# chapter four
# Approaches to Image Capturing

A director must decide not only what to shoot but how to shoot it. The distinction here is between what is put in front of the camera and how the camera itself is used to record and manipulate the scene being shot. Film scholars have adopted the French theatrical term mise-en-scène to describe the director's control of the lighting, sets, locations, props, makeup, costumes, and blocking.[1] This concept is useful in defining more clearly the role of cinematography.

The director can make decisions about the mise-en-scène while undertaking planning or during the shooting phase (the last-minute blocking of the actors or adjustment of the lights) but before the camera comes into play. In effect, the mise-en-scène is what is visible through the viewfinder before shooting—the way the scene is staged for the camera. Once the director decides on the mise-en-scène, attention moves to how best to capture it with the camera. At this point the director and cinematographer must make a number of choices about composition.

## Shot Determination

Interpreting the mise-en-scène involves determining how much of that scene to include within the shot. One of the special powers of the camera is its capacity to force the audience to see what the director wants the audience to see. This situation is quite different from real life or from a stage play, where the observer is free to choose the point on which to concentrate. At a play, part of the audience may be watching the French maid; the rest may be watching the English butler. When a camera is used to interpret that scene, the viewer can virtually be forced to see a single area of the scene, such as the maid's eyes.

Of course, the director may also use elements of the mise-en-scène to direct the audience's attention, whether in a movie, at a stage play, or even in real life. The lighting, blocking, costumes, makeup, set design, and dialogue all direct the viewer's eye. But the camera directs the audience's attention in a more obvious and powerful manner.

## The Basic Shots

Selecting what is to be seen in the frame is one way the camera can be used to direct attention. This capacity distinguishes a film from a play, where the frame is the entire proscenium arch. In the theater you buy the frame through which you are going to see the play when you pay for your seat. The cheaper the seats, the longer your "shot" of the stage. Shots are constantly changing in a motion picture. You see a variety of long shots (LS), medium shots (MS), and close-ups (CU). Defining these terms is not always easy, but generally a close-up isolates the subject from the surroundings, a medium shot includes the subject but also some of the surroundings, and a long shot emphasizes the surroundings and the subject's place in relation to them (see Figure 4.1) However, to some extent these terms are relative to each other. The medium shot in Figure 4.1 might serve as a long shot in another circumstance. For example, used as a long shot, it could be followed by a medium shot of the man's head and chest and a close-up of his face. Perhaps the simplest way to describe different shots is in terms of a spectrum, with an extreme long shot as the widest shot and an extreme close-up as the nearest shot. All other shots are spread somewhere between the two extremes.

Another common way to describe a composition is according to the number of people in the shot; for example, a two-shot has two people, and a three-shot has three people. Terms such as *head shot, head-and-shoulders shot,* and *full shot* are fairly self-descriptive, but none of these terms is exact. (Figure 4.2 shows some standard shots.) Given that there are many ways to describe a composition and that your medium shot may be somewhat different from what your friend means by a medium shot, the

real translation often lies in the camera viewfinder. The director can look through the viewfinder (or at the video assist) and say, "That's what I want."

## Subjective Shots

Another type of composition injects a subjective element into the composition. A shot in which the lens of the camera becomes, in effect, the eye of a character in the film is called a **point-of-view (POV) shot**. We are all familiar with a novel that is narrated by a character such as the hard-boiled detective. Narration from the viewpoint of a character within the story is more difficult in film and video. Nothing within the shot itself tells you that this is what James Bond sees. But a close-up of Bond's eyes (and a slight widening of the pupils) can be followed by a POV shot that approximates the height, angle, and direction of Bond's gaze.

Sustaining this for an entire film, however, greatly reduces a director's storytelling flexibility and can be almost silly. Robert Montgomery's film *The Lady in the Lake* (1946) tried, and not very successfully, to create a visual equivalent of first-person narration (like the hard-boiled detective novel on which it was based) by using POV shots for the entire picture. We see the detective's hands reaching into drawers or his pipe poking into the shot as if the camera were located precisely at eye level and the pipe were in our (his) mouth at the bottom of the frame. The detective in *The Lady in the Lake* is seen only occasionally, in a mirror or window reflection. Most filmmaking uses POV shots far more sparingly (see Figure 4.3).

The **over-the-shoulder (OS) shot** (see Figure 4.4) is also executed from a particular position. This shot literally looks over the shoulder of one character toward another character or object. An OS shot is a typical way of shooting two people talking. For example, a man might be seen from over a woman's shoulder. A reverse angle shot would then show the woman from over the shoulder of the man. Over-the-shoulder shots have a subjective element. We are seeing from approximately the same angle as the character whose shoulder we are looking across.
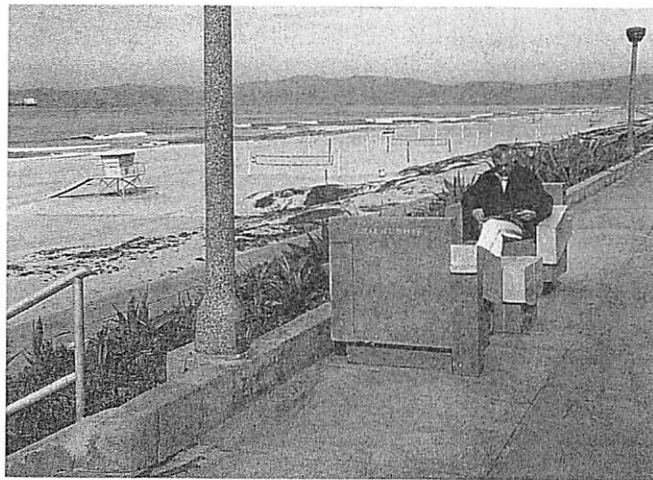
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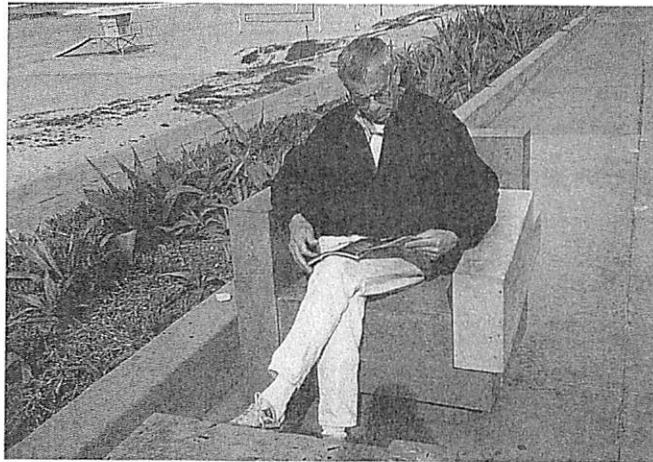
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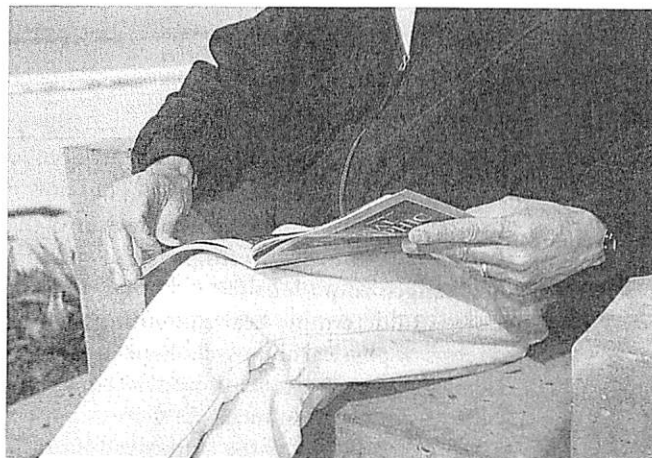
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Figure 4.1

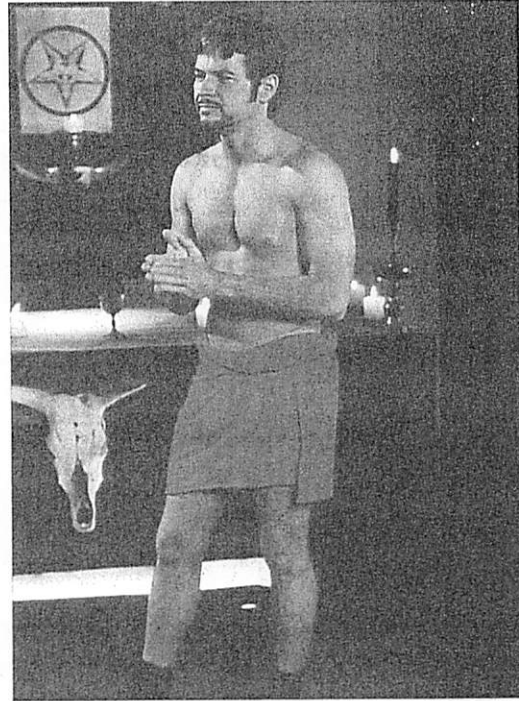*(a) A long shot, (b) a medium shot, and (c) a close-up.*

**Figure 4.2**
*Other common shot descriptions: (a) a two-shot; (b) a full shot; (c) a head-and-shoulders shot; and (d) an extreme close-up, sometimes called a choker close-up. (Photos (a), (b), and (c) from Len Richmond's* Merchants of Venus, *courtesy of Amazing Movies, Dianna Ippolito, photographer)*



a



b



c



d

## Lens Selection

Another aspect of composition concerns the choice of **lens** or the setting of the variable focal length **zoom lens** (see Chapter 3). This choice can determine how something appears in terms of physical and psychological distance. It can also direct attention by selecting what will and will not be in focus. As more and more shooting moves out of the studio and into the environment, the manipulation of lenses becomes quite important. In the real world, things are often more crowded and cramped than they are on a sound stage, so the lenses need to be used to convey distances that may not actually exist.

## Focal Length Characteristics

The **normal lens,** so called because it shows things much as the viewer's eyes see them, might be the least manipulative and most realistic of the various lenses. It introduces the least distortion into the scene.

The **telephoto lens** (or **long lens**) tends to compress the perceived distances between the foreground and background within the shot. A television commercial in which the auto execu-

tives demonstrate their faith in the brakes of their company's luxury sedan actually demonstrates their faith in the power of an extreme telephoto lens. This lens makes the car that is screeching to a halt near their legs seem much closer than it really is. In general, the long or telephoto lens may be the most obvious lens in the sense of calling attention to itself. It can draw the viewer into the scene, creating intimacy and involvement. An extreme telephoto lens can so distort perspective relationships that the result is an almost surreal, dreamlike quality. This lens can also give a voyeuristic feeling, almost as if the spectator is eavesdropping on the scene. *Mississippi Burning* was shot largely with a telephoto lens to give a closed-in feeling that evoked racial tension.

On the other hand, an extreme **wide-angle lens** (or **short lens**) calls attention to itself by distorting the image, albeit in the opposite way. It can create a feeling of size and scope by giving a wide horizontal field of view. This characteristic can be used to delineate relationships between characters in a film. Orson Welles's classic film *Citizen Kane* is noted for its extensive use of extreme wide-angle lenses to emphasize the physical and psychological distance between its characters (see Figure 4.5).

The object is to choose the focal length that fits the sense of the scene you are shooting. What kind of relationships do you want to emphasize through size, distance, and perspective? Do you want to distort or call attention to the way the mise-en-scène is being manipulated?

## Depth of Field

By manipulating the **depth of field**, the director has yet another way to direct the spectator's attention within the frame (see Figure 4.6). A large depth of field allows the viewer's eyes to roam throughout every plane of action, all of which will be in focus. Some directors, like Orson Welles and Jean Renoir, are noted for using deep focus in their films. This technique can be more realistic because it approximates the way we see. It also allows the viewer to seek out an area of interest in a composition with many layers.

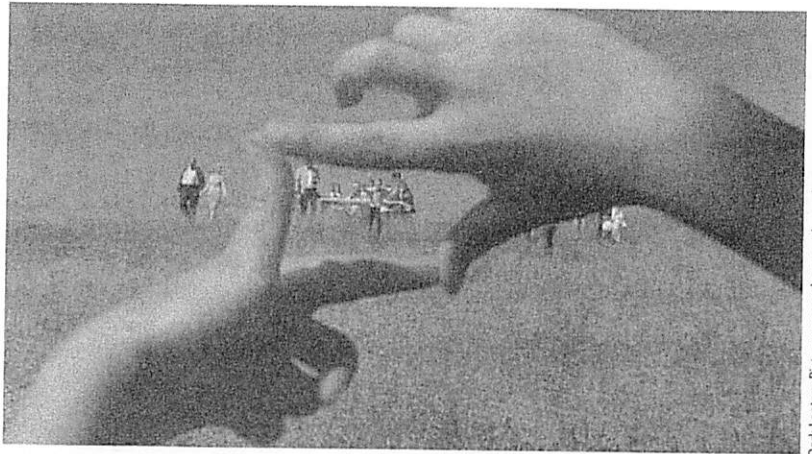A shallow depth of field (or shallow focus) isolates a subject in one plane and throws all



Figure 4.3

*A point-of-view shot of a person framing a picture for a film shot. (Photo courtesy of Dark Lantern Pictures, www.dreamersthemovie.com)*
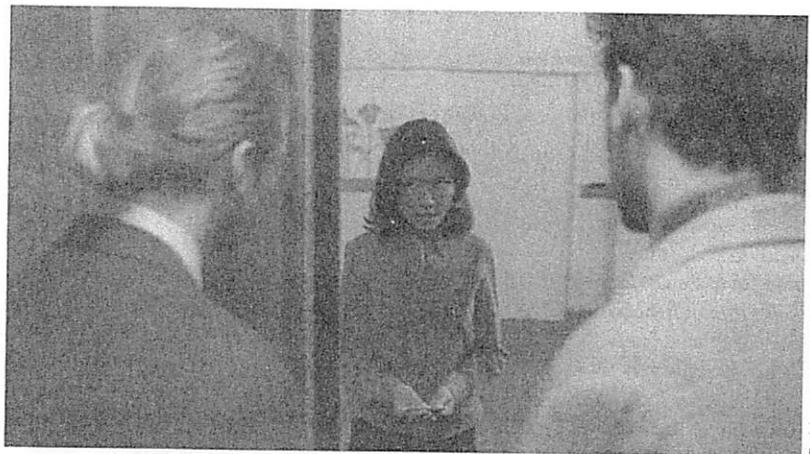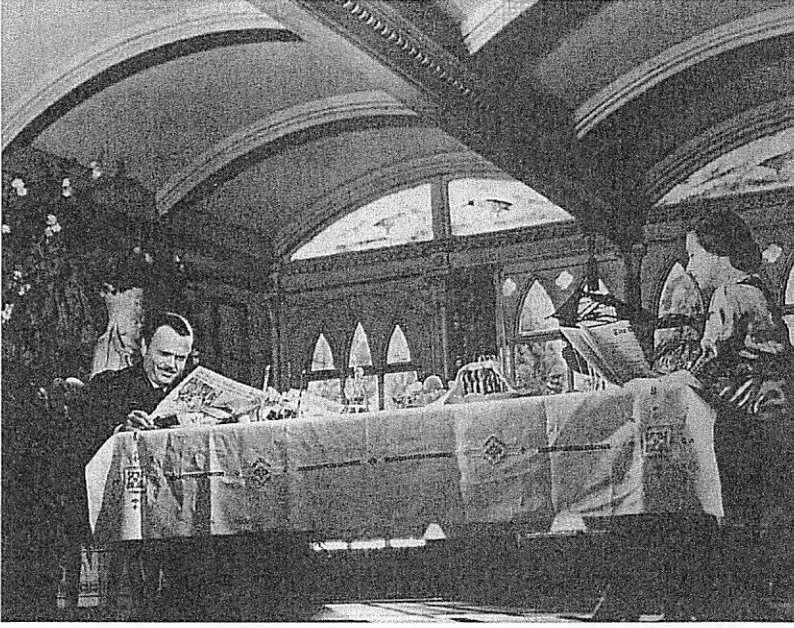


Figure 4.4

*An over-the-shoulder shot. (Photo courtesy of Dark Lantern Pictures, www.dreamers-themovie.com)*

other planes out of focus. In the heyday of Hollywood studio production, a shallow depth of field was often used to isolate the studio's major star from any visual distractions in the foreground or background. Using a shallow depth of field also makes it possible to shift the point of focus during the shot. This technique, as it is seen on the screen, is known as **rack focus**. It is the result of **pulling focus** (that is, changing focus) during the shot (see Figure 4.7). For example, a shot might begin with the star in sharp focus in the foreground, but as the focus is shifted, the star blurs out of focus while a character in the background comes into sharp relief.

Photofest

**Figure 4.5**
*In this breakfast scene from* Citizen Kane, *the husband and wife are made to look further apart than they are to emphasize alienation. (Photo from Photofest)*

## Camera Angle

The angle of the shot can also affect composition. A camera can be placed above or below the scene, creating a **high-angle shot** or a **low-angle shot.** The standard (or conventional) meaning attached to these shots deals with the relative dominance of different viewing angles. A shot looking down usually diminishes or weakens the subject (or character), whereas a shot looking up tends to accentuate the power or dominance of the subject. In Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* the corrupt and corpulent border police officer, played by Welles himself, is consistently shot from extreme low angles, making him grotesquely sinister and powerful at the same time.

These are examples of extreme angles, however. The normal camera angle in narrative

**Figure 4.6**
*(a) A shallow depth of field from* Dreamers *and (b) a deep or large field in Jean Renoir's* Rules of the Game. *(Photo (a) courtesy of Dark Lantern Pictures, www.dreamersthemovie. com; photo (b) from Janus Films)*



Dark Lantern Pictures, www.dreamersthemovie.com
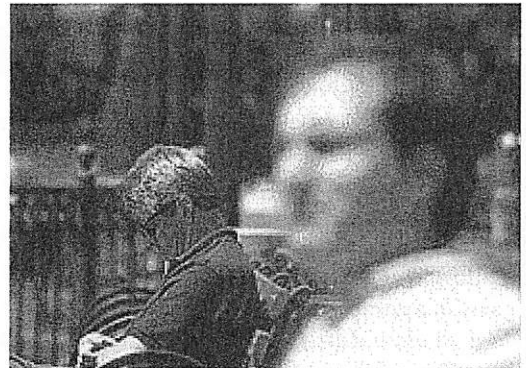
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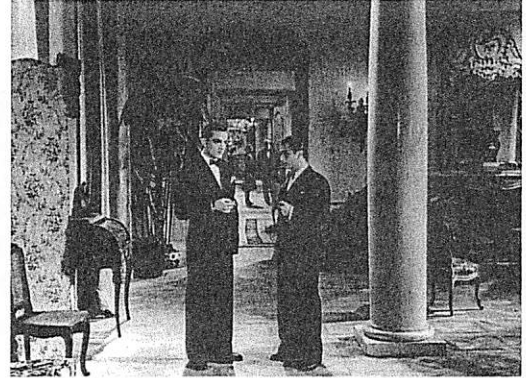


Janus Films

b

**Figure 4.7**
*(a) The man in the foreground is in focus. Pulling focus (b) brings the man in the background into focus and throws the man in the foreground out of focus. (Photo courtesy of* Video Producer: A Video Production Lab *by Herbert Zettl and Cooperative Media Group, published by Wadsworth)*
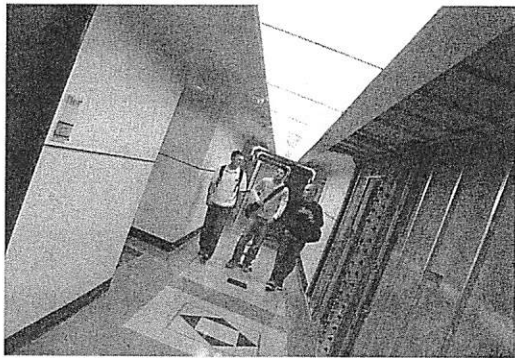


Video Producer

a



Video Producer

b

a



b



c



d

Figure 4.8
*Different camera angles: (a) a canted shot; (b) a two-shot from the conventional chest-high angle in* Merchants of Venus; *(c) a high-angle shot; and (d) a low-angle shot from Jean Renoir's* Rules of the Game. *(Photo (a) courtesy of Brian Gross; photo (b) from Len Richmond's* Merchants of Venus, *courtesy of Amazing Movies, Dianna Ippolito, photographer; photos (c) and (d) from Janus Films)*

motion pictures is chest high, not eye high, a practice that does not match the viewer's everyday visual experience (unless the viewer is very short). This angle does match the viewer's experience of watching motion pictures—a chest-high camera angle is the norm, the conventional angle for shooting "larger-than-life" film stars. Consequently, eye-height angles (as in shoulder-mounted camera work) look like high angles even though they are totally realistic in terms of our normal viewing experience. A **Steadicam** (see Chapter 3) allows stable, handheld, mobile shooting at angles lower than eye height.

The framing of a shot may also be manipulated by the degree to which the framing is level with the horizon. A **canted shot**, or **tilted shot**, is unusual and disorienting and can be unsettling to the viewer. A POV shot that suggests someone is drunk or drugged frequently uses this composition, but it is wrong to suggest that a canted frame always means something is askew or out of kilter. The meaning of a canted frame, or for that matter a high-angle or low-angle shot, is derived from the context of the film, not from some dictionary of camera aesthetics. (The photos in Figure 4.8 illustrate different camera angles.)

## Composing Within the Static Frame

Some shots that the director composes are relatively static because the camera does not move very much. A number of conventions, or so-called rules, have evolved regarding the composition of a shot within a static frame. These involve elements such as balance, depth, relative strength of various planes of the shot, and the space on and off the screen.

### Manipulating the Mise-en-Scène

Before the camera rolls, the way the event is staged for the camera has a profound effect on how the composition directs the viewer's eye. The director's storytelling technique is based on

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Figure 4.9
*(a) The diagonal lines add to the interest of this shot of Prunella Gee and Michael York; (b) the two people in the center of this scene from* Dr. Zhivago *create a mass that is dominant in the frame; (c) the woman standing facing the camera stands out from the others. (Photo (a) from Len Richmond's* Merchants of Venus, *courtesy of Amazing Movies, Dianna Ippolito, photographer; photo (b) © 1965 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc.; photo (c) courtesy of Dark Lantern Pictures, www.dreamersthemovie. com)*

a subtle interplay of lighting, blocking, costumes, and setting and the way the camera emphasizes those elements.

In a culture that reads left to right, the left side of the frame is probably more powerful than the right. To counterbalance this tendency, it may even be useful at times to place an object (or character) of greater size on the right side of the frame. Usually, the element that has the greatest mass or that takes up most of the composition will draw the most attention.

However, the placement of objects or characters within the scene is not the only way to attract the viewer's attention. The most brightly lit object (or person) in the composition also tends to dominate the frame. The colors of costumes, props, or the set itself can create a visual emphasis.[2] In Robert Altman's *The Player,* the appearance of Cher in a bright red dress at a formal social gathering, where everyone else is wearing black or white, absolutely guarantees that she will be noticed. During the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List,* a young girl in a red coat is the only visible color in an otherwise black and white scene. The red coat is glimpsed again later in the film as the camera pans across a pile of discarded clothing, indicating that the girl is dead.

The different lines of interest established within the composition have a dramatic effect on how the viewer sees and interprets the image. Diagonal lines across the frame are often more dynamic than horizontal lines. Horizontal lines make people feel comfortable, and vertical lines convey strength. Shooting a group of choir boys in a circle rather than in a straight line may create a feeling of tranquility.

The **blocking** of actors is one of the director's most basic tools for focusing the audience's attention. An actor closer to the camera is more dominant than one farther away. A performer facing the camera tends to grab the spectator's attention more than someone turned three-quarters, in profile, or away from the camera. A person in motion tends to attract the viewer's eye more than a person who is stationary. Similarly, an actor who is standing while the other actors are seated (or vice versa) receives greater emphasis. A performer alone, away from others in the composition, tends to attract more attention, as does an actor on whom all the other actors seem to be focusing their attention. Someone entering the scene usually is noticed more than someone leaving the scene.

Ultimately, the director's dramatic objective for a given scene determines the way the event is staged for the camera. What are you trying to emphasize? What do you want the audience to see? The answer to these questions lies somewhere between the manner in which the viewer's attention is directed by the mise-en-scène and the way in which the camera interprets the mise-en-scène (see Figure 4.9).

## Balance

**Unbalanced** compositions are considered more interesting than **balanced** compositions. When subjects within the frame are balanced so that the relative "weights" on the left and the right or on the top and the bottom are equal, the composition appears stable and solid but also tends to be flat and lacking in depth. Unbalanced compositions are more dynamic and visually active and can be used to create a sense of instability or tension. One reason for this is that what is in the "heavy" (or weighted) half of the frame tends to draw the items in the "light" half of the frame toward it.

The real objective, of course, is not to create individual shots suitable for framing on the wall but to create a composition that is appropriate for the subject at hand. Sometimes a perfectly stable and relatively flat composition is exactly right. For example, George Cukor used many balanced frames in his film *Adam's Rib* to convey equality between Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn (see Figure 4.10).

Closely related to the concept of balanced-unbalanced compositions is the **rule of thirds,** which states that you should try to avoid breaking the frame in half (top and bottom or left and right) because such compositions tend to be overly balanced and flat. Breaking the frame into thirds tends to create less symmetrical and more active compositions. Because the lines of interest are more on the diagonal, the viewer's eyes may be drawn more powerfully across the frame, and a sense of depth may be enhanced by the more angular, less even composition (see Figure 4.11). Of course, following this rule is difficult if you are trying to shoot for both **standard definition** (square) and **high-definition** (widescreen) formats because the thirds will be in different places.

## Creating Depth

A director can accentuate the sense of depth in a static shot in a number of ways. For example, giving a frame a definite foreground, middle ground, and background provides a sense of depth (see Figure 4.12). A shot of a person (foreground) placed in front of a wall (background)



Figure 4.10

*A balanced and relatively flat composition from* Adam's Rib. *(© 1949 Turner Entertainment Co. All rights reserved.)*



Figure 4.11

*A shot from* Married... with Children *provides a good demonstration of the rule of thirds. A strong diagonal line of interest flows from the kneeling shoe salesman in the lower left third to the woman trying on shoes up to the reaction by coworker Al Bundy in the upper right third. This picture also demonstrates how the sense of depth can be enhanced by having objects in different planes throughout the composition. (Photo courtesy of Columbia Studios)*

does not appear to have much depth, but if a middle ground figure, such as a bush or even a shadow, is added between the person and the wall, the frame will assume more depth. Overlapping foreground objects with middle ground or background objects enhances the sense of
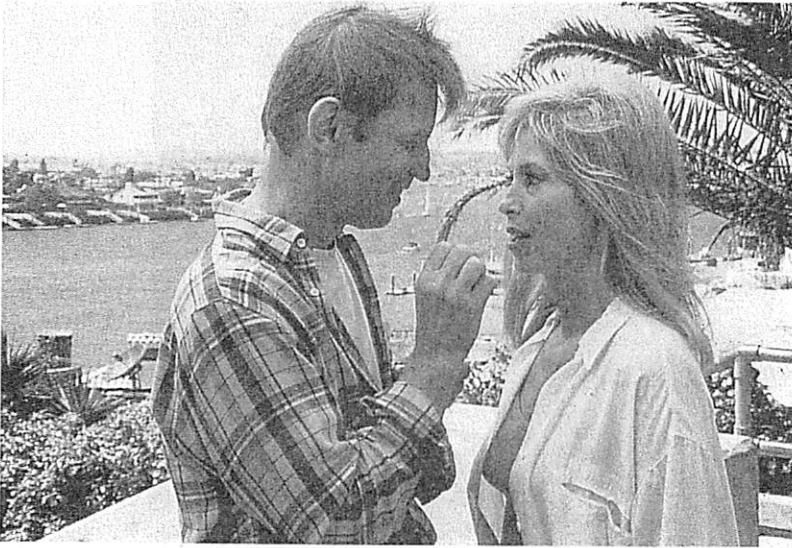
**Figure 4.12**
*With Prunella Gee and Michael York in the foreground, the foliage of a bluff in the middle ground, and a harbor in the background, this shot has great depth. (Photo from Len Richmond's* Merchants of Venus, *courtesy of Amazing Movies, Dianna Ippolito, photographer)*



**Figure 4.13**
*The frame of this shot is opened up because Beverly D'Angelo is looking off-screen and also holding a cup toward something that is off-screen. (Photo from Len Richmond's* Merchants of Venus, *courtesy of Amazing Movies, Dianna Ippolito, photographer)*

depth even more. Variations in size of objects within the frame or in their position within the picture plane can also serve as depth cues, as can color and brightness.

Unbalanced compositions and strong diagonal lines in the composition tend to increase the

depth cues and draw the viewer's eyes back into the frame. A director must take care, however, to keep background objects, such as potted plants and telephone poles, from appearing to grow out of a person's head.

## On-Screen/Off-Screen Space

Another important element of composition involves the director's use of space outside the frame of the film or television image. The frame limits what we can see of a scene, but a director can choose to open up the frame by having actors leave and reenter the frame or by framing shots that make us more aware of the space outside the frame. We may see only the front half of the dog in the frame, but we are at least subliminally aware that the rest of the dog exists just outside the frame.

The **off-screen space** in film or video is more "real" than in a stage play. When actors go offstage (out of the frame imposed by the proscenium arch), we do not expect to follow them. In film or television, the frame is more like the frame around a window. Viewers have the sense that if the camera moved just slightly forward and more to the right they could see through the window and continue to watch the characters who just went out of frame. By having a character simply look off screen, the director to some extent can open up the frame and heighten the use of that off-screen space (see Figure 4.13).[3]

## The Edge of the Frame

Even if a director tries to open up a frame, it does have limits because only a certain amount can be shown. Deciding what to put toward the edge is challenging if the movie is going to be shown in both the rectangular 4:3 **aspect ratio** and one of the **widescreen** formats. If you want to place an actor at the edge of the frame to convey isolation, and you do this so the actor is at the edge of the 4:3 frame, that actor will be about a third of the way into a 16:9 frame. Conversely if you frame for widescreen, the actor may not be there at all for a 4:3 ratio unless the frame undergoes **pan and scan** (see
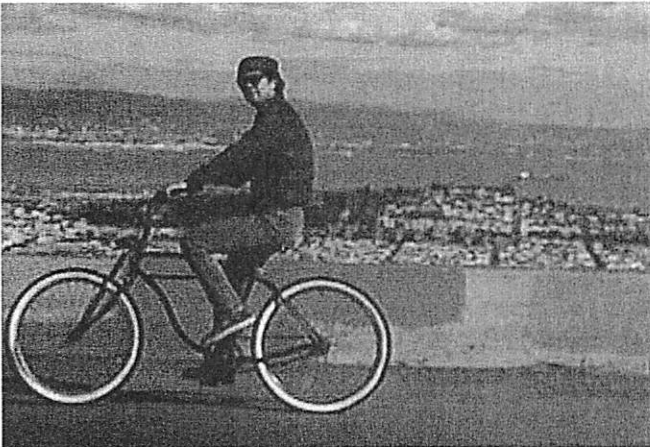
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Figure 4.14
*Photo (a) shows a composition with too much headroom; photo (b) shows a more typical or conventional amount of headroom. Photo (c) does not give the man on the bicycle enough leadroom; photo (d) is better. (Photos courtesy of* Video Producer)



c



d

Chapter 3). As the widescreen aspect ratio becomes more common for TV and film, the problems associated with the edge of the frame will diminish.[4]

The sides of the frame create another kind of limitation, however, particularly in shots in which a person is the subject. A viewer usually perceives that something is wrong if the framing of a person does not leave enough (or leaves too much) **headroom** between the top of the frame and the top of the person's head. **Noseroom,** sometimes called **look space,** refers to the space to the sides of the frame and the direction a person is looking within the frame. If the person is looking to the left, placing him or her on the right side of the frame leaves noseroom to the left and focuses attention in the direction the person is looking. If a person looking left is placed on the left side of the frame (with his or her nose virtually touching the left side of the frame), attention focuses on the empty space behind.

These same general principles apply when a person is moving in the frame and the camera is following the action. The convention is to provide **leadroom** in the direction the person is moving. In a chase sequence, however, allowing the people being pursued to bump up against (or move closer to) the side of the frame in the direction they are moving may help create the sense that they are hemmed in and about to be overtaken. The photos in Figure 4.14 illustrate proper and improper use of headroom and leadroom.

# The Moving Frame

Most of the concepts we have talked about in this chapter thus far would apply equally well to still photography or painting. The mobility of the camera itself, however, is one of the distinguishing characteristics of film and video. When the camera moves, the framing of the scene moves with it. A composition that was unbalanced one second may be balanced the next, or a shot that was high-angle can become straight-on. A medium shot can become a close-up, or the foreground can become the background. A camera moving in toward a character gives that character more impact or emphasis.

## Camera Movements

Tripods, cranes, dollies, and the human body allow cameras to move (see Chapter 3). Camera movement is needed to follow moving people or objects, but it also provides different psychological feelings. The major camera movements are the pan, tilt, dolly, track, and crane. A **pan** is a left to right movement of the camera but not of the mounting device. A tilt involves moving only the camera up or down. Moving the camera and the supporting device in or out is called a **dolly**, and moving both of them left or right is called **tracking**. An up and down movement of the camera and the supporting device is called a **crane** (also referred to as a **boom**). Other movements, such as an arc, are used from time to time, and you can make several movements at once—for example, a camera can dolly in, pan left, and crane up all at the same time.

In general, when just the camera moves, the feeling projected is one of an onlooker. When the camera and its mounting support—crane, tripod, human shoulder—move, the feeling projected is one of a participant. Take, for example, the difference between a pan and a track. Both are side-to-side movements, but for the pan only the camera moves left to right, a movement that produces an effect similar to someone moving his or her head from side to side as someone would who was observing the scene. Tracking, on the other hand, moves the camera and tripod and produces a feeling of someone walking or running alongside whatever is being photographed, a much more involving type of shot. The movement of the background is also very different with a pan and a track. For the pan, the background moves at an angle; for the track, it stays parallel. Similar differences in feeling and background occur with a tilt, which involves swiveling the camera up or down, and a crane, which moves the entire camera and supporting mechanism up or down.

## Zooming

In a **zoom** the elements of the lens move, magnifying or reducing objects in a way that the human eye cannot. With a dolly, the camera and the camera support move together into and through the space in the scene, creating a greater sense of what that particular space is like. A zoom in tends to flatten things out and bring everything in the composition closer. A dolly makes objects on screen appear to move out of frame as the movement occurs, forcing the viewer to experience the space at a more visceral level.

Students tend to rely too much on the zoom. Don't use it as an excuse for not putting the camera in the proper place for the appropriate field of view. Instead of zooming, place the camera closer to the scene (or farther away) and then compose the shot. Don't use a zoom as a substitute for a dolly because they have a different psychological feel. Constant zooming during shots can create a feeling of uncertainty (if not vertigo). Professionals use the zoom sparingly and carefully. They sometimes use it in a situation in which the artificiality of the zoom lends some particular meaning to the shot. They also use it in a situation in which a dolly is impossible or too expensive (as in *K19: The Widowmaker* when a zoom in on a submarine emphasizes its isolation in a vast ocean). Like any shot, a zoom should have a purpose.

## Time

Any camera movement also involves a time element. Moving the camera takes time, and a director who chooses to use elaborate camera moves generally tends to emphasize the mise-en-scène (as opposed to editing) to tell the story. Moving back from a close-up to a two-shot usually takes longer than cutting directly from a close-up to a two-shot.

Camera movements can be slow or fast or any speed in between. Many directors have used the rhythmic quality of camera movement as a powerful, expressive tool. Abrupt, quick movements create a different feeling than long, majestic ones. Even a brief look at music videos provides many examples to illustrate the importance of time in camera movement.

Camera movements are most frequently based on the movement of the characters within the frame. But a director may also use camera movement to create a sense of expectation or suspense unrelated to the characters. A camera movement can also change our focus to some object or some part of the mise-en-scène that the director wants to emphasize.

# Color and Tonality

Manipulating the filmed image through the choice of film stock is strikingly different from capturing an image on videotape. A black and white slow film stock (one less sensitive to light) records a richer range of grays and a sharper image than a fast film stock (one more sensitive to light), which tends to yield grainier images with more contrast. Different color film stocks, and even different stocks from different manufacturers, offer perceptibly different tonal qualities (one stock may emphasize the reds and yellows, another the blues and greens). And the lab can further manipulate all these differences when the film is processed and printed.

There is no such thing as color videotape or black and white videotape. In video, the same tape can be used to record both. In most cases it is easier to obtain black and white in postproduction than in production because most video cameras do not allow the user to shoot in black and white. Tonal quality gradations are also best handled in postproduction.

## Black and White or Color

Color is the norm for commercial production in film and video, so the absence of color calls attention to itself. Television advertisers recognize the attention-getting value of a black and white commercial. Some commercials extend this idea even further by colorizing the product in postproduction (the pink cherry cola can or ravishing new red hair rinse) to highlight the product in an otherwise black and white environment.

More commonly, black and white is used to evoke the past. Both film and television began as black and white media, with color becoming the standard as the technology evolved. Woody Allen's comic "documentary" *Zelig* uses black and white in much the same way, suggesting not only the past but old movie newsreels as well. In fact, one of the clichés of student moviemaking is the use of black and white to cue flashbacks in a color film. Director Martin Scorsese seemingly inverts this cliché in his black and white film *Raging Bull.* The only color material in this film consists of flashbacks to the La Motta family's faded color home movies.

Black and white may be more appropriate than color for certain subjects. Movies meant to be somber or earthy may convey this mood better if shot in black and white. This is true for Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* with its somber holocaust subject matter. Many music videos have experimented with ways black and white (or black and white in combination with color) can be used to enhance the mood or meaning of a particular piece of music. Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* switches between black and white and color within the same scene, mimicking the intercutting of color and black and white in many music videos.

## Color Considerations

Much has been written about the aesthetics of color.[5] Even beyond the theorizing of the artists and scholars about the power of color to evoke specific emotions, most of us accept a number of cultural conventions about color. Whether we are buying fabric or talking to an interior decorator or housepainter, we have a tendency to describe certain colors (reds and yellows) as emotionally warm and other colors (blues or greens) as emotionally cool. One theory holds that warm colors make items appear large, close, heavy, and enduring, whereas cool colors make items appear small, far away, light, and temporary.[6]

Certain colors seem to go together, and others seem to clash. Mixing colors opposite each other on the color circle, such as green and red, creates color contrast. Working with colors on the same side of the color circle creates color harmony. (See Color Plate 3.) Advertisers go to great lengths to determine what color of packaging encourages us to buy their products.

In moviemaking many decisions about color are made during the planning stage. The director, in conjunction with the production designer, decides which colors are appropriate for the sets, costumes, props, and even makeup. Color can emphasize or deemphasize any element of the mise-en-scène.

The camera can also be used to alter the emotional content of the shot with subtle shifts in color tonality. Think of the warm and homey glow of the typical hamburger chain's television commercials, or the way beer commercials tend to be shot in the orangish light of late afternoon (after work when the world is beautiful). In Robert Altman's western *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* the Golden West comes to life visually on-screen. A dreamlike golden tone pervades most of this film, a technique that further heightens the contrast with the cold blue death of McCabe in a snowstorm at the end. Warren Beatty's film *Dick Tracy* uses vibrant primary colors to emphasize the story's comic book origins.

In filmmaking these effects can be produced to some degree in the laboratory as the film is being processed or printed. With video, similar effects can be created during digital postproduction. In both film and video, color effects can be enhanced by placing a filter on the lens to warm (orange or reddish) or cool (blue or green) the image (see Color Plates 6 and 7). Other types of filters can alter the contrast range of a shot or diffuse and soften the subject being photographed (see Chapters 5 and 6 for more on filters).

The same scene or subject can read in very different ways, depending on shot composition, framing, camera movement, and manipulation of the color and tonality of the image. The power to interpret the mise-en-scène with the camera is basic to the art of moviemaking. Choosing and controlling the type and quality of the shot is one of the most important decisions confronting the moviemaker, student and professional alike.

# Shooting to Edit

The camera can move from a medium shot to a close-up (or the actor can move toward the camera and change a medium shot to a close-up), but this change of view is normally created through editing. The eventual editing of the shot has a profound effect on the composition, framing, and movement created by the camera (see Chapter 13 for aesthetics of editing).

## Shot Selection

A shot begins the moment the camera starts recording the subject and ends when it stops. It can be long or short, but eventually it will be joined with other shots during editing. In narrative moviemaking, the basic building block in the construction of the story is the scene, a unified action occurring in a single place and time. A scene is usually composed of a series of shots, though an entire scene can be one continuous shot. To provide complete coverage of the scene, the director usually shoots more shots than will actually be used in the final edited version. At the simplest level, the objective is to provide a

variety of shots of the physical action and dialogue in the scene (see Figure 4.15).

Imagine a simple one-minute scene in which a man and a woman eat breakfast while talking at the kitchen table. To ensure adequate coverage of this scene and to make certain that the needed shots will be available during editing, many directors begin by shooting a **master shot,** a fairly long shot showing both characters at the table as they play out the scene in its entirety. If used in the edited version of the motion picture, this one master scene shot would present all the dialogue and action within a single shot—a one-shot scene. A director using the master scene shooting method would then begin to provide coverage of the scene with shots from a variety of angles and perspectives: close-ups of each actor delivering lines, two-shots, reaction shots of one character listening to the other talk, and **cut-ins** to some essential detail within the scene (for example, a piece of burned toast). Perhaps the last element in providing complete coverage of a scene is to shoot **cutaways,** shots of related details that are not actually part of the scene (such as the kitchen clock on a wall off-screen).

In the editing room these different shots will be cut together to build up the scene—beginning, perhaps, with a master shot of both actors, then cutting to a close-up of the clock, a two-shot of the woman talking, and a CU of the man listening. It is important that the director select shots that can be edited according to the action, dialogue, and dramatic needs of that particular scene. Sometimes, for complicated scenes, the director may shoot two master shots from different angles, or a master shot where the camera moves, or no master shot at all. Directors always select shots with an eye to how they might be edited later.

## Shot Duration

The director must also decide how long to shoot each shot. The dialogue or the movement of the actor within the scene often dictates the length or duration of a shot. Moving the camera (because it takes place in time) can also determine shot duration. In addition to the composition, framing, and use of camera movement, the du-



a



b



c

### Figure 4.15

*In this scene from* Merchants of Venus, *two policemen confront Nancy Fish, who plays a business owner. Director Len Richmond filmed the master shot (a) of the three people. Because a heated argument transpires between the owner and one of the policemen, he shot the two of them (b). At the end of the scene, the owner becomes ill, so he also filmed her by herself (c). (Photos from Len Richmond's* Merchants of Venus, *courtesy of Amazing Movies, Dianna Ippolito, photographer)*

ration of the shot deeply affects how we see and understand it. The viewer can absorb more during a shot of long duration than during one of short duration.

On the purely technical level, providing extra time at the beginning and end of a shot for identification and editing purposes is important. In film and video the first few feet are needed to slate, or identify, the shot. In filmmaking the first few frames of the shot often contain overexposed frames (or *flashframes*), which are created while the camera is getting up to speed. Having a little more *head* or *tail* on each shot can prove invaluable in the editing room because it allows for options, both technically and aesthetically.

## The Long Shot, Medium Shot, Close-Up Pattern

The most conventional way to put together a scene is to begin with an **establishing shot**, a shot that sets the scene and establishes the location. This often is a long shot (the apartment building), but it could be something like a sign (Mastroianni's Cafe) that tells us where the scene is taking place. Next, we move into the scene from long shots to medium shots and finally to close-ups.

If the angle of view does not change sufficiently between the LS, MS, and CU, the shots will appear to jump when they are edited together. The conventional way to avoid this problem is to vary the angle of view at least 30 degrees from the previous shot (the so-called 30-degree rule). Some critics have argued that the LS–MS–CU pattern is the most psychologically correct way to construct a scene because it is similar to the way our minds work.[7] When we walk into a dance in a large ballroom (establishing shot), we tend to survey the entire room (the long shot) until we spot a group of friends (the medium shot) and move over and begin talking to them (the close-up). The establishing shot, long shot, medium shot, close-up pattern draws us into the scene. We gather more and more information as the shots move closer and closer.

This pattern can also be reversed. Beginning with a close-up can create questions. Who is this character talking to? Where are we? Moving from close-up to the medium shot and long shot can answer these questions as each shot provides additional information about the scene. Again, there is nothing inherently right or wrong about any pattern, but unless the director selects the shots during the shooting phase of production (shooting to edit), they will not be available when the editing begins.

## Shooting for Continuity

Technically, a single shot maintains **continuity**, a sense that the space we see in the shot and the time of the shot are continuous and uninterrupted. In conventional moviemaking continuity most often becomes an issue in the scene. Usually, scenes take place in a single location and in a continuous segment of time. This arrangement would not be a problem if the scene were shot with a single run of the camera. But because most scenes are composed of a variety of shots taken at different times and from different angles, continuity is often difficult to maintain during editing.

On the set of a typical Hollywood film, continuity is almost an obsession. Crewmembers such as the **script supervisor** are constantly checking for continuity errors. Some of the most common gaffes involve costumes or props: the tie that changes color from one shot to the next or the glass that is almost empty in the first shot but full in the next. Even something as simple as changing light values (when shots taken at different times of the day are edited together in what is supposed to be a continuous sequence of time) can violate continuity. This kind of error involves the mise-en-scène, but unless a director is consciously shooting to maintain continuity, the placement of the camera can also create problems.

Perhaps the most common technique for shooting to maintain continuity involves the **axis of action**, or the so-called **180-degree rule**. In any shot, whether it contains two people talking or a single person walking down the sidewalk, the principal axis of the action is identifiable. It is the imaginary line between the two people talking or the screen direction established by the walking character or moving ob-

ject. If the camera is placed on one side of this imaginary line (anywhere within the 180-degree arc on the same side of the line), spatial continuity will be maintained (see Figure 4.16). A shot that crosses the line would, when edited, flip-flop character A and character B to opposite sides of the screen. Similarly, crossing the axis of a walking character or moving car would make the person or car appear to reverse screen direction on the cut.[8]

Maintaining a constant screen direction also extends to the line of action established by a character looking off-screen. Imagine, again, two characters talking. We see character A in a close-up talking to character B, who is off-screen. In the next shot we see a close-up of character B responding to character A, who now is the one off-screen. Unless there is an **eyeline match** between the two shots, character A and character B will not appear to be talking to each other and might even appear to be distracted by something else off-screen (see Figure 4.17).

A radical change in the speed of a character or object (a car, for example) from one shot to the next also can violate continuity. The first few steps people take when they are getting up to walking speed (almost always near the beginning of the shot) are appreciably slower than when they are already at full walking speed. If you cut together two shots of people walking down the street, you want their relative speed (and gait) to match up as you edit from one shot to another. A **match cut**—a cut that maintains a continuous sense of space and time from one shot to the next—can be extremely difficult to make unless the director has shot the material with an eye to editing.

The time-tested method of ensuring footage that can be match cut is to have **overlapping action** during shooting. Imagine two shots that are going to be match cut. A character (from an angle in the hall) comes up to a door and opens it. The next shot shows the character entering the doorway and coming into the room from an angle inside the room. To overlap the action during shooting the director should shoot the entire action (walking up to the door, opening it, and walking into the room) in both shots. By overlapping the action in this manner, the director provides the editor with an almost infinite



a
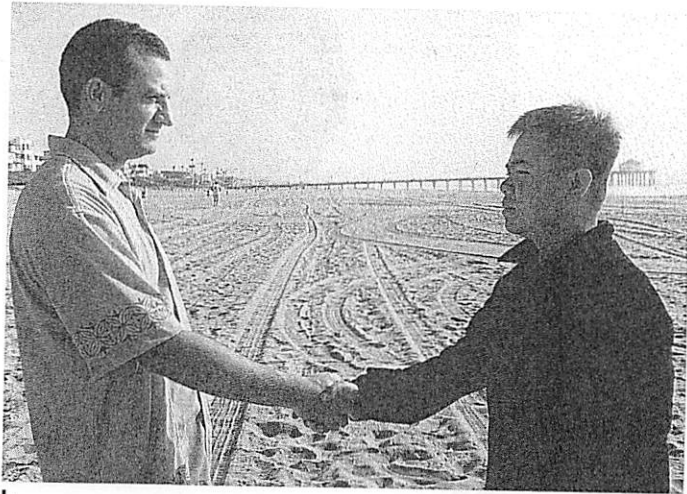
b
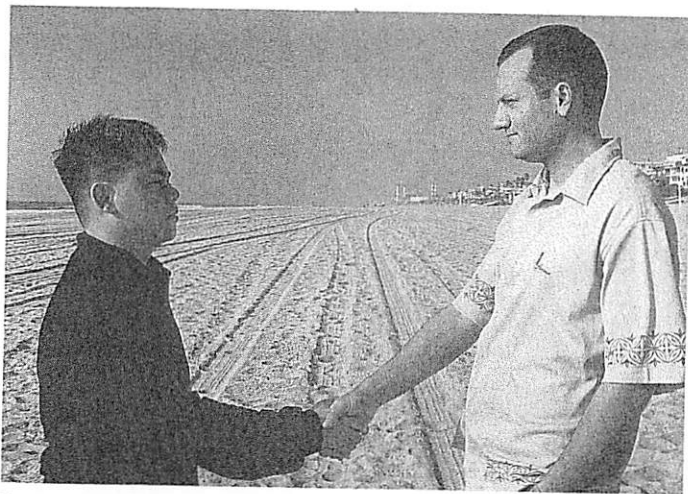
c

**Figure 4.16**
*Anywhere within the 180-degree arc established from camera view 1, the two people (A and B) will maintain the same spatial relationship—A on the left and B on the right. Crossing the axis, however (as in camera view 2), will reverse, or flip, A and B to the opposite sides of the screen.*

a



b



c

## Figure 4.17

*Once the eyelines have been established in one shot (a), the eyes must maintain those directional lines in subsequent shots to match. The woman in photo (b) illustrates correct eyeline match as she is looking in the correct direction for the man established in photo (a). If the woman is supposed to be listening to the man, the eyeline match is wrong in photo (c) because she is looking away from him (and his eyes). The implication of cutting from shot (a) to shot (c) is that she is not really listening to him or that she has been distracted by something off-screen in the other direction.*

number of cutting places for matching the two shots.

Of course, continuity entails much more than the placement of the camera. It also depends on how the director stages the mise-en-scène for the camera and the way in which the editor puts the material together in post-production.

## Now That You Know the Rules...

Now that you know the rules... go ahead and break them. Cross the line. Shove someone's nose up against the edge of the frame. Forget chest-high shooting and try other angles. Break the frame into halves instead of thirds. The "rules" presented in this chapter are violated frequently, and usually for good reason. They are broken because doing so serves the needs of the story or will, in some way, affect the perceptions and emotions of the audience. If you are a student, school is an excellent place to experiment. Use your creativity and imagination and try some new techniques. It is a good idea to also record material in the tried and true fashion in case your ideas don't work, but don't be afraid to go out on a limb. If you are shooting on film, experimentation can be expensive, but if you are shooting on video, try whatever comes to your mind—tape is cheap.

Professionals know that in actual practice composing a shot is more intuitive than analytical.[9] Through composition of the image within the frame, the director can choose to highlight, modify, shade, reinforce, or even undercut almost any element in the scene. Whether the composition of a shot is good or bad depends more on what the director is trying to accomplish with a shot than on some abstract principle of pictorial composition.

## Notes

1. See, for example, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 145–184; and James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 148.

2. Bob Fisher, "Through the Looking Glass," *Emmy*, June 1999, pp. 34–36.

3. Noel Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. by Helen R. Lane (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 17–31.

4. "Finding the Art in HDTV," *Broadcasting and Cable*, 25 June 2001, pp. 26–28.

5. Monaco, pp. 96–98; R. T. Ryan, *A History of Motion Picture Color Technology* (New York: Focal Press, 1977); Raymond Durgnat and Vincent LoBrutto, "Three Moods Prevail in *Dead Presidents*," September 1995, pp. 59–66.

6. Herbert Zettl, *Sight-Sound-Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990), pp. 66–68.

7. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 23–40.

8. Frank Beacham, "The Art of Crossing the Line," *TV Technology*, October 1991, pp. 30–31.

9. "Are You Serious About No Catering Truck?" *Los Angeles Times*, 30 July 2001, p. F-1.