C H A P T E R   1

INTRODUCTION TO FILM LANGUAGE AND GRAMMAR

THE FILM WORLD

The first dramatic films were rendered as if through a proscenium. The camera was placed in position, and all the action in the scene took place within that camera frame. The audience's view was much the same as a theater audience sitting front row center. The American director D. W. Griffith was one of the first to move the audience onto the stage with works like *For Love Of Gold* (1908), *The Lonely Villa* (1909), *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), and the highly influential, but strongly racist, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). "Look here!" he said to the audience with his camera—"Now here!" Griffith was not only moving the audience *into the scene*, he was then turning their seats this way and that—moving them into the face of a character, then in the next instant pulling them to the back of the "theater" to get a larger view of the character in relation to other characters or showing the character in relation to his or her surroundings.

The reason for putting the audience into the scene is that it makes the story more interesting—more dramatic. But by moving the audience into the action and focusing their attention first here, now there, the director can easily confuse and disorient the audience. The geography of a location or the wholeness of a character's body becomes *fragmented*. Whose hand does that belong to? Where is character A in spatial relationship to character B? Usually the director does not want to cause confusion. Rather, she wants the audience to feel comfortable in this film world—to be spatially (and temporally) oriented—so that the story can take place unimpeded. Usually the director wants the audience to know, "That hand belongs to Bob, and Bob is sitting to the right of Ellen" (even if we haven't seen Ellen for a while). There are times, however, when we will use this possibility for confusion and disorientation to our advantage to create surprise or suspense.

FILM LANGUAGE

When film became a series of connected *shots*, a language was born. Every shot became a complete sentence with at least one subject and one verb. (We are talking about an *edited shot* here, as opposed to a *camera setup*, which can be cut into a number of edited shots.) Like prose, a film sentence/shot can be simple, with only one subject and one verb, and perhaps an object; or it can be a compound sentence/shot, composed of two or more clauses. The type of sentence/shot we use will first depend on the *essence of the moment* that we wish to convey to the audience. Secondarily, that sentence/shot will be contained in a *design of the scene*, which can be an ingredient of an overall *style*. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), where there are but nine sentences, each

one 10 minutes long (the length of a film roll), each sentence contains many subjects and a host of verbs and objects.

Let us look at a simple sentence/shot: a wristwatch lying on a table, reading three o'clock. Without a context outside of this particular shot, the sentence reads, "A wristwatch lying on a table reads three o'clock." The significance of this film sentence, its specific meaning in the context of a story, will become clear only when it is embedded among other shots (sentences); for example, a character is someplace she is not supposed to be, and as she leaves we cut to the very same shot of the wristwatch on the table reading three o'clock. Now the shot—the sentence—is given a context and takes on a specific significance. Its meaning is clear. The character is leaving behind *evidence* (that could cause her trouble). The fact that it is three o'clock might very well have no significance at all.

The necessity of context in interpreting a particular shot applies to the camera angle also. *No camera angle—extreme low, extreme high, tilted to left or right, etc.—in and of itself contains any inherent dramatic, psychological, or atmospheric content.*

SHOTS

Professionals in the film industry don't usually refer to a shot as a sentence. But in learning any foreign language, we have to think in our native language first to clearly formulate what it is we want to say in the new language, and the same principle applies to learning to "talk" in film. It can be extremely helpful before you have developed a visual vocabulary to formulate the content of each shot into a linguistic analogue (the prose and syntax of your native language) to help you find the corresponding visual images. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that film, unlike the words of the screenplay, is rendered on the screen in a series of images that, when combined in a sequence, gives a meaning that goes beyond mere words. The late Stefan Sharff, a former colleague of mine at Columbia, in his book *The Elements of Cinema*, wrote:

> When a proper cinema "syntax" is used, the viewer is engaged in an active process of constantly "matching" chains of shots not merely by association or logical relationship but by an empathy peculiar to cinema. The blend so achieved spells cinema sense—a mixture of emotion and understanding, meditative or subliminal, engaging the viewer's ability to respond to a structured cinema "language." . . . A cinematic syntax yields meaning not only through the surface content of shots, but also through their connections and mutual relationships.

FILM GRAMMAR

Film language has only four basic grammatical rules, three of which are concerned with spatial orientation as a result of moving the audience into the action. The fourth also deals with space but for a different reason. All of these rules must be followed most of the time, but all can be broken for dramatic effect.

THE 180-DEGREE RULE

The 180-degree rule deals with any framed spatial (right-to-left or left-to-right) relationship between a character and another character or object. It is used to maintain consistent screen direction between the characters, or a character and an object, within the established space.

When a character is opposite another character or object, an imaginary line (*axis*) exists between that character and the other character or object. The issue is most acute in the sight lines between two characters who are looking at each other (Figure 1-1). As long as A and B are contained in the

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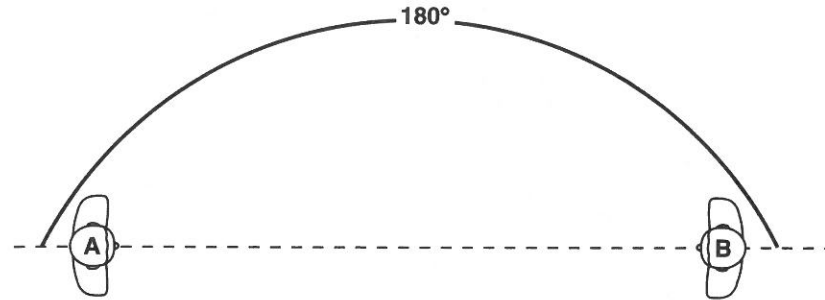o significance at all.
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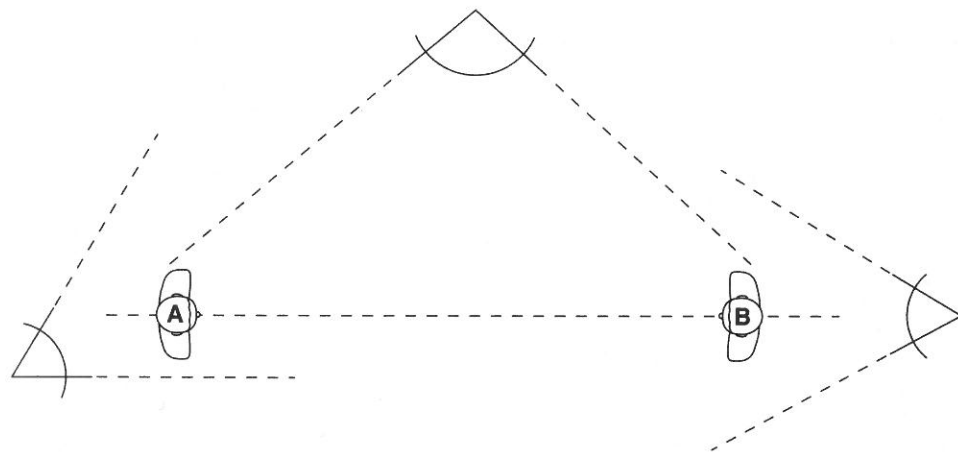hat, when combined
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FIGURE 1-1 ————————————————————————————————

Axis between two subjects.

FIGURE 1-2 ————————————————————————————————

A and B both contained in three shots from different angles.

same shot, there is no problem (Figure 1-2). (The axis exists even if the characters do not look at each other.)

Now let's place a camera between the two characters, facing toward A, who is looking, not at the camera, but at B, who is *camera right* (Figure 1-3). (Characters almost never look into the camera except in very special situations, such as an object of a point of view (POV) shot, a comic take, or a reflexive moment that recognizes the presence of the camera.)

Let's now turn the camera around toward B who will now be looking *camera left* (Figure 1-4).

If we were to shoot separate shots of A and B then cut them together so that one would fol-low the other, what we would see on the screen is the two subjects looking at each other. In other words, their sight lines would be correct, and the audience would understand the spatial relation-ship between the characters. What happens to the sight lines if we *jump the axis* during a scene (Figure 1-5)?

Still shooting in separation, we have moved the camera across the axis for shooting A while leaving the camera on the same side of the axis for B. Subject A will now be looking camera *left*. B will *also* be looking camera *left*. When the two shots are cut together, the result will be that the subjects/characters will be looking in the opposite directions, and the audience will become
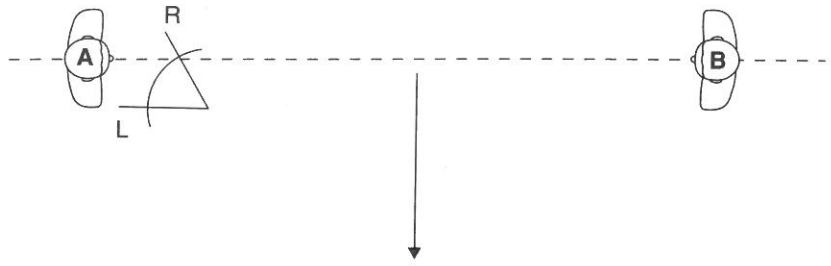
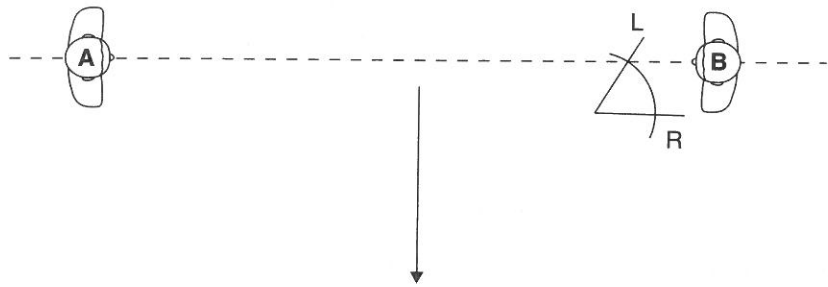FIGURE 1-3

A looking camera right at B.

FIGURE 1-4
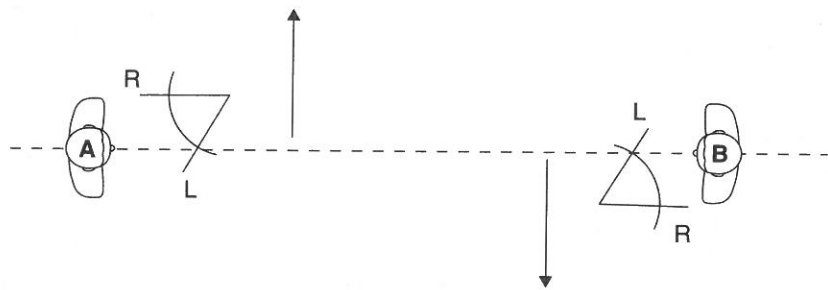
B looking camera left at A.

FIGURE 1-5

Jumping axis by moving the camera and shooting A across the 180-degree line.

confused as to spatial positioning between them, the dynamics of the dramatic moment thereby broken.

It is possible to *cross the axis* with impunity as long as we keep the audience constantly apprised of where the characters are in relation to each other. We could dolly across or around. Or we could cut to a *two-shot* from the opposite side of the axis. Other than the fact that character A will jump to the left side of the frame, whereas B will jump to the right side, the audience will still be correctly oriented (Figure 1-6). This "flip-flopping" of characters to opposite sides of the frame, at the right dramatic moment, can be another powerful dramatic tool.
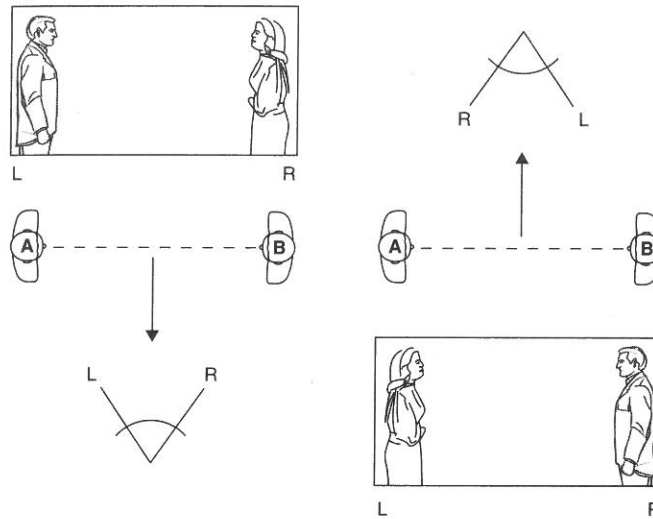
FIGURE 1-6

Jumping the axis with both subjects in the frame.

Having characters change sides within the frame is also a *staging* technique often used by directors, and it is one that is highly effective in punctuating a moment. This is made even more powerful if, say, the position of characters A and B within the frame is changed forcefully. A good example of this exists in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), the highly memorable scene in which Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) exclaims to the private detective, J. J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson), "She's my sister, she's my daughter!" At the start of this hysterical outburst, Dunaway is on the right side of the frame. Nicholson tries to calm her down. He fails until he slaps her hard, sending her reeling from screen right to screen left. This change in their positioning vis-à-vis the frame serves to end that dramatic "stanza" and announces the arrival of a new one. Another good example of flip-flopping of characters to the opposite side of the frame is in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorcese, 1976) as Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) makes her way to a taxi pursued by Travis (Robert De Niro) after a disastrous date at an X-rated movie. Keeping both in the frame, the camera crosses the 180-degree line four times, dramatically punctuating Betsy's exit.

Can we ever jump the axis between our characters while they are in separation? The 180-degree rule often terrifies the beginning director, and so much heed is paid to not breaking this rule that it rarely is. But we can break it—jump the axis between characters—with great dramatic effect *if we do it on an act of energy*: This act of energy can be either psychological or physical. We will see an example of this when we add the camera to a screenplay in Chapter 8.

THE 30-DEGREE RULE

If we are going from one shot of a character or object (Figure 1-7) to another shot of the same character or object without an intervening shot of something else, the camera angle should change by at least 30 degrees.

The effect of disobeying this rule is to call undue attention to the camera; it seems to leap through space. If the rule is obeyed, we do not notice this leap. But in some instances, disobedience can be dramatically energizing. In *The Birds* (1963), Hitchcock ignores the rule to "punch up" the discovery of the body of a man with a series of three shots from the same angle, each shot coming
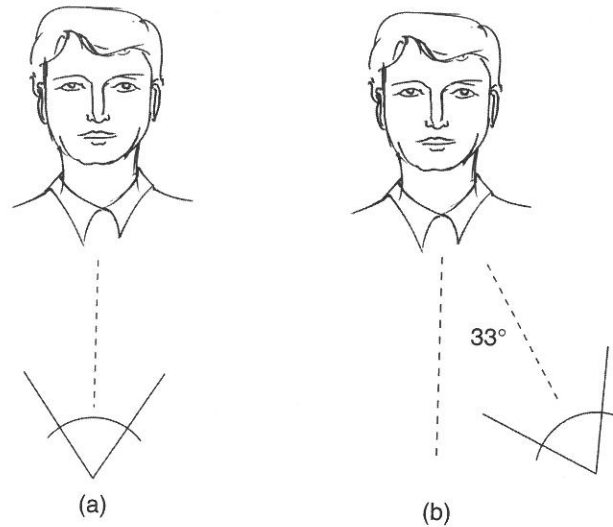
(a)   (b)

FIGURE 1-7

Initial camera angle on character A and camera angle changed by 30 degrees on same character B.

dramatically closer: medium to medium close-up to close-up. (Three is the magic number in this style of *elaboration*, as well as in other stylistic and dramaturgical aspects of film. Given any two types of patterns we anticipate the third, creating dramatic tension.)

Sometimes, because of the geography of the set or other limitations, we have to cut to the next shot from the same angle. We see it done successfully fairly frequently, but the reason it works is because of one of the following mitigating factors: the subject is in motion, the second shot includes a foreground object such as a lamp shade, or the change in image size from one shot to the next is substantial.

SCREEN DIRECTION

The sections that follow explore various aspects of screen direction.

LEFT TO RIGHT

If a character (or car, or anything else) exits a frame going from left to right (Figure 1-8), he should enter the next frame from the left if we intend to convey to the audience that the character is headed in the same direction.

If we disobey this simple rule and have our character or car exit frame right (Figure 1-9), then enter the second frame from the right, the character or car will seem to have made a U-turn.

This rule can be broken if the time period or distance (which can be synonymous) is protracted as with a covered wagon going from New York to California or an ambulance speeding to a hospital. In fact, it can help to elaborate the sense of distance traveled, or in the latter case to increase the dramatic tension through a sequence of shots that reverse the screen direction (right, left, right, left). Each succeeding shot, besides reversing the screen direction, should be varied as to angle and length of time on the screen. The last shot in the sequence should then pay heed to the grammatical rule. That is, if the covered wagon or ambulance exits the starting point going from left to right, it should enter the frame of its destination going from left to right.
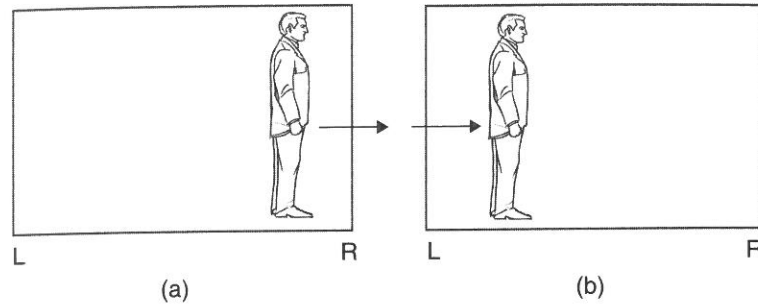
FIGURE 1-8

Character moving left to right and exiting frame right (a) and character entering frame left, moving left to right (b).
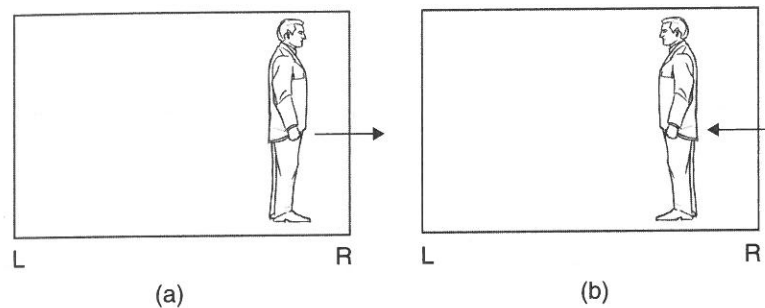

FIGURE 1-9

Character moving left to right and exiting frame right (a) and character entering frame right, moving right to left (b).

RIGHT TO LEFT AND UP

Psychologists have told us that those of us who grew up moving our eyes from left to right when we read find it is more "comfortable" for us when a character in a film moves from left to right. When they go from right to left, a tension is created. Maximum tension is created when the character moves right to left and up. I suspect Hitchcock was aware of this psychological effect on an audience when in the final bell tower scene in *Vertigo* he had Jimmy Stewart climb up the winding staircase right to left.

APPROACHING AND RECEDING

A character approaching the camera and exiting the frame camera right (Figure 1-10) should enter the following frame camera left.

FILM-TIME

Our stories *unfold* in time as well as space, and the ability to use both in service of our stories is of paramount importance. A simplistic view of the use of time in film—but one that contains much storytelling savvy—is that we shorten (compress) what is boring and lengthen (elaborate) what is interesting.
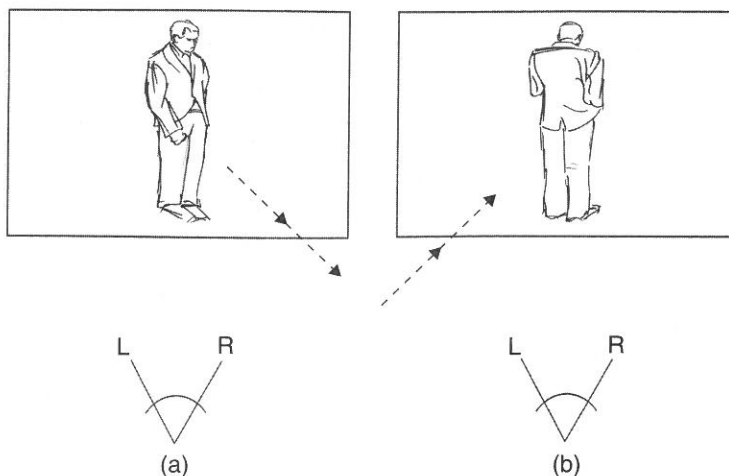
FIGURE 1-10

Character approaching camera and exiting frame camera right (a) and character entering frame camera left and receding from camera (b).

COMPRESSION

We are not talking here about the compression that takes place in the screenplay—a year, or even 10 years, played out in five minutes of film time (an absolutely essential component of nearly all screenplays). And we are not yet talking about transitions between scenes: the "what" that happens between the end of one scene and the beginning of another. What we are talking about here is the compression of time that takes place within a single scene.

In what we might call "ordinary compression," to distinguish it from an *ellipsis* (a cut that makes it obvious to the audience that a jump in time has occurred), we will often be dealing with compression that the audience will accept as real time. A more accurate appellation would be *film-time*. The following example will clarify this.

A MAN enters a large space that he must cross to get to his destination. We have determined that there is no dramatic reason to show every step he takes. In fact, it would be boring, so we compress the distance traveled. How can we accomplish this? Have the MAN enter the first shot and exit it, then enter a second shot already at his destination. This will give the semblance of real time to the audience. The jump across the space will have been made gracefully and will go unnoticed.

ELABORATION

Here we want to take a moment and make it larger, to stretch time. Large elaborations often occur at the end of films, as in, for example, the staircase scene at the end of Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), or Marlon Brando walking through the crowd of dockworkers at the end of *On the Waterfront* (Kazan, 1954). But elaboration occurs with regularity throughout a film. The two instances just mentioned rely on a *series of shots* to achieve this purpose, and that is most often the case. But elaboration can also be a single camera movement, such as the end of *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1987), where the camera moves into a "tight" close-up of the tortured face of Michael (Al Pacino). The movement gets us into Michael's head and allows us to be privy to his thoughts—his realization of what he has become.

Elaboration can also be used to *prepare* the audience for what will happen next, and, at the same time, create *suspense* about just what it will be. In Eric Rohmer's film *Rendezvous in Paris* (1997, French), the artist/protagonist in one of the three stories is seen walking back to his studio in a protracted series of shots. This *undue attention to the ordinary* sets up an expectation, hence suspense, in the audience. The payoff of this elaboration happens when the female antagonist enters the film by passing the artist going the other way. (This is a good example of suspense versus surprise. Suspense has a duration to it and is much more useful and prevalent in cinematic storytelling than is surprise, which comes out of nowhere and is over in an instant. Still, surprise has its undeniable place in cinematic storytelling, and many times a surprise is embedded in a suspense sequence. How many times have we seen a bird fly out unannounced or a cat hiss unexpectedly and jump toward the camera?)

Elaboration can also be used to elicit a mood, as in the comedy *Starting Over* (Alan J. Pakula, 1979). A long, slow tracking shot over the participants of a divorced men's workshop while they listen to an older member's grievances about growing old elaborates the depressive pall that is cast over the entire group.

FAMILIAR IMAGE

A familiar image can reverberate with the harmonics of a previous moment, making the present moment larger. Scharff, in *The Elements of Cinema*, explains:

> We know that cinema thrives on repetition and symmetries. The familiar image structure provides symmetry in the form of a recurrent, stable picture that "glues" together scattered imagery, especially in scenes that are fragmented into many shots or involve many participants. . . . Normally, the familiar image is "planted" somewhere in the beginning of a scene, then recurs several times in the middle, with resolution at the end.

Scharff mentions an image from *Lancelot du Lac*, Robert Bresson (1975, France):

> A solitary shot of a small gothic window flashed periodically on the screen means volumes, since the lonely queen lives behind it. All the emotions, struggles, drives, and fanaticisms of the knights, their whole philosophy of life, are tied to this little window.

A strong image need not appear more than once to become familiar, so that the next time we see it we immediately recognize it, as in, for example, the front entrance to the Nazi spy's mansion in *Notorious* (see Part Five, Chapter 15). When Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) arrives at the front door for the first time, the job of setting up the geography goes unnoticed by the audience because it is integrated with the action of the moment, and we are as curious about the house as Alicia is. But if we had not been privy to the imposing grandeur of the front of the house before the climactic ending of the film, which takes place within a similar framing, we may well have been thinking to ourselves at the moment when the final dramatic resolution is occurring, "Wow, what a big door that is." In addition, Hitchcock uses the same prolonged tracking shot, but in reverse, to enter the mansion and then to exit it—a familiar note that reverberates within the audience's psyche, bringing them an aesthetic pleasure in the director's orchestration of such symmetry.

Familiar images can be incorporated with familiar staging to orient the audience to geography that is less imposing, less memorable—say, an ordinary living room that is going to be used in more than one scene. To orient the audience, it is desirable to decide on an angle that says "this is the same room." An angle that has the characters approach a couch from the same screen direction can give the audience all the information they need. On the other hand, an angle that has the characters approaching the couch from the opposite screen direction than it was approached in a previous scene might confuse the audience to the point that it intrudes on the dramatic moment.

A strong image exiting a frame can make the audience anticipate the return of that image, and this phenomenon can be used to create tension—even if this expectation in the audience is on the subconscious level. Think of the yellow barrel being pulled out of the frame in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) after the first harpoon has been planted in the shark. Later, when that familiar frame is repeated, we find ourselves expecting the barrel to return into the frame—and to our great satisfaction and pleasure, it does.

There is yet another value to the familiar image: *dramatic economy*, a key ingredient of dramaturgy from its inception, starting with Aristotle's *unity of action*. The concept of economy is mostly the purview of the screenwriter, but it also relates to staging, camera, props, and so on. In short, every time a director considers adding a new element to do a narrative, dramatic, or even atmospheric job, she should first ask this question: "Can I do it with what I've already got?"