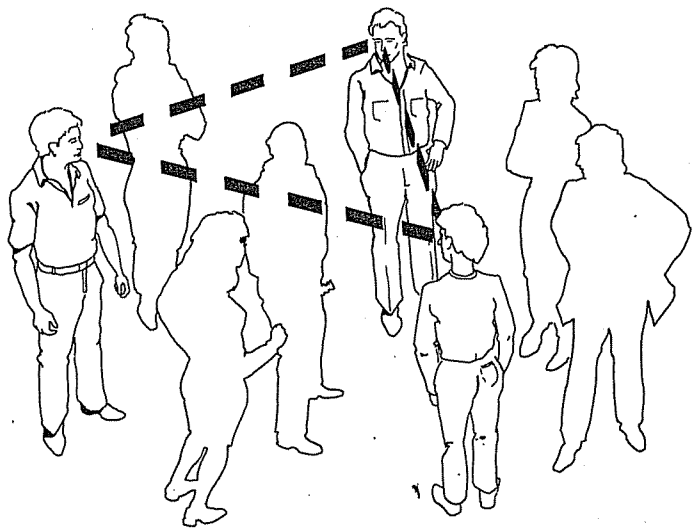


Figure 11.3

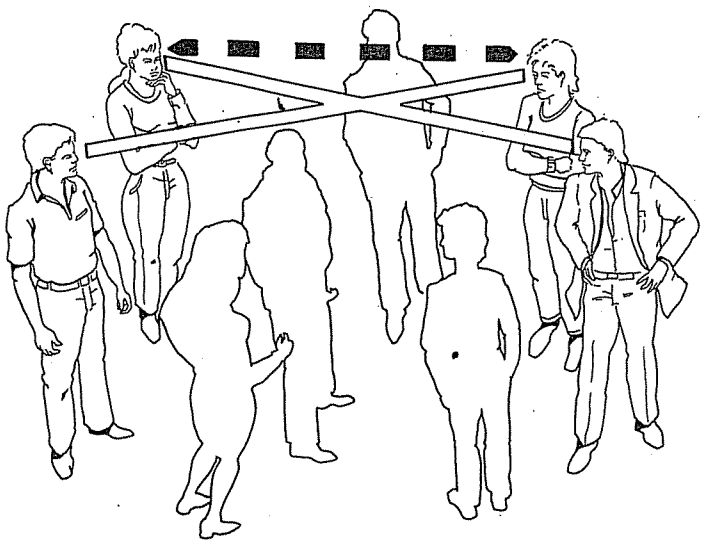


Figure 11.4

In Figure 11.4 the same logic applies to four key players. In this situation we have multiple lines of sight or potential lines of action. While it is possible to puzzle out camera placement for each pair of players, there is a simpler way to work out the staging. Limit yourself to a few key setups. If you are establishing more than four sightlines to move around space in a large group, you are creating unnecessary problems. The dotted line in Figure 11.4 represents a basic line of action that permits close-ups, singles, two-shots and a group shot. This means that we are establishing a general viewing direction.

It should be mentioned at this point that all this attention to the line of action and camera setup implies an active cutting style. In any of the previous examples of large group stagings, a single camera setup could be used, and this of course would eliminate continuity problems.

While it is easy to visualize this in illustrations from an uncluttered high-angle view, it can be anything but simple to visualize a scene when you're on the set with a large cast. But no matter how complex the staging becomes, the camera geography of any scene is easily determined by keeping the line of action in mind. This is true whether you choose to violate the line or not. The Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu, whose staging style required him to cross the line, was as consistent in his rejection of the traditional rules of continuity as any Hollywood director is in observing them. The purpose of describing staging in terms of the line of action is to help a director make clearheaded choices. The line and the patterns based on the line should be thought of as a system of organization, not as an aesthetic choice. If it helps you to break through to some new way of working, so much the better.

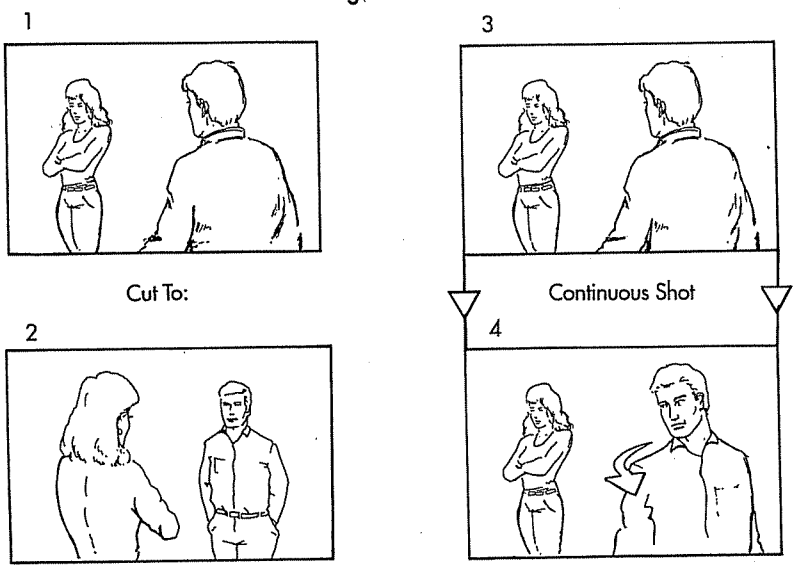
12 MOBILE STAGING

When Fred Astaire left Broadway for the studios of RKO he summed up his thoughts about motion pictures and dance this way: "Either the camera will dance or I will." This is pretty good advice for a choreographer to follow, but it also happens to be a succinct way of describing the two basic methods of staging mobile action: move the camera or move the subject.

In the previous three chapters on staging dialogue we built sequences by using multiple camera viewpoints to direct the viewer's attention—the camera moved around players who remained in a fixed position. There is an alternative to this way of staging action: directing the viewer's attention from one subject to another by having the subjects move within the space framed by the camera. In practice, both approaches are frequently combined to present a varied and fluid dramatic sequence. In addition to cutting multiple viewpoints together and moving the subject in the frame, we can also move the camera in a tracking or crane shot. These three methods of photographing action in sequence represent the entire range of camera and subject staging techniques.

In Figure 12.1, frames 1 and 2 illustrate a simple shot, reverse shot editing pattern using OTS framings. This is a straightforward way to treat

Figure 12.1



Frames 1 and 2 show the shot, reverse shot cutting pattern. Frames 3 and 4 represent a continuous shot in which the man turns around to face the camera. This strategy uses mobile staging to achieve the same results as cutting.

a dialogue scene if the subjects are stationary. The alternative is to allow the players to reposition themselves as part of the action in a single shot, as shown in frames 3 and 4. By having the man turn around in frame 4 we obtain the frontal view that previously required a new shot.

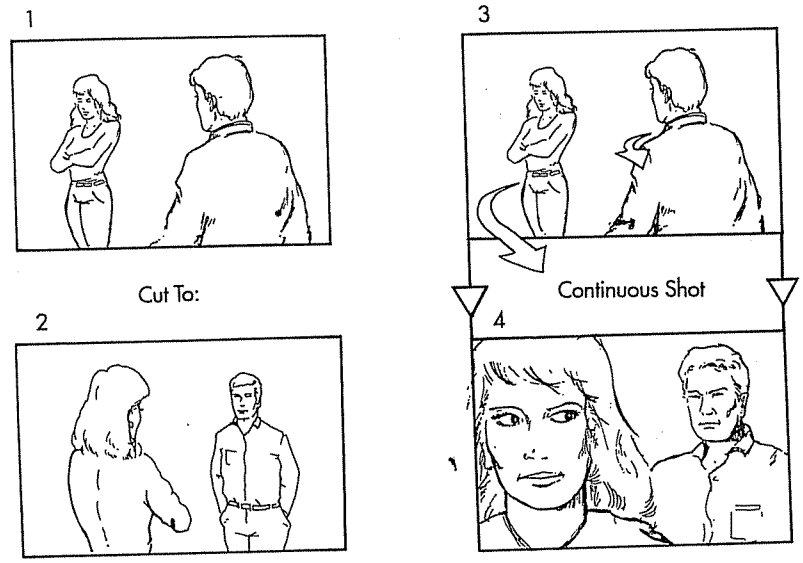
A variation on this same idea of substituting the actor's movement for editing is shown in Figure 12.2 This time the girl in the background of the shot comes forward until she is seen in close-up. The man with his back to the camera in frame 1 turns with her so that they are both facing the camera. In a sense we have obtained the equivalent of a medium OTS shot, a close-up and two-shot without resorting to cutting.

These two examples of mobile staging will give you the basic idea. The only criterion the actor's movement should meet is whether it is motivated or not. This type of staging falls under the category of "stage business." This can mean anything from lighting a cigarette (the classic piece of stage business in the '40s) to moving around a bedroom while getting dressed in the morning. You should never really have to invent artificial business just to add action to a scene. If the story, actors and the directing process are working together, ideas will emerge from this collaboration that are accurate observations of human behavior.

Building Blocks

Think of the longest, most involved sequence shot you can remember from a film. Now imagine how you might draw that sequence in a storyboard. Since you cannot depict continuous movement in a single panel, you would

Figure 12.2



These separate frames at left represent a single shot. By using mobile blocking, the actors are seen in different positions and sizes, the same as if we had cut between several camera setups.

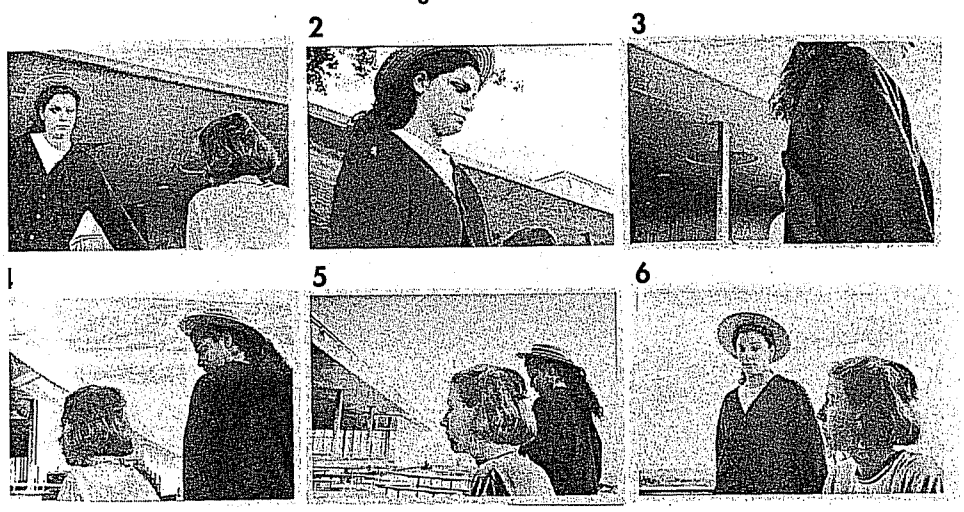
have to choose key moments in the action and draw them in a series of panels. As it turns out, this is fairly easy because most action staged for a long interrupted shot is composed of these very same moments choreographed into a smooth continuity. We can also reverse the process and devise a continuous shot built from the same individual key events in the action.

We've already looked at the building blocks for this approach in the patterns and positions catalogued in the previous chapters on staging. Working out choreographed movement with the actors is merely a matter of connecting different patterns and positions so that all the separate views of a scene are linked into a single shot.

Mobile Staging (Example One)

Let's try building a simple two-position sequence using camera movement and a subject who is repositioned in the shot. This strategy is shown in figure 12.3. The movement of the camera and the actor represents a single

Figure 12.3



We begin with an OTS framing and . . .

. . . the camera dollies forward as the girl who is standing moves to the opposite side of the table.

unbroken shot. The accompanying diagrams show an aerial view of the choreography.

Imagine that the two girls in the photographs have been speaking for several moments in the wide OTS shot in frame 1. Rather than cut to a new shot of the seated girl as she begins to speak, we dolly the camera forward 4 ft. while the girl in the hat walks to the other side of the seated girl. In this version both camera and player move simultaneously, and the final staging in frame 6 permits us to see both players. You might recognize this arrangement; it is position five from the two-player stagings in Chapter 9. This particular type of move, in which a subject moves in the opposite direction of the camera, is called a *counter move.* In this version the girl who walks past camera is absent from the frame for a moment, but the whole action is very short and only a few seconds elapse from frame 1 to frame 6. Of course, the variables in timing and positioning are considerable and have a great deal of impact on the dramatic emphasis within the scene.

Now we're ready to try a considerably more ambitious sequence shot using staging patterns and positions we learned in the previous three chapters. We can begin with position four, version #8, from the two-subject dialogue stagings (chapter 9) and combine it with another position at the picnic table. The following pages illustrate how a series of separate shots can be combined into a single shot by moving the actors and the camera.

Mobile Staging (Example Two)

In frame 1 the girl refuses to acknowledge her boyfriend. He moves forward and takes a seat at the opposite end of the table in frame 2. The schematic drawings show the movement of the camera to accommodate the new staging.

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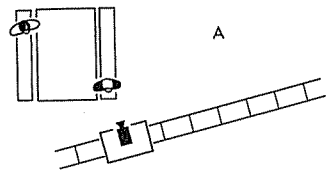

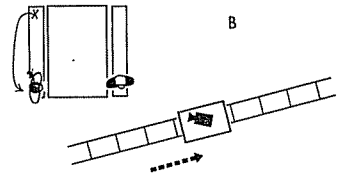

tiently, or any other visual or physical index to the person's feelings. If the person who is reacting is looking into a fireplace we might see the flames for an extended period or just a shot of ashes. Sharing his point of view can help shape our understanding of his reaction.

Moving the Center of Interest

The camera following a subject who is the center of interest can move around other players so that the subject directs us to the reactions of the other players. This can be done in a single shot. The subject who is the center of interest need not be emotionally dominant but may have special knowledge that is of interest to the other players. From a practical standpoint the advantage of this staging is that one player moves while the other players are stationary.

An extreme example of the moving center of interest strategy is the Marine Corps sergeant drilling new recruits, a scene we have watched in many movies. If the camera pans to follow the sergeant in a long continuous shot as he moves in and around a small formation of men, the background will include the faces of the recruits while featuring the sergeant. Carefully executed, this staging technique can provide many opportunities to include action and reactions simultaneously in a variety of compositions.

Indirection

Not every story point and line of dialogue in a scene needs to be emphasized. Film is such a direct medium that holding back its expressive power from time to time is a way of emphasizing all the other moments. In staging actors and choosing camera setups this could mean relegating some action to the background even if it is central to the narrative.

Similarly, the notion that an important line of dialogue requires a close-up is simply not true. People are often most attentive to the person who speaks most softly. What this means for the filmmaker is that he or she is freed from trying to compose every dramatic point full screen. Sometimes the smallest gesture is the most telling.

13 DEPTH OF THE FRAME

So far we have concentrated on the placement of the subject in front of the camera. First, we looked at a system of patterns and positions to organize the staging of actors. Second, we looked at ways of moving the actors so that several staging patterns and positions could be combined into a single choreographed shot. This approach emphasizes points in space rather than the space itself. While this gives us considerable control over compositional elements within the frame, we will not have explored the subject of staging fully until we examine the scene space in which the actors move.

It's not unusual today to hear about mainstream feature directors who shoot dialogue sequences with five and six setups for just one actor. This is clearly a symptom of indecision and a failure to commit to a directorial point of view. Admittedly, if shots were judged by pictorial quality alone, there are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of interesting compositions that a director and cameraman could devise. We can cut the problem down to size by organizing the possibilities according to a few basic conceptions of space.

The Dramatic Circle of Action

No matter what you are shooting, the space before the camera has limits within which the action of the scene is confined. As a way of organizing the scene space, we will divide this action area into three segments using the traditional terms for depth in the graphic arts: the foreground immediately in front of the lens, the middleground and at the farthest reaches of the location, the background. In staging action for the camera, these terms have a particular meaning. Simply put, the dramatic circle of action for any scene is determined by the size and shape of the space that the action covers.

In the Action/Out of the Action

At a football stadium, space is clearly defined: The players are confined to the field and the fans to the seats. Assuming that the game is the center of attention, there are only two ways of looking at the action: from the outside looking in as a spectator, or from the inside looking out at the action surrounding you as a player on the field.

These are the two basic ways that the camera can record action and space. The variable here is the "shape" of the action. A parade, for example, may appear in a long line as it approaches the camera, stretching into the

distance through foreground, middleground and background, but if it crosses our path horizontally, the marching figures occupy a small portion of the middleground like a curtain drawn across our field of vision. If we are in the playground of an elementary school, a game of tag can be far more shapeless than a parade or a football game, with kids running every which way, disappearing around the corners of the school or behind us. In this situation it's the filmmaker's job to evaluate what portion of the whole event he or she wants to feature and from what vantage point to view the action. In most cases the physical action of a scene has dramatic high points that are more significant than others. By deciding where and how the significant action should be staged for the camera, the filmmaker controls the point of view, level of viewer identification and emotional direction of any scene.

Staging in Depth

For our first example illustrating the circle of dramatic action we will concentrate on camera placement rather than blocking. Here's the scene: A man walks from a pay phone to his car. A profile illustration shows us the location in Figure 13.1

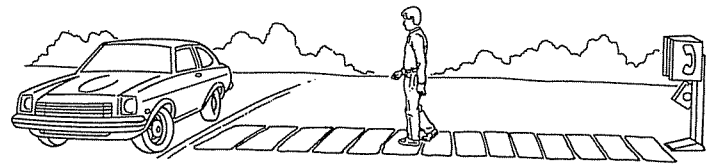

Figure 13.1: Ext. phone booth—suburban neighborhood.

Let's first assume that we won't be able to cut multiple views together and that the action will be photographed in a single shot. The aerial view in Figure 13.2 illustrates camera positions in and out of the circle of dramatic

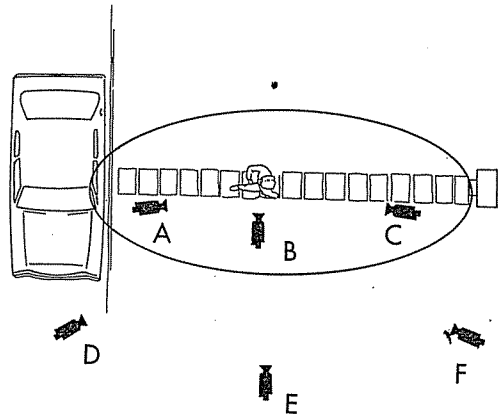

Figure 13.2: The circle is drawn closely around the general space that the actor covers in his movement.

action. The shape of the circle is determined by the space covered by the actor walking to his car. If he were to make a side trip off the flagstone walk for any reason, the circle of action would include this additional space.

Camera positions A, B and C are all *in the action*. In order for any one camera to cover the actor's entire movement from the pay phone to the car, the camera would have to pan until aimed out of the circle. Also, the man's prominence increases or decreases depending on whether he is walking towards or away from the camera. In a sense, the action has a beginning, middle and end, like a self-contained drama. Being in the action also affects point of view: Positions A, B and C accentuate our identification with the salesman, while positions D, E and F produce shots that tend toward distanced and more neutral observation.

Camera positions *outside the action* can cover the actor's entire movement with little or no panning if a sufficiently wide-angle lens is used. A camera outside the action maintains a stationary, narrow view of the man's entire movement, while a camera inside the action might pan as much as 180 degrees to photograph the same action. Also, when photographed from outside the action the actor remains about the same size throughout the shot. If photographed by a camera inside the action his or her size in the frame would vary considerably.

When there is more than one player in a scene, the circle of dramatic action is determined by the placement of the players. If the actors remain in the A, I or L pattern without movement, the circle of dramatic action is drawn tightly around the pattern.

The Purpose of the Dramatic Circle of Action

Like the A, I and L patterns, the circle of action is a way of looking at staging situations to discover familiar arrangements of camera and subject. The immediate benefit of analyzing action this way is that a filmmaker may discover new ways of setting up a scene. It is particularly useful when it helps a director to gain an overview of a complex staging.

To help familiarize yourself with the circle of action, learn to watch television and movie sequences in terms of space rather than shots. This means visualizing the geography of the location and the placement of the camera within that space. One good exercise is to keep track of where the camera is stationed for any scene staged in an interior location. Pay particular attention to how each new scene is introduced in the opening shots. You will soon begin to recognize basic strategies for establishing scene space and learn how each approach affects the narrative.

For instance, cinematographer Gordon Willis often places the camera deep in the circle of action and permits the players to flow around the camera as if the camera were an intimate witness. This results in framings and compositions in which a player passes within inches of the lens, momentarily obscuring the background. Using the opposite approach, director Jim Jarmusch prefers to keep his distance from the action, often using deadpan graphic framings that are like comic strip panels. Jarmusch often likes to stay outside the circle of action for entire scenes. Looking at the work of a random selection of filmmakers, such as Bernardo Bertolucci,