
ANIMATION

"The Phrasing of Action and Dialogue" in an animated film By Eric Larson

Acting is a recreation of emotions, and animation is acting!

"We must recognize both the validity of tradition and the necessity of exploration and discovery. We need a knowledge of the past and a basic and realistic understanding of the present, so that our creative energies can be fully geared towards our desired goals."

Why this discussion?

To focus on our: **Responsibilities**

Talents

Perspective

Discipline

Where are we at this time and place? Our responsibility is to a team effort but also to ourselves. If we do not hold ourselves accountable for doing our very best, our contribution to the team effort becomes nil.

Our talents have to be nourished every day through observation, analysis, discussion, application and doing.

The Handout

Our perspective has to be long ranged, having the ability to adjust, to view things in their true relationship, to know that creative activities are always demanding and that one accomplishment calls for the pursuit of another.

Discipline is a basic factor in our work. Are we giving our best in thought and execution of our assignments? Are we respectful of the contributions of others? Are we freely exchanging ideas and making use of them when they fit?

As animators (the actors), our closest contacts and relationships on a picture may well be with the Directors. A mutual respect and understanding is imperative.

The Director has the responsibility to inspire and enthuse the animators and all others on the picture, regardless of position or function.

The animator has the same responsibility. He should inspire the Director and he should never leave the Director's room without a thorough understanding of the scene or series of scenes he's picking up -- the business, the mood, the dialogue, the staging. Everything that will make the scenes come to life.

In the first handout from the Director, an animator has his first in-depth contact with the picture. Thoughts relating to the handout session might include:

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- 1 What's the story point in the scene and how does this scene relate to those ahead and to follow?
 - 2 What's the situation and mood of the character or characters?
 - 3 How will "the business" best be acted out and staged?
 - 4 Is there enough or too much footage?
 - 5 Be sure you, as the animator, understand the character; you'll have to be it when you get to working it all out on the drawing board.
 - 6 Have the Director act out the action and attitudes as he sees them. Offer suggestions.
 - 7 Do some acting yourself. Get some criticism.
 - 8 How will the action best phrase to get the desired results?
 - 9 Mood-wise, action-wise, attitude-wise, does the dialogue inspire? Does it say it like it should be said?
 - 10 Don't do a thing without knowing why.
 - 11 Don't argue! Discuss constructively.
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ACTION PHRASING

Getting it on the screen: That's your challenge, and to be sincere it has to be a part of you. Our drawing: What is a good drawing? A good drawing must be alive, simple as possible -- it must have rhythm, movement, weight, balance and attitude.

The poses in the scene should make positive statements, put over the story point and mood, have a silhouette quality as much as possible, be on character and have correct volume, proportions, looks, and shape. What's the point in having our character go through all that great action looking like something else? Consider twists through the body, chest to pelvic area, roll and angle of head, angle of shoulders.

Does the drawing have direction?

Is it easily understood?

Does it have appeal?

Our character Its physical makeup and emotions. These have a positive bearing on how it moves. Is he (or it) fat, skinny, short, tall, sloppy, trim, etc.? Is he (or it) excited, dejected, determined, inquisitive, surprised, scheming, thoughtful, haughty, flirtatious or what? Would all: characters, regardless of physical makeup, react alike in given moods and emotions? No! The physical makeup of the character and his emotions have everything to do with the way he moves and acts. They dictate.

(Consider: Chaplin's Little Tramp, Keaton's poker face and impulsive moods, Lou Costello's frustration, Harpo Marx the busybody.)

Action: What is it? Webster says: "The bringing about of an alteration by force." Is it "The manner or method of performance"?

Don Graham wrote: "Animation is unique in the story of action in that characters, the actors, are drawn. Because they are drawn, they are not earthbound like (merely) human performers--they are free!"

Ham Luske: "We must make our action stronger than it would be in real life -- or we are not taking advantage of our medium. Remember, in your work, the thought comes first--think, see and feel before you begin to draw. Keep your action simple and clear-cut. Keep every movement and expression visible to your audience. Never make a movement or gesture without a reason. Analyze every movement and gesture until you are satisfied that it is the most truthful, effective and direct way to present your character. Make only one gesture or movement at a time. Know that you have created a clear-cut characterization and that the action has begun definitely, remained clear through-out and come to a conclusion. Is the character interesting, honest, alive? Do you become emotionally involved with it? Are the gestures and movements sincere, clear, convincing and properly motivated? Does the action help delineate the character? Is the action realistic and prolonged sufficiently and exaggerated enough to appeal and communicate with the audience? Does your character have the charisma you desire! Pantomime is humor, love, drama, hate. It's wistful,arrogant, mischievous, spunky. It's animation."

Don Graham said: "The essentials which made the drawing come to life, the gesture, the staging, the expression, the inner vitality, have all been established by the animator. Only through truly great draftsmanship in the sense; not rendering, but of creation, can the animated drawing be significant. This is the new drawing of our time."

Thought Process

Consider thought processes: Mood, being a state of mind, is the force which dictates body attitude, action and expression. It dictates behavior.

Examples:

- 1 Fear-Action and decisions. Erratic, undisciplined
- 2 Frenzied, staccato.
- 3 Composed-Action warm, graceful, considerate.
- 4 Depressed-Action confined, minimal.

Action will be prompted by the character's emotions and his physical capabilities.

Would a frightened man with a bad leg run like the frightened man whose legs were whole?

Would the frightened fat man run like the frightened thin man?

Would the frightened, bewildered animal turn directly to a haven or would the action have added tension and excitement if some feeling of indecision were shown?

Good phrasing punctuates an action -- it makes it readable. It's to action what the comma, the exclamation point, and the period are to writing.

The mood and the nature of the action must be carefully analyzed. How would a certain personality with a given physical makeup best do it to create the maximum entertainment?

Once determined, keep the action simple, crisp and to the point. We now have something to say, so let's say it! Embellishments (will) or (may) be added later. But the cart does not come before the horse. We know that the considered spacing of the drawings between our final key poses will "carry" the action and show off our phrasing, mood and attitudes and hopefully bring the desired life and believability to our character(s) on the screen.

But first, we must know our character, his physical and emotional makeup and the acting it is to do on the screen, We must know what we want to say and how we're going to say it, then work out the needs in the scene by thumbnailing the action and the staging. Remember, the animator has control of that camera; make it work for you to get dramatic results.

The business in our scenes must be basically sincere then caricatured to get the crisp, alive quality we want, Walt said: "Our story of the actual is not so that we may be able to accomplish the actual, but so that we may have a basis upon which to go into the fantastic, the unreal, the imaginative, and yet to let it have a foundation of fact in order that it may more easily possess sincerity and contact with the public. By contact we mean that there must be a familiar, subconscious association; somewhere or at some time, the audience has felt, or met with, or seen or dreamt, the situation pictured."

In the phrasing of action, staging (cosmopolitan) is vital! It's the challenge of clearly presenting the action on screen to the viewer, in a positive, interesting and artistic way. Constantly, we should give thought to the speed of our film through the projector and remind ourselves of the need and value of good staging. (A second is of essence) "Get it all out in the open," someone said. Everything should be clearly defined.

Staging & Anticipation

In staging, let's make full use of the screen. Many actions justify it and make it exciting. (As walking, running, rolling, etc.) If we plan for our character to gain and lose in the field we will get a fluid feeling which will add interest and excitement to the action. (The character gains on the camera, the camera may then catch up and pass him.)

Anticipation is a vital part of good phrasing. It sets the action. (Go one way before you go another.) Anticipation, and very few actions can succeed without it, is like building up a head of steam. It does two things: it tells the viewer something is going to happen and it gathers up the needed energy to make it happen.

Anticipation is:

- 1 The cocking of your arms to get power enough to give your adversary a sock in the face.
- 2 It's the wind-up of a pitcher before he speeds the ball toward the batter.
- 3 It's the subtle lift of the hand as one readies to affectionately pat a youngster on the head.
- 4 It's the little lift of the guy up onto his toes as he goes into his walk.
- 5 It's the "introduction" to almost all we do.

It's the action that says: "I'm about to perform," There's a joy and a sensation to be experienced as we watch something in action -- the exotic and graceful movements to be found in animals and humans, the personality that the characters exhibit when in action (joy, depression, arrogance, anger etc-), you name it. There's positive personality in action. Let's be good students; we never know when or where we will see something to inspire our animation. Observe and analyze--two key points in good animation.

In dialogue phrasing, the mood, attitude, and movement of the "body" are the keys to convincing delivery and sync of your dialogue lines. If the body isn't saying it, it just isn't said!(If our Character is in a medium or C.U. shot, we should know what the off-stage body attitude is so that the action on stage will be sincere.) And to be sincere it has to be a part of you! How does that line of dialogue you're concerned with break down for you? Does the line feel right? How would the character's mood or situation dictate the phrasing of the action to get the sync and sincerity you want? Your character might say: "Oh! Get out of here." How would you phrase the action?

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- 1 If he were angry?
 - 2 If he were emotionally hurt?
 - 3 If he were annoyed?
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Consider: Animation, action-wise, is a pantomime medium, and pantomime may be our greatest challenge - every thought, attitude, expression, action, reaction, etc., has to be told in drawings expressing charm and appeal, and sans dialogue.

For us, there are two basic type of action:

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- 1 **Primary action**--motivated by a thought process on the part of the character
 - 2 **Secondary action**--the result of a primary action. It's the swirling of the dress on a dancer - the looseness (flutter) of the coat tails on a running character, it's anything reacting to whatever the primary action is doing.
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How do we create the illusion of action? By the change of shapes (squash and stretch - but keep the volume), the reversal in drawings, the clarity of poses, positive arcs, staging. In considering our approach to action, here are some thoughts from "The Stage and The School" by Katherine Ommanney and Harry Schanker. (They have been revised some to better apply to animation.)

About the character we are to animate:

- 1 What is his age?
- 2 What are his physical traits?
- 3 What makes him a distinctive individual?

Only when you can see him clearly in your mind, will you be able to make him alive.

Be sure you're making every use of the situation before as well as when your character is saying his line.

Question: Would little Thumper's response to his mother's question, "What did your father tell you this morning?" have been just as significant if he had not had an attitude (personality) buildup before delivering his lines? Would his audience appeal have been just as strong, if he had just blurted out his lines without an attitude buildup? Action on the mouth, eyes, brows, etc., are embellishments in our dialogue -- they add to the charm and sincerity of it and our characters. But we must have a good framework before we add the trim.

Just try saying something in which you want a given emotional impact, strong or quiet, and see if you can do it without body involvement and still have a believable feeling. Our dialogue will always fall into body and word phrasing, even if we just say the word: "No!" We search for those phrase identifications. Act it out and ask yourself, "If my character on the screen were in silhouette, would it still have a good dialogue sync"

That's a big step in the right direction.

Eric Larson