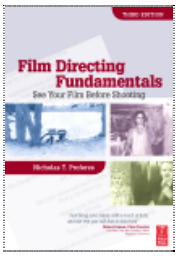
The 180-degree rule

Adapted from: Film Directing Fundamentals by Nicholas Proferes



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

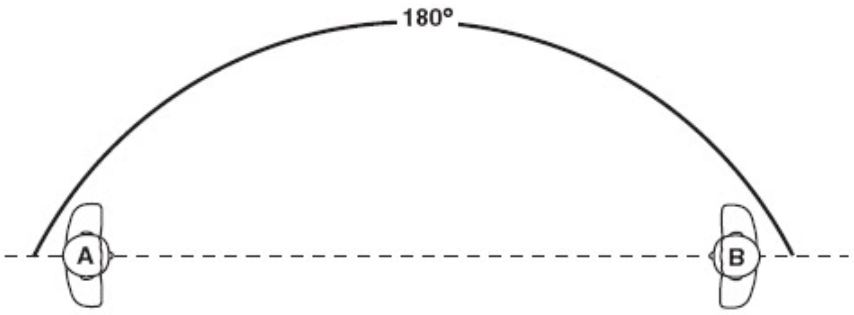


FIGURE 1-1

Axis between two subjects.

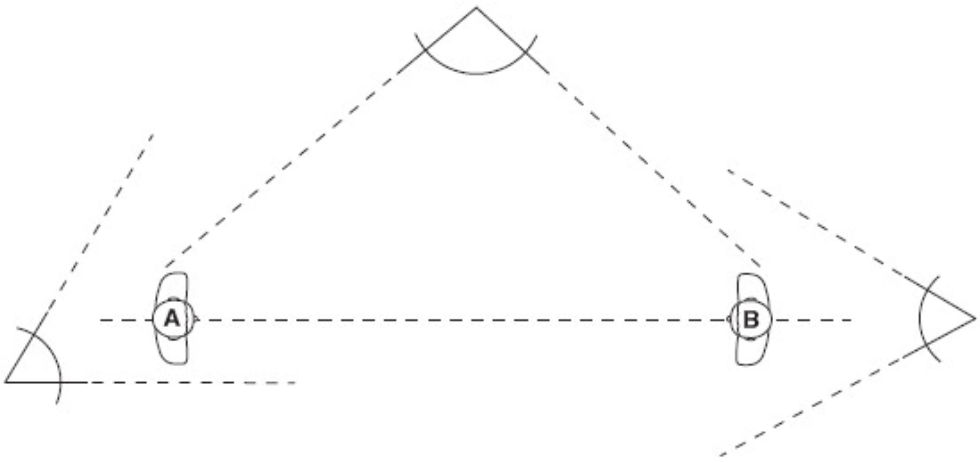


FIGURE 1-2

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

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.)

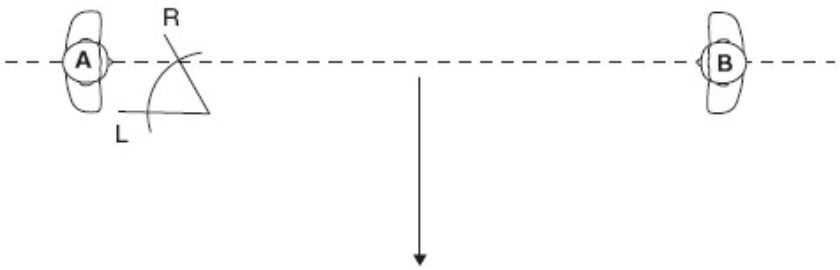


FIGURE 1-3

A looking camera right at B.

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

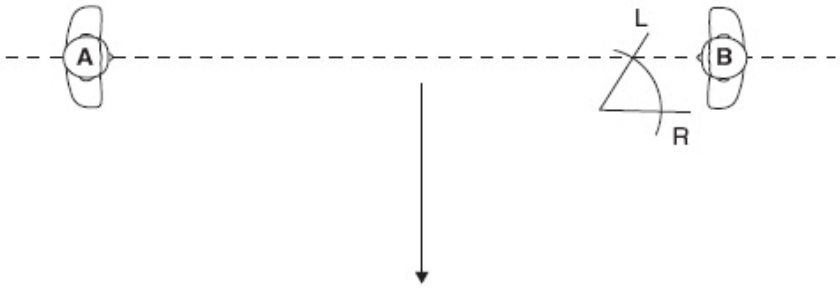


FIGURE 1-4

B looking camera left at A.

If we were to shoot separate shots of A and B then cut them together so that one would follow 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 relationship between the characters. What happens to the sight lines if we jump the axis during a scene (Figure 1-5)?

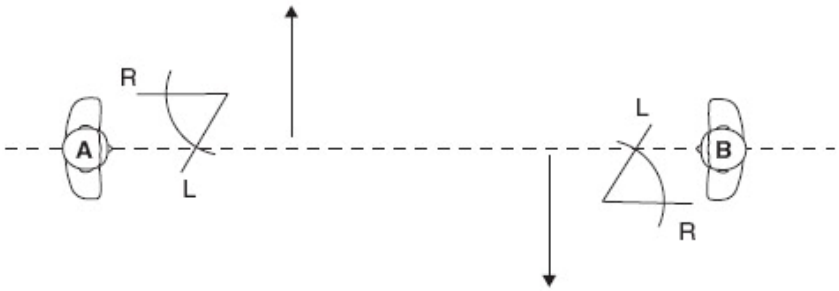


FIGURE 1-5

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

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 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.

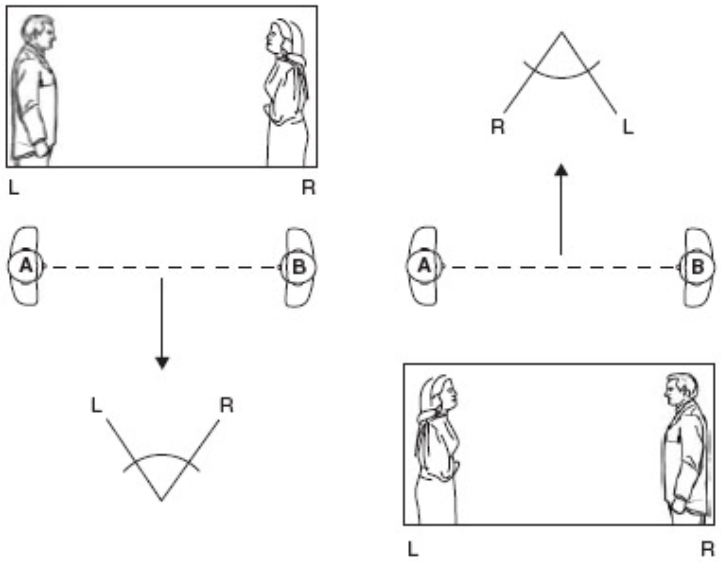


FIGURE 1-6

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.