ONE of the necessary steps in planning the filming of a scene is to develop a strategy for shooting. Although this involves developing a specific approach in the form of a storyboard or shot list, some basic principles of scene construction must be considered before trying to sketch anything out.

In theater production blocking refers to planning where the actors will be and how action occurs in relationship to the set and stage space. In film this is complicated by the presence of the camera. Blocking for the camera refers to staging action for the camera. As much or more than any other element, blocking for the camera must be done with a clear concept of how the scene is going to be edited. It might be useful to think of a film as a jigsaw puzzle, each piece of which must be created individually and have a specific place in the finished pattern. But unlike a puzzle, there is no single, correct way to put together a film. The design of each film bears the mark of the filmmaker's personal style, with the result being a unique piece of work.

The choices you make in terms of setups are entirely up to you, but seeing all choices as being equal is a mistake. Shooting a scene should be done with the knowledge not only of a wide set of rules intrinsic to film, but also of accepted, often-anecdotal folk wisdom that has evolved over the years and of many aesthetic principles developed by filmmakers and artists in other media. There may not be one right way to do a scene, but there are myriad wrong ways. There are approaches that many talented people have determined work; there are others that simply do not. If the goal is to create a scene that is clear and coherent to the viewer, understanding basic scene construction is crucial.

The Director

Directors are usually involved from near the beginning of a project all the way to, in some cases, the creation of the final print. A film is organized into three critical phases: preproduction, production, and postproduction. Preproduction constitutes the planning and preparation: the process of identifying and securing all the elements—aesthetic, human, and material—that will be needed for the film. This includes fine-tuning the script, casting, location scouting, set design, finding props, organizing the shooting into a series of manageable tasks, and whatever else it takes to get into a position to shoot. Production includes all the actual shooting. Producers often play a critical role here, but the director is usually the key decision-making force in both
of these stages of a film. Some directors are also involved in postproduction, the editing and all the detailed finishing processes, which is covered in part V.

It is the director's choices that drive the rest of the crew's actions. On fictional films the director is responsible for determining the look—the visual character—of the film, rehearsing and organizing the actors' performances, selecting the setups and all attendant details, and marshaling all forces toward the completion of the material. Although other key crew members have varying levels of input, it is the director's responsibility to define the script in terms of both a theatrical, dramatic interpretation and the story's visual presentation.

The Menu

Before discussing scene construction itself, a summary of the visual resources presented so far is in order. SEE 3-1 Lists such as this risk constant editorializing. On close scrutiny some of the categories begin to break down, and there are always exceptions to any suggested effect. Knowledge of these basics, however, can serve as a starting point for both those who want to learn conventional film techniques and those who want to go beyond them. That said, the implementation of certain techniques, such as close-ups, is often consistent from the most adventurous independent production to conventional television shows, even though the content of the shots may be radically different.

Certain patterns start to suggest themselves with these shots. If you want an essentially neutral portrayal, for example, you might choose specific approaches, such as a medium shot, at eye level, with a level camera. Most of the shots of Radio Raheem in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing are from a low angle, but there are several that have even more extreme characteristics. One shot of the character is from a low angle, photographed with a wide-angle lens, with the camera at an oblique angle. SEE 3-2 The wide angle exaggerates the character's features, and the oblique angle gives the sense of a world out of balance. Whether or not one agrees
with the intimidating nature of the combination of these effects, one can appreciate how a shot like this figures into the grand plan of the film. One of the major elements of *Do the Right Thing* is the increasing tension caused by the hot and stifling day on which the action occurs. The shot of Radio Raheem, as well as many other elements of the film, creates an atmosphere where everything is distorted and on the edge.

Although lists like figure 3-1 can give valuable ideas, these effects should not be treated as a mix-and-match recipe. It is not a matter of getting diminishment by mixing two-thirds long shot with one-third high angle. That approach would most likely be stereotypical and clichéd. Rather, the camera should be approached as a meaning-producing instrument. A list like this should never be seen as an end. The myriad subtleties continue to be explored more than a century after the first frame of film saw a glimpse of light.

**Basic Scene Structure**

It is clear from the discussion of shots and other resources that where the camera is placed in relation to the scene plays a central role in guiding how the viewer interprets character and action. A long shot of a character responding to something, for example, does not draw us in as persuasively as the same response in a closer shot. The sequence of long shot/medium shot/close-up (LS-MS-CU) represents a process of moving closer to the action, of moving from a random view to much more specific information.

**Dramatic Emphasis**

The concept of dramatic emphasis lies at the heart of narrative filmmaking and can be a critical component of experimental and documentary film as well. Simply stated, *dramatic emphasis* refers to the director’s using the camera to show us the action in the order and with the amplification that he or she wants. The director breaks down the scene into an interrelationship of dramatic perspectives (shots) that focus viewer attention on specific information, characters, dialogue, action, and so on.

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Notorious* has many remarkable sequences, but one of its more subtle scenes provides a clear example of this concept. SEE 3-3 The scene takes place about one-quarter of the way into the film and involves Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) trying to have a discussion with an unresponsive suitor, Dev (Cary Grant). Struggling with a shady past, Alicia is trying to start over—making the insult that Dev delivers in the middle of this scene all the more humiliating. The entire beginning of the scene is played in a *two-shot*, so named because it shows two people from roughly the waist up. The timing of the cut to the close-up is key to the scene’s effect. The exact positioning of the cut is indicated by the horizontal line, right at the end of Dev’s line of dialogue, and the camera subtly emphasizes the emotional deflation visible in Alicia’s face.

The two-shot is played out for an unusually long period of time—almost forty-five seconds. Some argument could be made that the director could have broken down the scene into other shots to emphasize Grant’s taciturn response or Bergman’s attempt to draw him out; and yet the choice of playing this part of the scene in a two-shot has an unquestionable logic. There is nothing occurring that cries out for emphasis. It is just a simple exchange of dialogue, and a cut is not necessary until the intensity of the interchange increases. When the cut finally does come, its logic is inescapable. If anything, cutting the lengthy two-shot would dilute the impact of the cut when it finally does come.
Dramatic emphasis—when the camera shows the action in the order and with the emphasis that the director wants—lies at the heart of narrative filmmaking.

Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant in *Notorious*.

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**ALICIA**

I wonder if it is too cold out here. Maybe we should eat inside.

She kisses him.

Hasn't something like this happened before?

What's the matter? Don't look so tense. Troubles?

Well, handsome, I think you'd better tell mama what's going on. All this secrecy is going to ruin my little dinner.

**Pause.**

Come on, Mr. D, what is darkening your brow?

**DEV**

After dinner.

**ALICIA**

No, now. Look, I'll make it easy for you. The time has come when you must tell me that you have a wife and two adorable children and this madness between us can't go on any longer.

**DEV**

I bet you've heard that line often enough.

**ALICIA**

Right below the belt every time. That isn't fair, Dev.

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You need not look far to see examples of scenes that use shot selection for dramatic emphasis. The technique is pervasive. In the hands of a competent craftsman, the approach is so natural to the logic of the scene that we barely notice it. Indeed, most commercial films are purposely designed so that the editing—how the scenes are constructed—is virtually invisible.
MASTER SCENE Technique

As suggested, the sequence of LS-MS-CU represents a common movement from random, general information to very specific information. Scenes often begin with a relatively random long shot, then the focus becomes tighter and more specific. In most cases a wide view of the whole scene is shot first, then the shooting is broken down into medium shots and close-ups. Though this process of breaking down scenes into their constituent elements has a variety of permutations and goes under several different names, it is generally referred to as master scene technique. Elements are simply those things—people, objects, places—that are key aspects of the scene being shot. If a scene has two characters talking, there are two elements. If they are arguing over the restaurant check in front of them, the check might become a third element. The elements are then presented in the groupings and the order that the director desires to create dramatic and engaging scenes. Though there were others experimenting at the same time, the early filmmaker D. W. Griffith is generally credited with pioneering this concept.

Master scene technique is an approach in which the director stages the scene essentially as it would be staged in a theater. All or part of the scene is shot in a master shot—a shot in which all, or most, of the elements are presented together. This shot is also called, more descriptively, an establishing shot, because it establishes the space in which the scene is occurring, where the characters are in relationship to each other, any important objects that may be present, and so on. The director then stages the scene many more times, only shooting it in a variety of MSs and CU. Medium shots convey more-specific information, though not with the emphasis or intensity that can be achieved with the close-up. Directors will tell you that they generally save close-ups for the most intense part of an individual scene—the climax. The material is then given to an editor, who cuts it into an effective sequence.

This method has an almost assembly-line approach and, in the heyday of the Hollywood studio system—the 1920s through the 1950s—films were literally ground out in a highly efficient factory. Indeed, one production unit at Warner Brothers even referred to itself as the “Sausage Factory.” Directors who had some clout, or who worked on such low-budget films that no one paid much attention to them, were able to make films with some individual character, but the assembly-line approach influenced virtually all films of the day.

This method has been recognized under a variety of different names, such as invisible editing, continuity style, classic Hollywood style, and master shot discipline, among others. By whatever name, the approach was—and still is—standard operating procedure in American filmmaking. There is, after all, a certain logic to this progression of moving closer to a subject. As with so many other techniques in the Hollywood approach, this is a natural replication of human perceptual experience. When we are curious about something, we move closer to it. Different and more adventurous styles have been experimented with, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, but the traditional approach still has profound influence.

SHOT/REVERSE SHOT

In its simplest and most common manifestation, called shot/reverse shot, master scene technique provides an easy way to handle a conversation between two or more characters. Once pointed out, the approach is familiar to everyone, particularly those who watch television interview programs such as “60 Minutes.” It is the bread and butter of thousands of movies and countless television shows.

Quite simply, shot/reverse shot involves shooting all of person A’s dialogue from setup #1, then picking up the camera and moving it to setup #2—called the reverse
shot—and shooting all of person B’s dialogue. SEE 3-4 The results are then intercut as a simple back-and-forth exchange. We have a shot of person A saying a line of dialogue, then a shot of person B responding. To keep things visually interesting, other types of shots are worked in, such as two-shots or over-the-shoulder (OTS) shots (done over a character’s shoulder).

The usefulness of this basic approach in shooting interviews is obvious. Several hours of an interview with person A are shot. When the interview is over, the subject is excused and the camera is moved to the reverse shot (setup #2). Several minutes of the interviewer (person B) nodding in assent (or maybe staring blankly in disbelief) are then shot. The inevitable dull interludes in the actual conversation can simply be cut out in the editing, the resulting jump in the footage covered with a shot of the interviewer responding to what is being said. This method of shooting allows the footage to be manipulated into the desired order and length—which can also extend to manipulating the context and content of what is said. Although many films, from Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* to the work of Robert Altman, try to find more adventurous approaches, shot/reverse shot remains a common method of delivering dialogue.

Although they are relatively straightforward to describe, these techniques—master scene technique, shot selection for dramatic emphasis, and shot/reverse shot—require practical experience to truly understand and control. Moreover, it is important to recognize the function they serve. These techniques are essentially tools that enable you to communicate narrative information clearly and effectively. On occasion, a more adventurous shot selection may overcomplicate material that demands a straightforward presentation. These techniques also serve a purpose common to most narrative art forms: They start with a general view of the subject, then move to a closer, more specific perspective.

Continuity

Style in American film has largely been subservient to the goal of presenting seamless and involving stories that, at least in their parts, are portrayed as unfolding in real time. Scenes are put together in such a way that their construction—the shot selection, the editing—goes largely unnoticed by the viewer. In film criticism this has most aptly been referred to as invisible editing.

A substantial part of this approach is based on continuity shooting—the creation of shots that, when cut together, represent continuous action. The style employs both story structures and formal elements that do not deviate substantially from realistic portrayals of events. Although this style has indeed been pervasive, other traditions have evolved that either present alternatives or, in many cases,
are conscious assaults on the ideological assumptions of this dominant approach. The remainder of this chapter explores some of the underlying principles of continuity shooting.

The general application of the concept of continuity in film is familiar to most viewers. It is most noticeable in scenes where it is lacking—sequences where the action does not match from shot to shot. For example, in one shot a character has on a tie; in the next shot, the tie is missing and the character’s shirt is casually unbuttoned. In one shot a character reaches for a drink with her right hand; in the next she picks up the drink with her left hand. In a master shot, there is a full glass of beer on a table; in the medium shot, it is empty. The mistake reaches comical proportions when the master shows the glass full again. Some of the mistakes are so obvious that it seems unthinkable that someone could have missed the problem, but during the lengthy delays between setups and the press of never-ending competing demands, elements are easily shifted, lost track of, and mislaid.

Although these examples are common things that most observant viewers have noticed at some time or another, shooting in continuity has a broader definition that has wide-ranging implications for the way elements must be monitored while shooting a scene: When you are shooting in continuity, you are creating a real-time relationship among the shots. As should be clear by now, films are not shot in order, much less in real time. A scene that takes several minutes of screen time could easily have taken a day or more to shoot. Shooting in continuity means you are creating pieces of film that will later be cut together in such a way as to suggest that what the viewer is seeing is occurring in real time.

Continuity editing is dependent on the match cut, a very common type of cut in which the action matches from one camera angle to the next. If a person is going out of a door, he or she starts to open the door in the first shot, and the next shot picks up the action at the same point in time, from the opposite side of the door. In a cut from a long shot of someone sitting down in a chair to a closer shot, the action in the two pieces should match.

The opposite of a match cut is a jump cut, something that was virtually heretical in the golden age of the Hollywood studio system. The jump cut is a cut between shots in which there is a jump in time—an ellipsis—between the shots. In his landmark film Breathless (1959), French director Jean-Luc Godard incorporated the jump cut into a structure that both made narrative sense and subverted dominant stylistic approaches. In this formally radical approach, when Godard wanted to get a character from one side of town to another, he simply cut him from one place to the other. When he wanted to get from one part of a conversation to another, he simply cut out all the intervening material. The result is that characters jump from one place to another, creating a jumbled, chaotic sense of reality. These are cuts that draw attention to themselves and, by extension, to the process of making a film. Godard’s film openly flouted the conventional approach, giving a highly subjective representation of space and action. American films in general still attempt to create a relatively seamless sense of real time and real space, but Godard’s influence has had a profound impact on everything from the most typical Hollywood features to commercials to music videos.

**Continuity Shooting**

Shooting out of sequence requires careful attention to detail to ensure that all the elements of a scene remain consistent from shot to shot. Something shot early in the morning may have to be matched with something you are going to shoot late in the afternoon. Even if you are doing shots relatively close together, you can run into problems. A student film from several years ago had an example of this. The film had a simple sequence of a woman entering a house. The student put the camera
outside to shoot the first part of the movement. When that shot was completed, he moved the camera indoors to do the match shot of the completion of the entrance. The actor sat down to wait and, as it was a bright, sunny day, put on her sunglasses. When the next shot was done, she had forgotten to take off the sunglasses. One can appreciate the sinking feeling the student had on getting the film back and seeing the mistake which, as glaring as it was, would be noticed by most viewers.

In the old days, continuity was monitored by the “scriptgirl”—a hopelessly outdated credit. Now the continuity person is called a script supervisor. Continuity used to be monitored by making rough sketches and detailed notes describing the action, the elements within the frame, and the position of performers. Although sketches and notes are still essential, Polaroid cameras had a big impact on how continuity was accomplished. The script supervisor could produce an instant representation of how all the elements within a frame were arranged. The use of Polaroids quickly became commonplace. Their sole drawback is that they can represent only individual moments within larger movements, and their sound and frequently needed flash make them unusable during takes.

In recent years Polaroids have been partially replaced with a virtually foolproof method. The video assist is a tiny video pickup device mounted in the viewing system of the film camera; it gives a video representation of the shot, albeit not a particularly high-quality one. With it the script supervisor can go back to check where specific movements occurred in relationship to dialogue and action or to find the precise positioning within a frame. If the script supervisor and video assist person have to roll through a substantial amount of tape to find what they need, however, this can be quite time-consuming. If other people feel the need to get involved, the whole set can come to a standstill, and pretty soon everyone is standing around drinking coffee and watching the monitor. Nevertheless, the use of video assist on sets is becoming prevalent. Polaroids are still used extensively, particularly in the costume and makeup departments.

Types of Continuity

The script supervisor is actually involved in only a few types of continuity. Some elements, such as lighting, are so specialized that they are left to their respective departments. The following categories of continuity are general areas, rather than rigid classifications that have been defined and elaborated on over the years.

**Action**  The position of performers and other moving elements within the frame must be carefully monitored. This refers to matching action between closer and longer shots, as opposed to what characters are wearing or how props are arranged in a scene.

If an actor says his line in the master shot before sitting down but says it after he sits down in the MS, the two shots will be uncuttable. If he is scratching his chin in the MS but has his hands at his side in the master, the pieces again will be uncuttable. This is always a difficult issue because, although you have to communicate to the actors the need for continuity so their actions match between setups, you also do not want to inhibit them. Experienced professionals are generally very knowledgeable about the requirements of the medium. For nonprofessionals it can be quite disconcerting.

**Props, costume, and makeup**  Shooting a short scene can easily take a day or more. Invariably, elements are moved around as you light, and objects are moved to balance compositions. Costumes and makeup also require constant attention. Responsibility for the consistency of these elements is shared by the script supervisor and the crew members in the respective departments.
Apparantly simple things such as candlelight can drive the script supervisor to distraction. Over the course of a shoot, candles will have to be carefully controlled so they remain consistent. If the candles are allowed to burn down, they may not match from the beginning of the scene to the end. A script supervisor would probably ask the prop person to bring a substantial number of extra candles. The prop person may burn some candles to certain lengths the night before, so as to substitute specific lengths. Assuming the standard delays between takes and setups, the candles might have to be blown out between shots. This is no problem, except it necessitates lighting them again. Because many smaller projects do not have a continuity person, or have one who has other responsibilities, something like this can easily be overlooked.

**Historical** Especially important in period pieces, historical continuity refers to checking that all elements are historically accurate for the context of the film. People reading printed books in a version of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* would be inappropriate; similarly, television antennas in a film set in the Civil War period would be out of place. Many films play fast and loose with this. You will often hear of films including a song or some other element that was created after their action occurs. This is often a matter of research, the responsibility for which can fall on a number of different shoulders. For a song it may fall to the screenwriter or, if the song's inclusion is an editorial decision, the film's postproduction team. For elements in the frame, the research may be the purview of the *art department*, an umbrella term for everyone involved in the design elements of the image. Extensive researching abilities may be part of the job description for many crew positions, particularly for period pieces.

As with everything, purposefully breaking the conventions can create interesting results. Alex Cox's *Walker* (1988) is set in 1850 Nicaragua, with the title character installing himself as the imperialist president of the war-torn country. To emphasize parallels to modern events, the film includes such historical impossibilities as Walker and his men being saved by army helicopters, images that are eerily reminiscent of the fall of Saigon in 1975. There are many other improbable elements, including a computer-outfitted command center and Walker's pride in making the cover of *Time* magazine. The purpose is clearly to create parallels with modern events and break with realistic modes of historical interpretation. Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001) is another good example of a film that purposefully mixes historical periods for stylized effect.

As you watch films more carefully, you will notice unintentional historical continuity errors with some frequency. One of director Anthony Mann's great westerns, *The Far Country* (1955), has jet trails in the sky above scenes supposedly occurring in the 1880s. The more actual film production experience you get, the more you realize that things like this are usually not mistakes but rather the unavoidable compromises one must make when under time and budgetary constraints. Perhaps they were losing the light and were forced to shoot despite the conditions. The more you know, the more you may be amazed that films get made at all! The production of a film is such a complex tangle of marshaling elements to occur at just the right time that you are often forced to proceed, even when you do not have everything you want in place.

**Lighting** Matching will be a problem if shots that are to be cut together look different in terms of the color and quality of the light, an issue often referred to as *photographic consistency*. It will drive many of the technical considerations you need to be concerned with while shooting. The script supervisor is generally not involved in lighting continuity issues, other than occasionally taking notes for the lighting crew.

Continuity is one concern that delineates motion picture photography from still photography. Still photography is usually not sequential in its presentation.
Even if a still photographer is attempting to create some kind of photo montage, the images are nevertheless presented as discrete entities and anything but major differences in lighting is not going to be noticed. In film, however, if you want the illusion of shots occurring in real time, the quality and intensity of light must match from shot to shot.

Still photographers who visit film sets are often amazed at the complexity of the lighting approach. They invariably suggest that a simpler approach might work, until they are made aware of the kinds of matching that are being attempted. Even then some cannot grasp the difference. Still photographers usually have extensive control in the printing process, including dodging specific elements or areas of the image and manipulating exposure and processing times. When they are shooting, if they just get a decent negative they can create the kind of product they want. Although there is some room for image manipulation in film, these discriminations can generally be applied only to the whole shot and the entire frame. It is imperative that you work out all matching issues when you are shooting.

One story may give some sense of the kind of hoops one must jump through in this regard: I was once working on an exterior shoot in a midwestern state on one of those days that people who forecast the weather like to call “partly sunny”—an ambiguous term that leaves up to question whether there are going to be more clouds or more sun. This was definitely a “more clouds” day, weather that reminds one why filmmakers prefer the largely cloudless skies of southern California. It was a relatively simple scene that the production manager (PM)—the person responsible for all scheduling—had budgeted the morning for shooting, with the intent of shooting another scene in the afternoon. The problem in such a situation is that the quality and intensity of light between the sunny and the cloudy periods do not match. The scene would have proved uncuttable—that is, would have appeared awkward or poorly staged to the viewer—had we attempted to shoot under both conditions. The three- or four-hour shoot became a daylong ordeal in which a succession of hapless souls tried to estimate, with limited success, how much sunshine we were going to be blessed with at any given time. The production manager was tearing her hair out because the afternoon shoot, which was logistically complicated, had to be canceled and rescheduled while a large number of costly elements (actors, extras, props, and the like) waited idle.

If it had been a bigger shoot, we probably would have had the resources to overcome our difficulties. There are lights that, as their manufacturers love to boast, “outshine the sun at twenty paces.” But our options were limited, and we spent substantial time just waiting. Natural light has a nasty habit of changing quite frequently. Artificial light requires a level of control that can be imposed only with experience and budget.

**Sound** This refers to creating a sound track that is consistent, with no big shifts in either the volume or the quality of the recorded sounds. Although the location recordings must be as consistent and high quality as possible, sound continuity is largely an editorial issue. Many imperfections can be covered or fixed, either during the editing process or when mixing the final sound track in the studio.

Sound can also have implications for historical continuity. When doing period pieces, modern sounds can present problems. The sound mixer on a film set in the 1840s, for example, which was shot about forty yards from a major highway and a half mile from a private airport, had to jump through many hoops to get usable sound.

**Performance** With action being shot from so many setups, performance must be standardized so that it matches between camera angles. This is generally not a problem on larger productions, where most actors, as well as the director, are experienced professionals. But on films where you may be working with nonprofessionals, it can be a big issue, both in terms of what a performer can produce and in how an
inexperienced director evaluates that performance. Before shooting, details of a performance—the level and tone—should be completely worked out between the talent (actors) and the director. A director who asks for anything different between takes can cause enormous editing problems. Although this is not the script supervisor’s domain, a good one will recognize glaring errors.

I had one job working with an inexperienced director who was directing a very emotional performance from an untrained actor, a bad mix if there ever was one. He was not getting from her what he wanted, but he started shooting anyway. We did several takes of the master shot of one of the actor’s long speeches, then moved in for medium shots and close-ups. Between setups the director decided that her performance was too unrestrained in the master, so he asked the actor for less. The next time he got too little, so he asked for more. He got too much. He was trying to shape the performance as we were shooting, and the resulting footage proved uncuttable. The editor was eventually forced to play the whole thing in master, an option that suited neither the scene nor the shape of the film. If this kind of mistake were made on a larger project, the eventual outcome would probably be a reshoot (and people would be fired). On smaller budgets this option does not always exist.

**Spatial continuity** This refers to creating an understandable sense of space and is the focus of the following section.

## The Line

A director friend likes to call the line “the central organizing principle” of narrative cinema. The line, also called the 180-degree rule or the axis of action, refers to a principle used to create an understandable sense of the space in which the action is occurring. The line is relatively easy to understand on a superficial level, but its application is something that takes on-set experience to truly comprehend. Simply stated, the rule says that if shooting is begun on one side of an action, it must stay on that side. If the camera jumps to the other side of the action—that is, crosses the line—the sense of an understandable and continuous space can be disrupted. Before doing storyboards or blocking the action for the camera, this line is drawn in the shooting space. The application of this rule has become less rigid in recent years, but if the goal is to create a logical and continuous sense of space, shooting with an understanding of the line is a must. As with anything painted with such a broad stroke, there are exceptions, but they are fewer than might be expected. Even if a distorted sense of space is desired, knowledge of the line’s effect is still necessary.

The location of the line is generally based on one of two factors: sightlines or direction of action.

### Sightlines

With sightlines, the line is created by drawing a straight line that represents a character’s direction of vision. The line is based on the sightlines of the character who is on camera and it can change as his or her direction of view changes. Often the line is drawn between two people in conversation, though it applies to an individual character watching an action as well as to multiple-character situations.

If you start on one side of the sightlines between two characters, you must stay on that side. If you use a setup from the other side of the line, the characters will not appear to be looking at each other and may seem to have switched places.

If you start shooting from setup #1, the rest of the setups should be on that side of the sightlines. **SEE 3-5** If you cut to anything on the setup #2 side, you will
have problems with matching sightlines, and the characters will appear to be looking at some unseen third space. It does not make any difference on which side of the sightlines you start. That should be an aesthetic determination based on what you want to see in the background, which profile of the performers you want to film, and anticipated character movement. But once you have started on one side, you have to stay on that side.

This can be difficult to conceptualize, so taking the most extreme example should make it easier to understand. In this example setup #1 is at a right angle to person A, and setup #2 is at a right angle to person B on the opposite side of the line. **SEE 3-6**

The key to understanding this is to consider the direction that the character will be looking in the resulting film. If we can transpare the shot from setup #1 to see how it would look on the screen, the character would be looking screen-
The subject from setup #1 is looking screen-right.

The subject from setup #2 is also looking screen-right.

If the same thing is done with setup #2, which way would the character be looking? This may be more difficult to visualize, but if we pull the camera around while moving the character with it, the direction can be determined. Again, the character would be looking screen-right.

The problem comes when we attempt to cut the two pieces together. It appears as though person A is talking to the back of person B's head. If the angles chosen are less extreme than in this example, the problem remains. This is more difficult to visualize, but characters will appear to be looking at some abstracted third space. Though audiences will not point to the screen and say, “Look, they crossed the line,” on an unconscious level it will be difficult to discern a logical space, that is, understand where the characters are in relationship to each other and the space. This confusion, this sense that something is wrong with the scene, will disrupt viewer involvement with the drama.

The characters do not appear to be looking at each other.