CHAPTER 5

STORY ELEMENTS AND FILM GRAMMAR

PERCEPTION AND MAKING STORIES

Filmmaking follows the processes we adopt when turning an experience into a story that we can tell to others. This chapter aims to help you found your shooting and editing in human perception.

It begins from the way we naturally sense the world around us. Go and stand in a busy street and notice how your senses function. Your eyes flicker after moving objects such as vehicles and people; your ears pick up particular sounds and tell your eyes where to look; or you see something that makes your ears search for the sound it is making. Always on the lookout for danger, your ears and eyes monitor the environment, and as people or vehicles come toward you, you adapt by moving, or by looking warily around before crossing the road. At the same time, you register a woman in a striking red dress, and notice an acquaintance going into a coffee shop with whom you might stop and chat. While this is happening, your memory fills any vacant spaces with visual and aural associations, and your imagination is visualizing what you might do with some time you have spare later in the day.

Note down everything you can remember from 5 minutes of observation. The memory is a wonderful story editor, because it remembers what is significant, and jettisons everything else. With some prodding, your memory will disgorge a Virginia Woolf stream of consciousness, which soon looks like a short but rich documentary script. If you work at the potential in your piece of writing, you will discern some quite serious preoccupations and a theme.

Thus there is a strong parallel between what we do in life (seeing, hearing, experiencing, remembering, and retelling the events of a morning, say) and the steps one takes in making a piece of cinema. Each has three parallel stages:

TABLE 5-1 Turning everyday experiences into an anecdote, and making a documentary film

Life	Cinema
(a) Living various experiences and storing the highlights in memory.	**Shooting** events on to a memory medium (using the camera's eyes, ears, and memory like a human being under particular pressures).
(b) Inwardly reviewing the main points, and fashioning them into a narrative with a meaning.	**Editing** (using a computer to help you replay, shape, structure, and abbreviate the story materials into something significant).
(c) Telling the story to different audiences—to entertain, gauge its effect, and validate one's feelings at the time.	**Screening** the story (for audience reaction, feedback on what it conveys, and to gauge whether the film acted upon the audience as intended).

Everyday awareness involves faculties we use constantly and unconsciously, like our leg muscles when we decide to start walking. Try now to dig into your awareness and notice how your stream of consciousness actually functions. It will take a second "observer you" who stands back and studies how the "normal you" imbibes experiences and stores them as impressions. You will need high concentration, so be prepared to learn in small snippets. The good thing here is that you can practice just about anywhere and under any circumstances. Keep trying, even though your whole being screams to go back to the comfort of normal unconsciousness.

We turn now to how you tell an incident. One that happened to me one winter night came out something like this:

Tramp, tramp through the icy dark of a Chicago winter with Cleo padding along on her lead. Suddenly, the ominous scraping sound of my booted foot sliding, a momentary vision of whirling horizon, then the sound of teeth rattling in my head, and the thump and clatter of forehead and eye-glasses hitting icy concrete. Lifting nose from gritty ice, I lumber onto all fours, suffused with rage at the neighbor who doesn't shovel after snowfalls. Surprisingly, my hand is still clutching the dog lead. Cleo is shocked but excited that I have plummeted to her level. From the direction I'm now facing I realize that I must have spun round in mid air before landing on forehead and knee-caps. I get up and move off, one knee and both hands aching fiercely.

From under a street-light a man watches. He stands mute, expressionless, and unknowable like destiny.

Each sound, image, or event here is like a movie shot or sound effect, and more importantly, it suggests a meaning. Telling it to friends, we see how they react, and with repeated tellings we improve the story so that it now carries a *subtext* (that is, an underlying meaning). Usually we structure a telling chronologically (in the order that things happened), but maybe some other priority will predominate if it enhances the underlying meaning. Mine was "disaster that can kill you happens faster than you imagine."

HOW SCREEN LANGUAGE MIMICS CONSCIOUSNESS

To see how someone's consciousness permeates the handling of a camera, imagine you go to your high school reunion and find a little camcorder that someone has left behind. Hoping to guess whose it is, you view its footage and see that someone has naively used the camera like his eyes and ears. From the off-camera voice you know the owner is male. The recorded events tell you not only whom he was drawn to, but how his mind worked and how he spent his evening. Though

he says little from behind the camera, his material gives you such a strong idea of his tastes, reactions, and personality that you can infer his heart and mind from his material.

Often a stretch of film—cut or uncut—produces the thrilling sensation of being in the presence of a questioning, guiding human intelligence. This is the effect of a director's interests and sympathies working hand in glove with all the potential of the cinema. Such a film is Alberto Vendemmiati's *The Person de Leo N* (Italy, 2006, Figure 5-1), about a 40-year-old actor born in a male body but who has felt like a woman all her life. Her central problem is whether to get a sex change operation, and stopping her is the fear that her beloved mother will reject her. Masterfully shot in Venice and Bologna, the film's empathic and highly intimate camera handling, emotional music, and taut, glancing editing style creates an unparalleled closeness to Nico, and makes us feel keenly the ultimate mystery of gender and self-identity.

FIGURE 5-1

A warmly questioning empathy guides *The Person de Leo N* throughout.

Cinema of the highest order like this leaves us feeling we have lived through the events ourselves. Engaged, intimate camerawork (by the director), allied with impressionistic editing, makes us feel intimately involved with the recorded events and personalities. Afterwards we feel we have somehow experienced these events ourselves. Misused professionalism, on the other hand, produces the soulless efficiency familiar from hack TV series and corporate video. One form is based on hyper-conscious human responses behind the camera, and the other on strategies of audience manipulation.

DOCUMENTARY INGREDIENTS AND HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

Throughout this book I shall stress that film language at its most effective simply makes the screen reproduce human interior processes of thought and emotion. The eyes are the camera, the ears are sound recording, and movements of the camera and editing together signify the reactions, expectations, and decisions that take place in our stream of consciousness as it guides us bodily through the stream of life-events around us.

ELEMENTS

All documentaries are composed of remarkably few elements, and their recombinant possibilities, though endless, are limited like any language by the conventions of the cinema and its audience. First, here are the basic ingredients with which every documentarian cooks.

How films combine these elements is already familiar, but you will need to internalize the groundwork of film language for yourself if you are ultimately to use the screen in your own way. You will have to decide from your audience's reactions "what works" and figure out why it works. This is how one arrives at one's own "voice" when practicing any of the arts.

A GUIDING THEORY

Some theoretical guidance may help, so we will draw parallels between types of shot and everyday human experience, and then work toward greater complexity by looking at the building blocks of cinema language.

TABLE 5-2 Picture and sound elements from which all documentaries are fabricated

Picture

Action
- People
- Creatures
- Landscapes
- Inanimate things

Graphics
- Photographs
- Documents, titles, headlines
- Line art, cartoons, or other graphics

Archive material
- Library material
- Material recycled from other films

People talking
- Unaware of camera and spontaneous
- Aware of camera and its portrayal

Interviews
- Interviewer present in frame
- Interviewer present but off-camera
- Interviewer absent and questions edited out

Re-enactments, factually accurate, of situations that,
- Were not filmed, or could not be
- Are suppositional or hypothetical

Blank screen—makes us think over what we have been seeing, or gives heightened attention to existing sound.

Sound

Diagetic sound (synchronous sound shot while filming)
- Dialogue
- Accompanying sound, especially of sound events

Narration (non-synchronous)
- Narrator
- Voice of the author
- Voice of a participant

Voice-over
- Audio-only interview
- Drawn from interview, but picture discarded

Music
- Diagetic (audible to participants)
- Non-diagetic, added to comment on scenes

Sound effects
- Wild (non-sync) sound effects
- Spot (sync) sound effects
- Wild atmospheres
- Location ambience

Non-diagetic sound (composed or added in order to comment on scene)

Silence—a temporary absence of sound creating a mood change, or causing us to look critically at the picture.

SHOTS ARE LIKE THE HUMAN GAZE

Shots with a camera reproduce aspects of human regard, which can be short or long, casual or intense. With thoughtful framing, composition, and context you can inflect each shot with special meaning, because *a particular shot often implies the thoughts and feelings of whoever is doing the seeing.*

TABLE 5-3 Film terms and their equivalency in everyday perception

Film term and definition		In daily life, equivalent to
Shot	Framed view	Long or short period of watching, staring, expecting, enjoying, confronting—either close or at some distance.
Pan (Shot inflection)	Camera pivots horizontally	Taking in one's surroundings; comprehending; discovering; revealing; escaping; assessing; fearing, expecting.
Tilt (Shot inflection)	Camera pivots vertically	Assessing height or depth; looking up to; looking down upon. Threatening or feeling threatened. Admiring, assessing.
Crane (Shot inflection)	Camera travels vertically	Traveling up with; down with; getting up; sitting down; looking up at; looking down on.
Dolly, track (Shot inflection)	Camera travels horizontally	Physically moving toward or away from something or someone; traveling alongside, behind, or in front of someone. Attraction; repulsion; advance; retreat (perspective changes).
Zoom (Shot inflection)	Objects grow bigger or smaller	Looking more closely or retreating (but more psychologically than physically since perspective relationships remain unchanging during a zoom).

If film equipment functions like human eyes and ears, the mind that interprets their input functions as the seeking, reacting, physically guiding human intelligence. This makes the camera a mobile, thinking, and feeling participant in what it records—a stream of consciousness and movements with which the audience tends to *identify* (feel in sympathy).

CUTS

Putting two shots together, one after another in *juxtaposition*, implies a meaning much as your thought patterns do when you glance from a bread recipe to the temperature gauge on your kitchen stove. Cut any two images together and you lead us to infer meaning from their relationship. The famous Lev Kuleshov "bowl of soup" experiment used the same reaction shot in three different contexts and demonstrated how an audience thought it was seeing three different reaction shots. The shot is of a man looking out of frame, and associating him with a bowl of soup, a dead child, and a seductively dressed girl, Kuleshov discovered that the audience inferred successively that he was (a) hungry, (b) grieving, then (c) feeling desire. Clearly, shots in juxtaposition not only imply relationship, but encourage us to bring our own subjective interpretations to what our eyes see.

Early experiments with film, and early film theories, were developed in Russia. Two theorists of editing, Vsevolod Pudovkin (1893–1953) and Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), came up with differing ideas about the technique of montage, as editing was then called. To Pudovkin, editing shots together was a structural activity that built information, relationship, and meaning. Eisenstein was interested by the awareness one could stir in the viewer by the clash of the dissimilar and antithetical. Here are examples of their principles:

TABLE 5-4 In Examples 1 to 5, Pudovkin's *categories of juxtaposition* supply expository details for the narrative. They establish the location's geography, the characters, and the central character's "problem"—whatever he or she is trying to get, do, or accomplish. Examples 6 to 13, Eisenstein's *categories of dialectic editing*, confront us with juxtapositions that argue as much as they inform

	Shot A	Shot B	B in relation to A	Type of cut and its function
Examples 1–5 PUDOVKIN'S CATEGORIES OF JUXTAPOSITION				
1	Woman descends interior stairway	Same woman walking in street	Narrates her progress	Structural (builds scene)
2	Man runs across busy street	Close shot of his shoelace coming undone	Makes us anticipate his falling in front of a vehicle	Structural (directs our attention to significant detail)
3	Hungry street person begging from doorway	Wealthy man eating oysters in expensive restaurant	Places one person's fate next to another's	Relational (creates contrast)
4	Bath filling up	Teenager in bathrobe on phone in bedroom	Shows two events happening at the same time	Relational (parallelism)
5	Exhausted boxer takes knockout punch	Bullock killed with stun-gun in an abattoir	Suggests boxer is a sacrificial victim	Relational (symbolism)
Examples 6–13 EISENSTEIN'S CATEGORIES OF DIALECTIC EDITING				
6	Police waiting at road block	Shabby van driving erratically at high speed	Driver doesn't know what he's soon going to meet	Conflictual (still vs. the dynamic)
7	Giant earth-moving machine at work	Ant moving between blades of grass	Microcosm and macrocosm coexist	Conflictual (conflict of scale)
8	Geese flying across frame	Water plummeting at Niagara Falls	Forces flowing in different directions	Conflictual (conflict of graphic direction)
9	Screen-filling close-up of face, teeth clenched	Huge Olympic stadium, line of runners poised for pistol start	The one among the many	Conflictual (conflict of scale)
10	Dark moth resting on white curtains	Flashlight emerging out of dark forest	Opposite elements	Conflictual (dark vs. light)
11	Girl walks into carnival	Distorted face appears in carnival mirror	The original and its reflection	Conflictual (original vs. distorted version)
12	Driver sees cyclist in his path	In slow motion driver screams and swings steering wheel	Event and its perception	Conflictual (real time vs. perceived time)
13	Driver gets out of disabled car	Same image, car in foreground, driver walking as a tiny figure in distance	Transition—some time has gone by	Jump cut

Like a spoken language, film language is in slow but constant evolution, so use it according to its potential for expression in your daily life rather than just according to cinema convention.

CAMERA MOVEMENT

The camera's physical actions (moving aside, coming closer, reframing, backing away, altering focus, craning up) also imply the emotional connotations that accompany human movement of any kind. A camera move can communicate anticipation, curiosity, appreciation, surprise, apprehension, intuition, dread, affection, and anger—all depending on the context. Imagine the camera equivalency to each of these actions:

- A voice behind you in a crowd makes you turn around to see who it is.
- While you are writing, footsteps approach. You lift your head to look at the door, anticipating who will enter.
- Someone enters whom you find tedious, so you turn back to your writing.
- In a ski lodge you open an outside door and find yourself facing a mountainside. You tilt your head back to see the peak.
- Your eyeline is obstructed by a tree, so you move sideways to see past it.

Whatever the camera pursues, avoids, or finds exciting will color that "corner of nature seen through a temperament." We will feel the vibrancy of a heart and mind at work, one that sees opportunity, enigma, threat, obstruction, beauty, or surprise as each new situation takes shape. Sometimes the camera is tired or drained, and reacts passively. Other times it draws us along with hectic ideas and agendas. If it has a living temperament, it also has changes in its moods.

To see all this in action, run any of direct cinema's seminal works, such as *The Man with the Movie Camera*, or the more recent *Primary* (USA, 1960) by Robert Drew, Terry Filgate, Richard Leacock, Albert Maysles, and D. A. Pennebaker, which chronicles the process by which John Kennedy sought the presidency. You can clearly sense the moment-to-moment reactions and decision-making during the filming, just as you can in Vendemmiati's *The Person de Leo N*, mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Finding patterns and implying explanations—what T. S. Eliot called "imposing order"—is an important function of authorship that we fulfill unconsciously all the time. Now your job is to hold a camera and microphone and use them to express your own changing states of attention. You, after all, are a surrogate for the audience and exploring life on their behalf. How well can you do it?

MOTIVATED CAMERA MOVEMENTS AND CUTS

Every edit and camera movement must feel motivated because in life something always initiates our mental and physical actions. We either act from an internal signal, such as a thought ("I wonder when the crossing-light will change?"), or from an external stimulus, such as an approaching vehicle, rain beginning, or someone waving from across the road. In your cinema work, as in life, there must be a constant flow of cause and effect.

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

A shot's content is what it *denotes* (what it "is") but the associations the shot can awaken are called *connotation*. Imagine calm shots of a flower or a hand lighting a candle. The shots denote what their subjects "are," that is, a flower and a candle. But depending on its context each shot can *connote* or suggest "natural beauty," "devotion," or a host of other associations. You

encourage these associations when you want to lead your audience toward the contemplative and philosophic, which is the domain of mature life. To practice for this, adopt the editor's habit of assessing everything on film—images, sounds, words—as a potential symbol or metaphor. You can also practice this in everyday life as the poet does. You are looking for the spirit of things beneath their physical substance. Iranian cinema is powerful because it comes from a culture immersed in poetic thinking. Even a humble shepherd can recite poetry by heart and is trained by the poetry in his religion to recognize matters of the spirit in symbols and metaphysical imagery. This way of seeing is something you can cultivate and make your own.

THE CAMERA IN RELATION TO ACTION

PREPARING TO SHOOT WITH FEELING

Using a camera with sophistication goes far beyond framing and shooting a subject with care, since this can seem devoid of warmth or meaning. In fact, an audience often feels that the camera is informed by feelings—most often curiosity, identification, and empathy. Recognizing when this happens is not difficult; but for a camera operator or director to infuse an inanimate camera with feeling seems on the face of it impossible. Is it all down to editing? No, because editing can seldom create what is absent from the footage.

To film with feeling, we must first reverse the idea that we are mainly passive and acted upon by others. Then we must see what we frame and film analytically, while retaining our emotional investment in what we see. Following are some practical ideas about how we react—emotionally and physically—to different human circumstances. They begin with how we think of human interaction itself.

THE ACTOR AND THE ACTED-UPON

In interchanges we seldom feel we have much effect, but the dramatic theorist Stanislavski proposed we are *acting upon those around us all the time*—even when adopting the strategy of passivity. Everyone has an agenda, so those we act upon, act back upon us. You see this most obviously in parent/child relationships, so often bristling with frustrations. A documentarian's job is always to seek the subtext of relationships, and to film them as they unfold with deliberate, timely camera framings and movements. This can give more psychic revelation than anyone was able to see at the time.

OBSERVING A CONVERSATION

Choose two people deep in discussion, and listen to their conversation. Most importantly, watch how your onlooker's perceptions move around. At first you probably look only at whoever speaks. Naive camera operators will cover a whole conversation like this, and they produce what I think of as Dog Television. Man's best friend, lacking powers of interpretation, can only look hopefully at the speaker. Walk? Dinner? Play with Charlie?

As a human interchange intensifies, notice how your involvement changes too. You look at each speaker as she begins, but then in mid-sentence switch to the listener. You have begun anticipating something. What is it?

You must think in terms of *actor* and *acted-upon*. Recall watching a tennis game when, at any given moment, one player will *act* (hit the ball), while the other is about to be *acted upon* (receive the shot). When Player A launches an aggressive serve, your eye jumps ahead of the ball to see how B handles the onslaught. She runs, jumps, swings her racquet, and the moment you know she's successfully intercepted, your eye flicks ahead of the ball again to see if A can handle the return.

HUNTING SUBTEXTS

We follow the actions and reactions in human relationship like this because we know that people are always *trying to get, do, or accomplish* something. A tennis game is openly a competition for points, but a human interchange is also playing for goals, and we want to know their nature. Notice while you observe an interchange, how your eyes spontaneously *judge where to look*, moment to moment? Without you consciously directing them, they probe according to action and reaction, changes of eyeline by the speakers, and meanings flowing in the conversation.

Notice how your eyes know when to leave a speaker in mid-sentence to monitor the listener? Why? Because you were subconsciously *looking for evidence of developing feelings*. Notice how fast the "actor" and the "acted upon" switch roles. Your eyeline is probing their motivations while your mind is unconsciously building hypotheses about who wants what.

Apply these ideas about mental probing to camera handling, and you now have the golden key to techniques of camera coverage and editing. Of course, you can't swing a camera around as fast as the changing human gaze, so you will have to simplify the core of what is happening. Can you pinpoint the moments of realization that prompt—or should prompt—each cut or camera pan?

All this has immense practical significance, because editing closely replicates how we investigate behavioral evidence, which exposes clues to volition and motive. Run any distinguished feature film, and you will see that the editing reproduces the observing, assessing, questing that we do as we *watch an action closely and inwardly debate its meaning*. We humans are empathic beings: we identify, live with, and live through those around us. We have been doing this for millions of years as we developed from tribal creatures, whose survival depended on astute relationships with the given power structure. This is in our DNA, and is such a constant in our daily lives that we do not even register we are doing it. As a director, however, you are now in the human relations business, so you must become wholly conscious. Once you begin seeing this principle forever at work in human life, the shooting and editing decisions that mimic it fall into place as logical and satisfying. However, your decisions about motives also depend on one more principle, mentioned earlier.

HIDDEN AGENDAS AND SUBTEXTS

Beneath what is visible in any human situation are *hidden agendas*—that is, the participants' hidden, often half-conscious drives that provide much of the situation's tension. A married couple's argument isn't really about who should take their child to the doctor. You sense there's a *subtext* (an underlying explanation). You eavesdrop until you realize it comes from his feelings of hurt and jealousy because she had lunch with an old boyfriend. The acrimony is not really about their car arrangements. It's about his possessiveness and her need for autonomy, or maybe in her insecurity she needs to make him jealous to prove her own worth. You will have to keep watching and hypothesizing until everything falls in place.

In fiction cinema, actors, directors, and editors put a vast amount of work into developing subtexts like these, because they fuel the tensions that animate real life. In documentary you can only imply the subtexts you think are present by astute camerawork and editing that makes the subliminal more visible. Obviously you can't rehearse and direct the participants to evidence their subtexts. Instead you encourage the audience to,

- Look for hidden agendas and subtexts. (Is he delivering an insult, and if so, how should she react?)
- Formulate a subtext. (I don't trust that smile of his. What's he driving at?)
- Test the information. (Can this be true? What does it remind me of?)
- Commit something significant to memory. (I'll need to think about that later.)

- Imagine consequences or alternatives. (If … supposing … then …)
- Decide what is hidden and what is visible. (Can he show that knowledge or will he hide it?)

Framing, camera movement, and associative editing help the audience develop particular thoughts and feelings about the participants, or become aware of crucial contradictions. Such techniques convey a living human heart, intelligence, and soul at work.

ATTENTION AND FOCUS

Sometimes while operating the camera your mind goes ahead of, or away from, the task in hand. You are admiring or doubting the value of a composition, guessing the source of a shadow, or thinking associatively about something else. You are no longer in the present and the audience may sense it. Actors call this "losing focus."

Camera operators lose focus when they should maintain an unbroken interior life on behalf of the camera, or continue to move, react, search, retreat, evade, or go closer in the way that a focused human intelligence should. This motivation and reactivity is very obvious in handheld, spontaneous coverage, but is still present in a tripod-mounted camera that produces a more settled, formal coverage.

By the way, work from a tripod whenever you use a long lens and want shots to remain steady instead of wobbly like a telescope. An unsteady camera during an interview, for instance, is simply a distraction unless the participants are riding in the back of a truck in a war zone. In that case, the improvised nature of the exchange would be manifestly justified.

EYE CONTACT AND EYELINES

When you observe two people in earnest conversation, you'll see that, contrary to the fixed notions we hold, neither makes eye contact more than fleetingly. Eye-to-eye exchange is intense, draining, and reserved for special moments. Why is this?

Recall that each is either *acting on* the other person, or *being acted upon*. In either mode, each glances only occasionally at the other, either for enlightenment, or to judge the effect of something just said or done. The rest of the time each was looking inward, and their eyes hopped around, or rested on some convenient object.

Now, what made *your* eyeline shift around while observing them? Often, changes in their eyelines made you shift yours. Each blink and eyeline-shift alerts you to significance elsewhere, and your eye goes hunting for it. Watch two people like this long enough, and you'll detect a rhythm and motivation in their eyeline-changes that is being orchestrated by the shifting contours of the conversation itself. This can only be fully rendered in fiction film since conversations in documentary cannot be repeated and are seldom covered by more than one camera.

LOOKING AT, AND LOOKING THROUGH

In the fiction film *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, USA, 1970, Figure 5-2), the poignant two-person exchanges between the failed pianist and his sad waitress girlfriend relay three points of view: one each for the two characters and a

FIGURE 5-2

Depending on the drift and intensity of a conversation, the audience can identify with either character at different points. (*Frame from Five Easy Pieces.*)

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third more detached one that is both ours and that of the Observer. Bobby and Rayette's perspective on each other is intimate, while the Observer's is outside their enclosed consciousness and looks upon them from a more analytic vantage. Depending on the drift and intensity of the conversation, the audience identifies with each character at different points. While Bobby talks, for instance, the observing camera (through whose eyes and mind we see) looks through Rayette's eyes at Bobby in search of clues to his inner feelings. At other moments we see Rayette through Bobby's more sardonic vantage. The third, authorial viewpoint comes via cooler, more detached two-shots in which we see them as a couple—mismatched and drowning.

In a two-person documentary scene, the camera does not quite have this freedom of coverage, but uses on-the-spot camerawork to capture and convey all those interpretive reactions by the characters that *both accompany and direct* human observation. The implications are complicated to grasp, but you'll understand best from watching yourself during an intense exchange and discovering how you first (passively) observe and then (actively) decide what action to take. There are many nonverbal signs to help you—in body language, eyeline shifts, rhythmic changes, voice inflections, and particular actions—all in their context implying particular meanings. Being responsive like this is what makes film language truly universal.

SCENE GEOGRAPHY AND AXES

Filming a scene well depends on *inhabiting* that scene with your empathy and consciousness. Figure 5-3 represents A and B under observation by O, the Observer who is their child. He makes a good example because children are highly observant, have vivid emotions, and often go unseen. As you imagine how O's eyeline moves back and forth between his parents as they talk, we can now name some of the "axis" components.
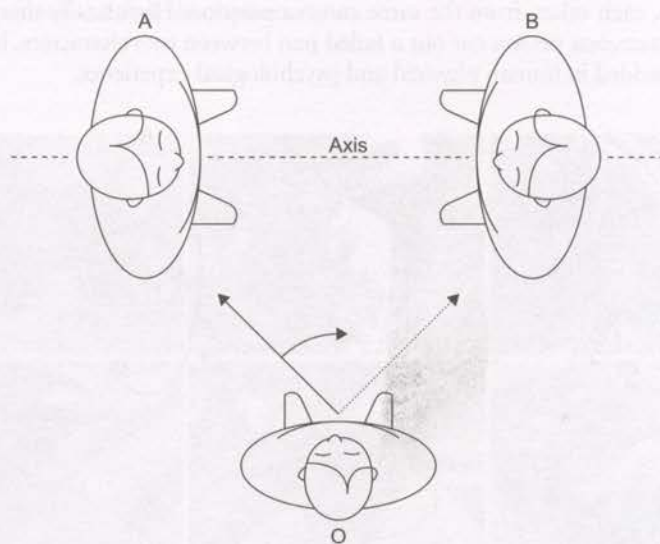

FIGURE 5-3

The Observer watching a conversation.

SCENE AXIS

O's awareness is drawn to the *line of tension* between his parents, an invisible, active pathway of words, looks, awareness, and volition between them. This is the *scene axis*, or *subject-to-subject axis*. If the scene contained four people, there would be multiple lines of tension and at different parts of the scene you would have to decide which was dominant.

CAMERA AXIS

Every scene also has an *observer-to-subject axis*, which O would think of as the "me to them" relationship. My example shows this at right angles to the axis between A and B. That is the *camera-to-subject axis*, often called the *camera axis*.

This may all sound rather technical but it's really quite human. From O's point of view, he has strong relationships (a) along his axis to each of his parents, (b) to the invisible connection (their axis, sometimes called the *scene axis*) between them, and (c) to the consequences upon him of whatever emotions pass along these axes. It is the human tribal-survival situation mentioned earlier, never more urgent than during our perilous apprenticeship as a dependent child. This sense of self versus others stays with us lifelong—often tinged with apprehension, but freighted with other emotions too, such as love and trust.

PANNING AND CUTTING

In turning to look from person to person, the camera mimics the Observer's actions by a *panning* movement between the two speakers (that is, the frame moves horizontally as when scanning a panorama). In Figure 5-4, O has moved closer to A and B's axis and, to avoid missing any of the action, must swerve his attention quickly between A and B. Under this circumstance, humans blink their eyes to avoid the unpleasant blur between widely separated subjects (try it for yourself). The brain, however, reads this as *two static images with no intervening period of black*. Cinema reproduces this by cutting between two subjects, each taken from the same camera position. Historically this solution must have emerged when some nameless person cut out a failed pan between two characters. It "worked" because its counterpart is embedded in human physical and psychological experience.
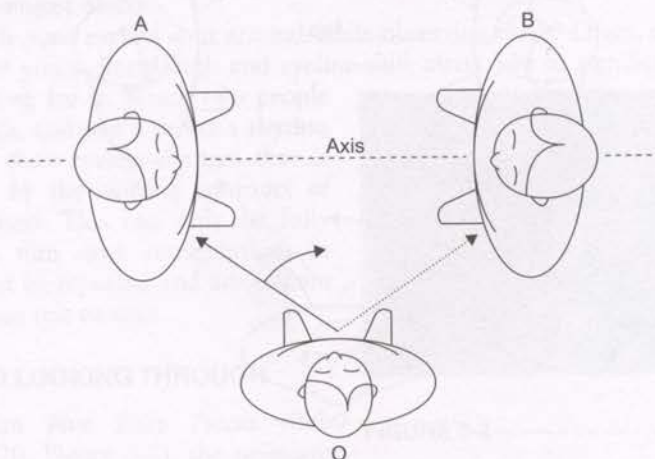

FIGURE 5-4

The Observer moves closer to the characters' axis.

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SCREEN DIRECTION

A subject's direction of gaze, or movement through a composition, is called his *screen direction*, and this is described as "screen left to right," "screen right to left," and "up screen" or "down screen" (Figure 5-5). Where a subject's movement flows across several shots, as in a sequence of shots showing someone in a procession, this becomes rather important. All the action in successive shots should use the same screen direction (Figure 5-6). As a practical matter, this requires
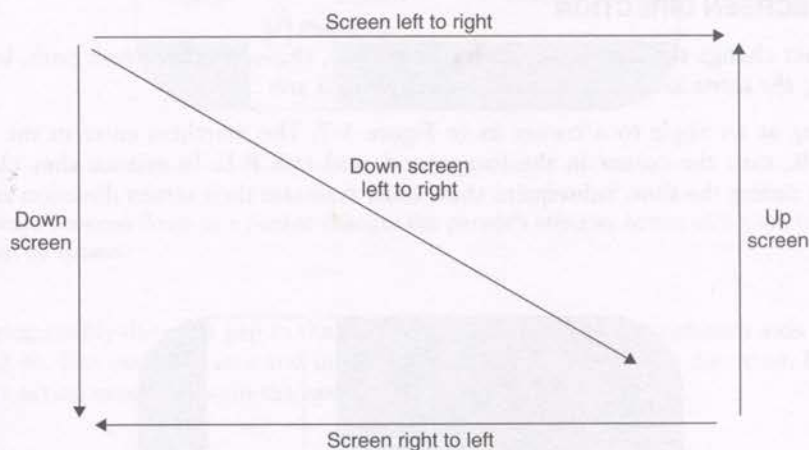

FIGURE 5-5

A range of screen directions and their descriptions.

FIGURE 5-6

Series of shots all maintaining right to left movement.

that you remember to shoot *characters and their movements from only one side of the scene axis.* Imagine instead that you take shots of a parade then run ahead so you can shoot it filing past a landmark. To get a better background, you cross the parade's path to shoot from the other side, something that feels quite unremarkable. However, when you try to intercut the R-L material with the L-R close-ups shot earlier, things go awry. The audience presumes there must be two factions marching toward each other. Cutting to the new camera position causes confusion because we see only the "before" and "after," and *not the transition where you crossed the scene axis.*

CHANGING SCREEN DIRECTION

You can in fact change the screen direction of a parade, chase, or character's path, but you *must show crossing the scene axis* on-screen. Two ways to do it are:

- By filming at an angle to a corner as in Figure 5-7. The marchers enter in the background going L-R, turn the corner in the foreground, and exit R-L. In essence they change screen direction during the shot. Subsequent shots must maintain their screen direction as R-L.
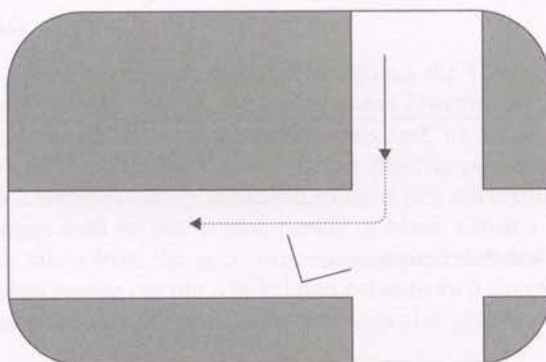

FIGURE 5-7 ───

By shooting at a corner, a parade or moving object can be made to change screen direction.
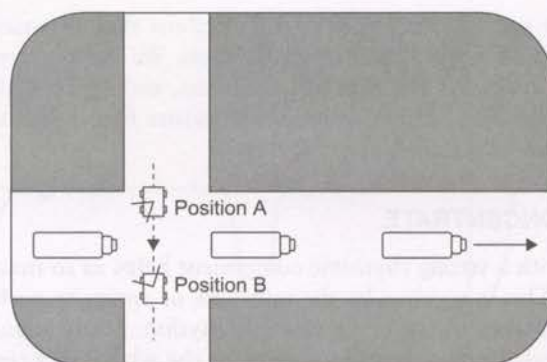
FIGURE 5-8

Dollying sideways between floats in a parade changes the parade's effective screen direction, but the dollying movement must be shown.

- By dollying *visibly* during a gap in the parade so that you cross the subject's axis of movement (Figure 5-8). The audience sees and understands the change in screen direction. In subsequent shots the action must maintain the new screen direction.

SHOT DURATION, RHYTHM, AND DEMAND ON THE AUDIENCE

GENERATING OPTIONS

Whenever you shoot a static shot, hold it longer than necessary, "just in case." When you pan over a landscape, add a longish "hold" at the beginning and end, so your editor can use the shot in multiple ways. Generating multiple options like this is standard practice in filmmaking.

If, however, you shoot a composite panning shot—a hold, a pan to a new composition, a second hold, then a pan on to a third composition—you will need a guiding principle to judge the "hold" between pans, and another to get the panning speed right. If possible, you shoot several takes incorporating different rhythms, so there's a version for different eventualities.

SHOT DURATION

As an editor, you hold a shot onscreen according to how long the viewer needs to absorb it. An analogy is to an advertisement on the side of a bus: if it's a simple image with four words of text the bus can drive past quickly and you'll get the ad. But if there are four lines of text and a complicated diagram, the bus must go slower, or the message is lost. We hold a shot on the screen long enough for the audience to absorb what matters, no longer. But shoot more than necessary, "just in case."

VISUAL RHYTHM

In a *montage* of shots, dissimilar shots edited together will be of different lengths yet feel similar in duration because the editor has timed them to require a similar level of scrutiny by the audience. When each is present for the right duration needed to "read" it, their *visual rhythm* feels similar even if their temporal spans vary.