
Entertainment VI

“Movement, Rhythm, and Timing for Animation” by Eric Larson

Good pantomimists have always insisted that action should be simple and direct - it should not be overdone. This thought was given emphasis by Ham Luske and others in the mid-thirties when the character and meaning of Disney animation was beginning to find its place in the field of entertainment.

How often do we give thought to the inward sensation we experience as we view something in motion be it human, bird or animal — be it trees or grasses pushed by the wind - or water cascading down a canyon wall or ominous cloud formations gathering in a threatening storm pattern? Wherever we look there's something in motion and most of it is exciting. Why then shouldn't the movement and rhythm we put into our scenes, regardless of nature or content, be a satisfying experience for our audience?

In our action the big moves may move us from place to place, suggesting the spirit and emotion in our character, but the smaller moves, the embellishments within the big moves, magnify the attitude and emotion and add dimension and sincerity, keeping our action from being Just ordinary or passable.

Do you remember seeing a frolicking colt, running pell-mell across an open field, suddenly jumping into the air, wildly tossing his head side to side, giving an exuberant kick with his back legs, landing and then right back into full stride, never missing a step? Or a baby crawling hurriedly across the floor, all 'fours' working feverishly, his little rump and shoulders rolling from side to side, his whole body alive in great anticipation of "getting there"?

These actions are not just ordinary or passable. The big movements in the run of the colt and the baby's crawling, provide the excitement or "being". The little happenings within the big moves add strength and emotion - they pull the audience into the scene.

Our inward feelings are often expressed in minimal moves

— little things like the downward roll of the head in disappointment or sadness — the sharp lift of it in arrogance or contempt — the roll to the side that questions or wonders — the hips and shoulders which move and roll forward and back to help arms and legs function properly and with rhythm. All are relatively limited moves, but are a vital part of bigger body moves. We cannot successfully consider the most simple or the most complex moves without a thorough analysis of the workings of every part of the body, one with or counter to another, and then making good use of them in our action.

Even in the simplest of walks, perhaps a cycle, we can present an interesting action if we accept and use little basic "things" that really happen in a walk, "things" like the normal move of the body forward and backward giving it the needed balance, the logical involvement of the shoulders and hips as the arms swing forward and back and the legs lift and kick out into the next step and the reaction of the head to the over-all body movement. But we should remember that all the movement in the world will not pay off for us if we lose its rhythm and flow through bad timing and poorly planned patterns of action and attitudes that are rigid and uninteresting.

RHYTHM:

Of rhythm and its meaning, Walt said: (Memo to Don Graham).

“I think a good study of music would be indispensable to the animator - a study of rhythm — the various rhythms that enter into our lives every day — how rhythmical the body really is and how well balanced the body really is. There are things in life that we do to rhythm that come natural to us. Notice how rhythmic an action like pounding with a hammer is. There’s a reason for that. You must have rhythm or you can’t carry out the action completely. Also sawing a board see how necessary it is to have a good rhythm for that. Also walking — if you walked without rhythm. where would you get? You’d have to be thinking all the time what to do next. You’d have to set your mind to walking rhythmically instead of doing it naturally.”

TIMING:

When Walt speaks of rhythm in simple actions like the hammering of a nail and the sawing of a board, he’s talking about the timing and phrasing, the change of pace, so necessary in every action we do, to make that action crisp, alive and exciting.

Timing is, in theory, a very simple little trick that, skillfully done, creates rhythm, pacing and vitality in our animation. We crowd drawings close together to create and define mood and attitude and we space them apart to give emphasis. How we space and use all those drawings, determines the life and tempo in our scenes.

We must understand the value of a “second of time” (24 frames of film) upon that movie screen. We must know just how much “time” (seconds or parts of) it might take for us to make our story message known to our audience. We must capably break our action down into “seconds” and “frames” — one second being 24 frames — one-half second being 12 frames — one third second being 8 frames, etc, We must mentally calculate all this. We have to feel and know the value and relationship of frames and seconds and drawings in order to express ourselves fully.

It’s interesting to note that when a beat rhythm is broken by a mis-move or an illogical interruption, it may take a number of beats to get back into it. In the course of doing so, even the simplest action could go awry.

As is always desired in our action, the path and design of the hammering and sawing actions were positive. In each, the anticipation would be in a slight, upward arc; the hammering an over arc — the sawing an under arc. The action down into the hit or sawing would be in the same arc, moving in the opposite direction. The force or power in the overall move is gotten through the reversal of movement on the same line of action. If we get Out of that “line of action” going either way, the strength and rhythm of the action will be off balance.

The reversal of direction on a given line has power.

We were illustrating this years ago when we used to say: “Go one way before you go another” when discussing anticipation. With this in mind let's consider a brutal example. If we're going to punch someone in the nose, we best draw our fist straight back on a direct line to his face in anticipation and then come forward at the poor guy with all our might, moving fast on that same straight line and into the hit. That's a very visual force.

The “flow” of the action line is all important.

We must always have a reason for it. The straight line often suggests strength. The undulating line, often more interesting, gives a poetic feeling and movement to the action. Even in a simple run we may add interest if we gradually lean our character into a forward attitude, then pull back into a more erect position for his “second wind” and then faster into a more determined lean forward, never breaking stride, but suggesting an increased emotional feeling within our character. With the changing body attitudes and our timing in and out of them, we get an interesting pacing but we do not vary or change the beat or tempo of the run. In our pattern of action we strive to avoid rigidity. “Stiff as a board” has nothing in common with animation, unless used to point up a given gag or story point.

The rhythm and timing of animation is like a good musical score — it builds to crescendos and drops into quiet — it surges and it slows — it lifts and it falls. An audience needs that change. It must have periods of excitement and periods of rest. Our action must have variety and vitality in timing lest it becomes monotonous and irritating. Action, like emotion, needs change to get and keep the viewer's interest. It has to be alive. We might say it has to be moody, impulsive, sprinkled with surprises. It has to have zest, humor, drama and meaning. How? Through expressive drawings, movement patterns and our timing and acting skills!

Think back, if you will, on the scenes of Medusa in her boutique shop, on the phone with the bungling Snoops on the other end of the line. What an exercise in character analysis, thought processes, action patterns and timing. All so crisp, sensitive, entertaining and alive, running the gamut of emotions.

Consider the “Nutcracker Suite” in FANTASIA — A beautiful, exciting experience in entertainment with the pictorial thrust being design, color and movement. The Snow Fairies and the Mushroom dances are outstanding examples of delightful movement patterns and timing.

“Timing” is visual and emotional. The Raindrop sequence in BAMBI is a charming illustration of a storm in the forest from its beginning to its end, made alive by the reactions of the forest creatures. and nature's own moods, sounds and beauty.

And there's the extravagant comedy, so beautifully timed, in the doings of the Bear and King Louie in JUNGLE BOOK; The appeal of Lady and the Tramp having dinner at Tony's; The fun—filled meeting of Jose, Donald and Panchito in THREE CABALLEROS. All are timing masterpieces - well worth our study.

As Disney does it, the animated film is an art form that entertains and inspires people, young and old everywhere - generation after generation. And we are all a part of it.

ANTICIPATION:

Anticipation is a vital part of timing. It tells an audience that something is about to happen. It adds definition and life to an action. It sets up the rhythm.

Let's think on this for a moment. Do we, or do we not, anticipate the many actions we might go through in our daily routines? Do we get directly up out of a chair? Do we move directly into a walk from a still position? Do we pick an object up off the table without an anticipation of some kind? Having a ball in our hand, will we start bouncing it without first anticipating the action?

Because an anticipation to an action is so normal, we're often apt to overlook our doing it. Of course, we may each anticipate a given action just a little differently. Let's say we're sitting in a chair and something startles us. We might excitedly grab the arms of the chair — lift our feet — plant them on the floor — push our body forward directly over our feet for balance and move forward and upward into a standing position. That suggests a lot of anticipation before we actually get to our feet, doesn't it? But the situation might justify it. Normally, just to get up from a chair, we wouldn't go through such a “wind-up” anticipation. We would probably just lean forward, getting our body bent over our legs and then, with hands on the chair arms, push ourselves forward and up into a standing position, ready to walk away.

Sometime try kicking an object like a soccer ball or a tin can without anticipating the action. It will feel and look clumsy and awkward and the total distance the ball or can might travel will be less because the body and the kicking foot would not have had the “wind-up” or built-in rhythm an anticipation would supply.

Starting from a still position, try moving directly into the first step of a walk. The move will not feel right because we have not prepared for the lift and reach of the leg which is to start the action. We need that anticipation; that something that automatically says: “Let's go.”

A walk anticipation may be no more than a body lift and that just naturally helps get the starting foot off the ground. It's all done as habit. Too, the anticipation may be just a body twist within a short backward move. Or it might be a big, show-off thing in the form of a body bowing, pushing the fanny back for balance and then moving forward, “pushing” the body into an up position with the stepping foot lifting and reaching out into the first step - and the walk is on its way. If the walk is to be one of great spirit, the “bowing” anticipation might be embellished (and made more of) by several little quick steps backward as the “bowing” is taking place. Really, there is as much variety in anticipation as our imaginations will allow.

The nature and ways of anticipation go on and on, and regardless of how or why, it's a part of everything we do, and must be a part of all we animate.

The character on our drawing board cannot get by without anticipation anymore than we, ourselves, can. His will be caricatured and more visual and more fun — but anticipation must be a part of him just as it is a part — a natural part — of us.

Eric Larson