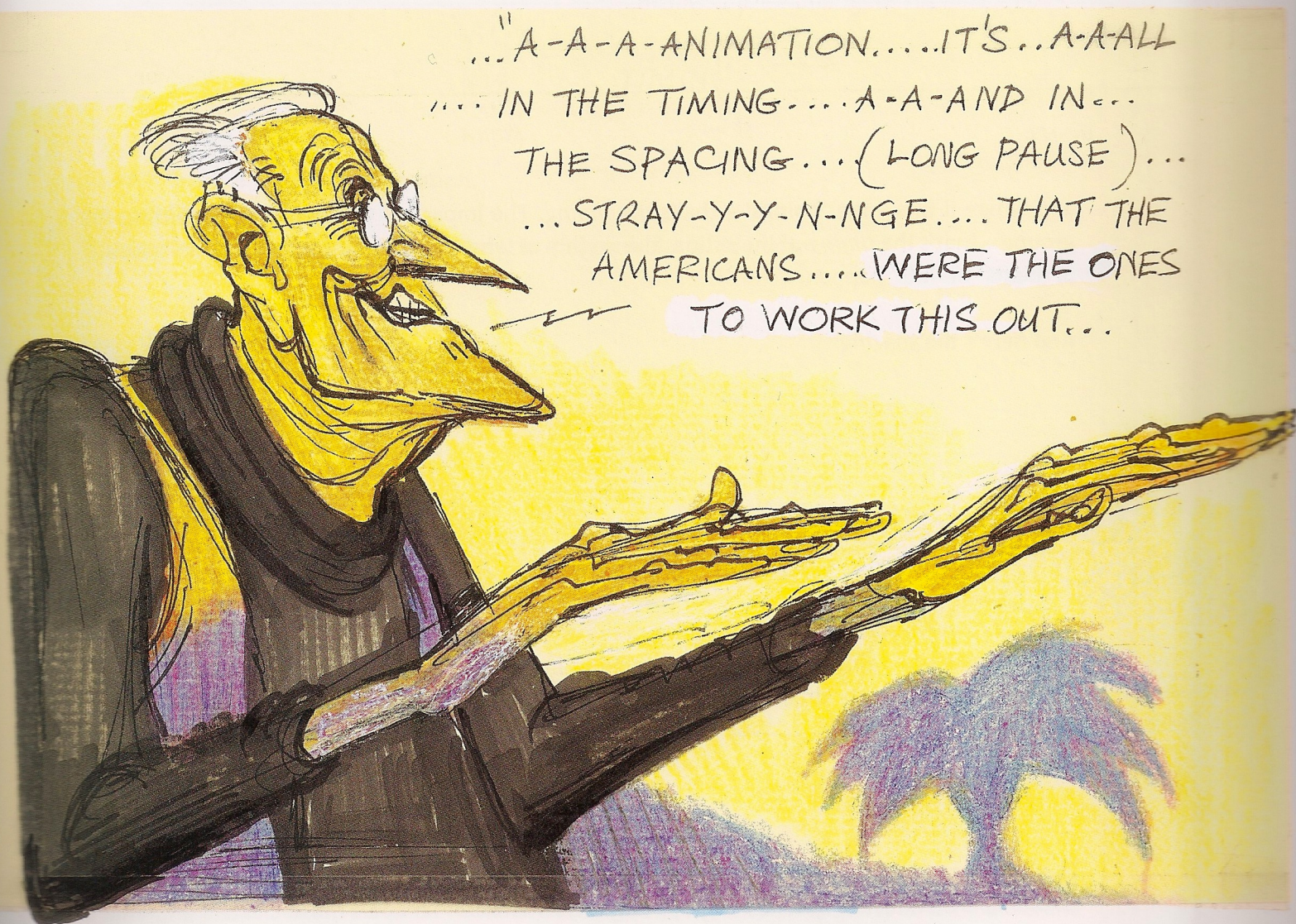


IT'S ALL IN THE TIMING AND THE SPACING

I met Grim Natwick (born Myron Nordveig) in a Hollywood basement when he was in his eighties. Grim was the oldest of the great animators, being already in his forties when he animated eighty-three scenes of Snow White in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Previously, he'd designed Betty Boop for Max Fleischer, for which he received nothing and was furious about it 'til the day he died, aged 100.

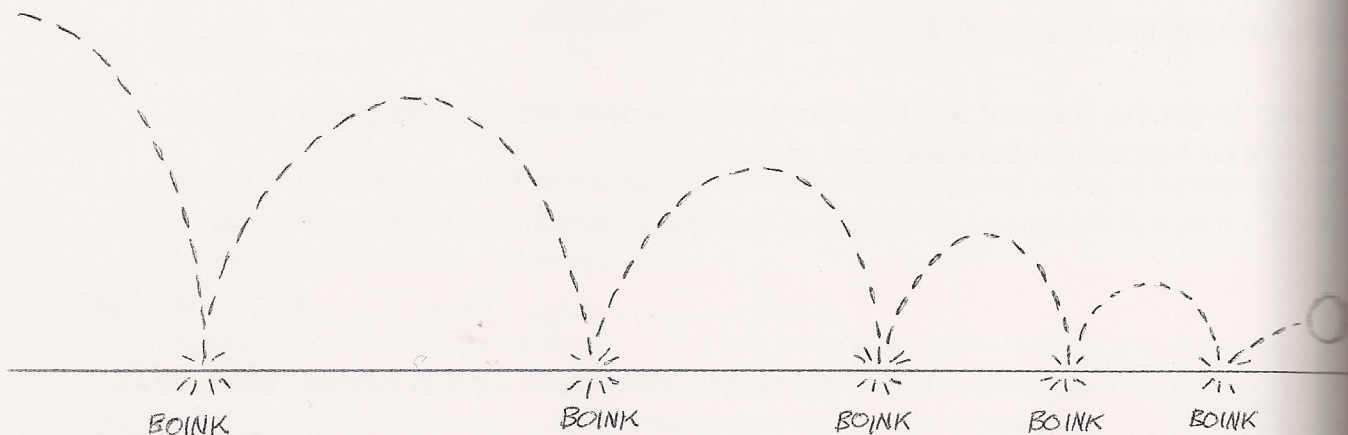
I'll never forget the image of this big Norwegian American sitting in the golden twilight, extending his long arms and spatula hands saying . . .



The bouncing ball says it all.

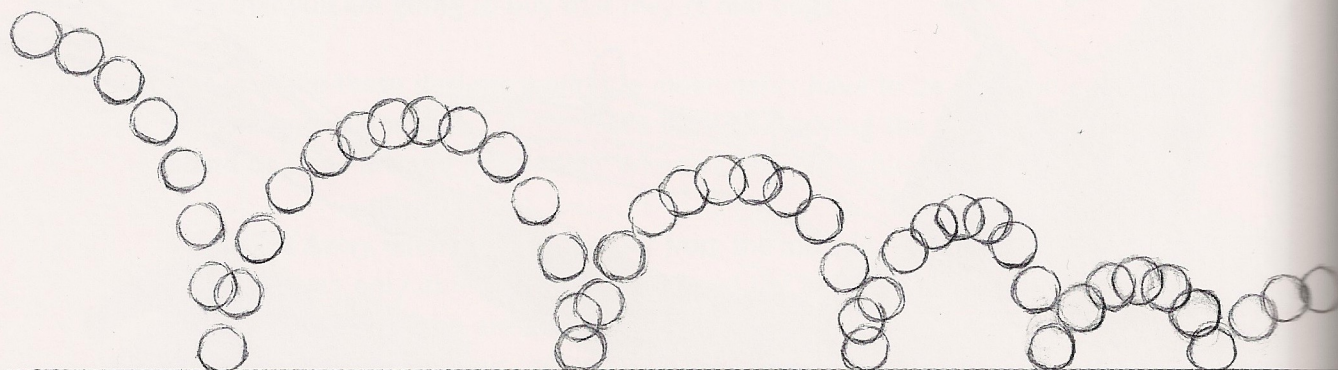
The old bouncing-ball example is often used because it shows so many different aspects of animation.

A ball bounces along,



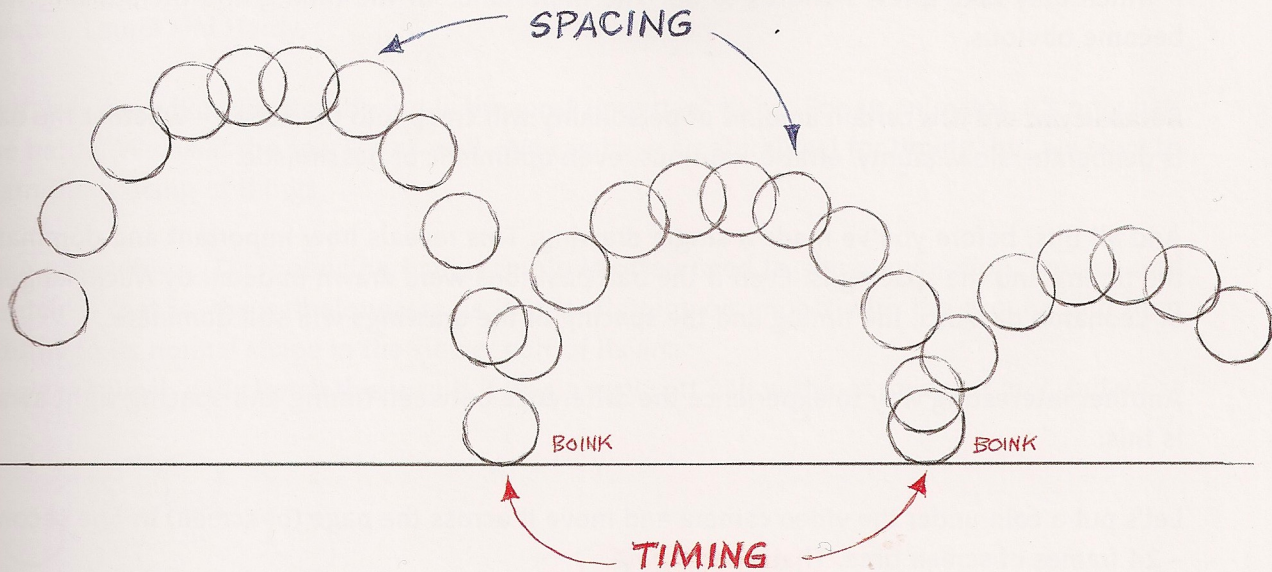
and where it hits – the 'boinks' – that's the *timing*. The impacts – where the ball is hitting the ground – that's the *timing* of the action, the rhythm of where things happen, where the 'accents' or 'beats' or 'hits' happen.

And here's the *spacing*.



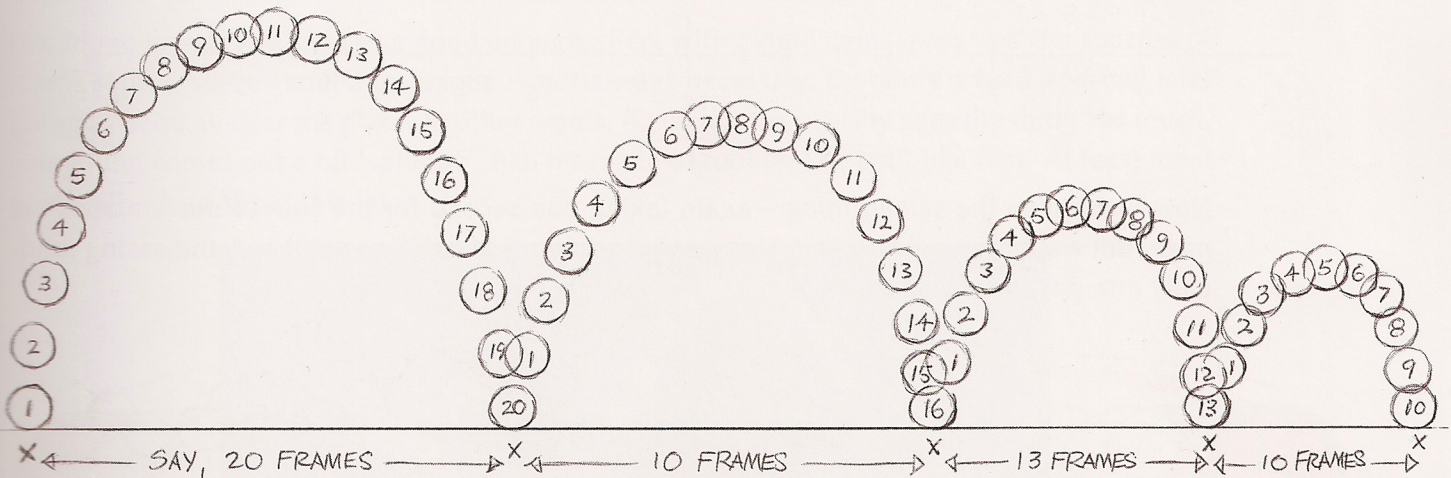
The ball overlaps itself when it's at the slow part of its arc, but when it drops fast, it's spaced further apart. That's the *spacing*. The spacing is how close or far apart those clusters are. That's it. It's simple, but it's important. The spacing is the tricky part. Good animation spacing is a rare commodity.

So we have:



The two basic elements of animation.

To experience this, take a coin and film it in stages under a video camera.



First plot out the *timing* – where you want the ball to hit the ground. Then push the coin around – taking a picture at each frame – and see what looks right or wrong. Try it with different timings and spacing. You're already animating. You're already dealing with the important fundamentals and you haven't even made a single drawing. You're doing pure animation without any drawings.

Hidden in this simple test is the weight of the ball – how it feels, light or heavy; what it's made of. Is it large or small, moving fast or slow? This will all emerge if you do several tests – which only take a few minutes to do. The importance of the timing and the spacing will become obvious.

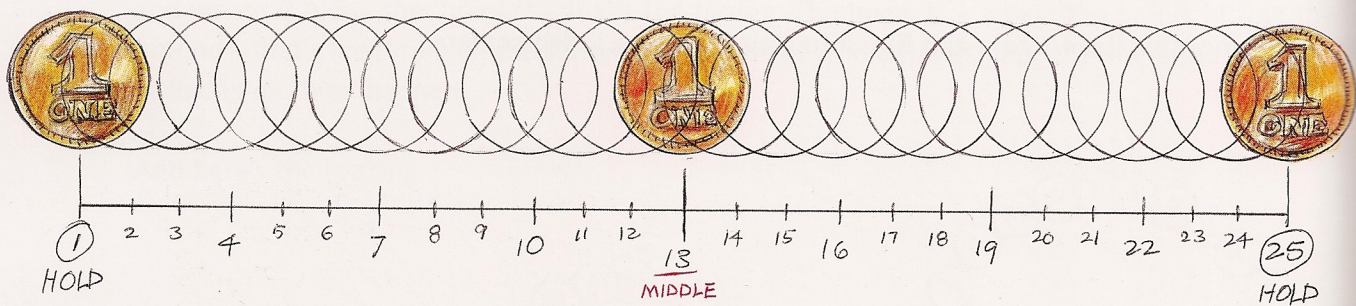
Because *you* did it, a certain amount of personality will creep into the action – whether the ball is deliberate, slow, jaunty, erratic, cautious, even optimistic or pessimistic.

And all this, before you've made a single drawing. This reveals how important and dominant the timing and the spacing is. Even if the ball positions were drawn in detail by Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci, the timing and the spacing of the drawings will still dominate.

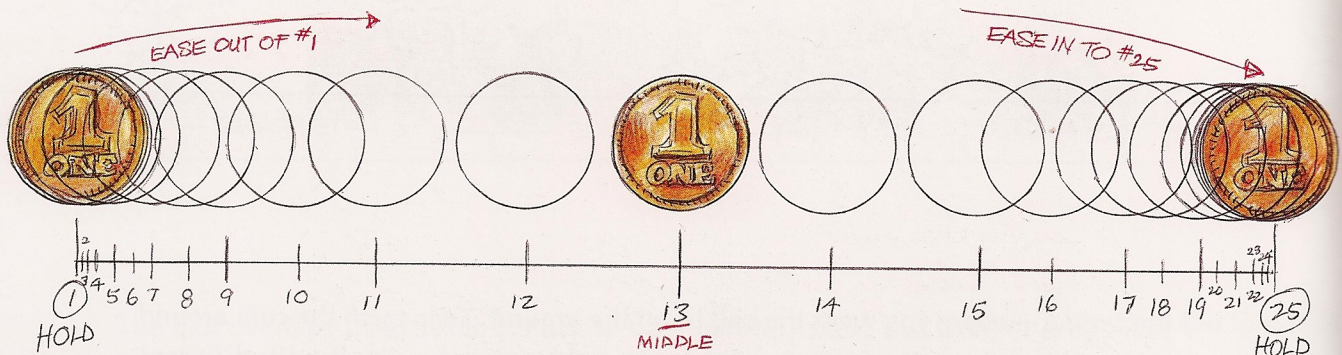
Another interesting way to experience the difference between timing and spacing right away is this:

Let's put a coin under the video camera and move it across the page (or screen) in one second – 24 frames of screen time. That's our *timing*.

We'll space it out evenly – and that's our *spacing*.



Now we'll keep the same *timing* – again taking one second for the coin to move across the page. But we'll change the *spacing* by slowly easing out of position number 1 and easing gradually into position number 25.



It still takes one second for the coin to get over there. It has the same timing – but there is very different movement because of the different spacing. Both start together – and both hit the middle together – but the spacing is quite different. And so the action is very different.

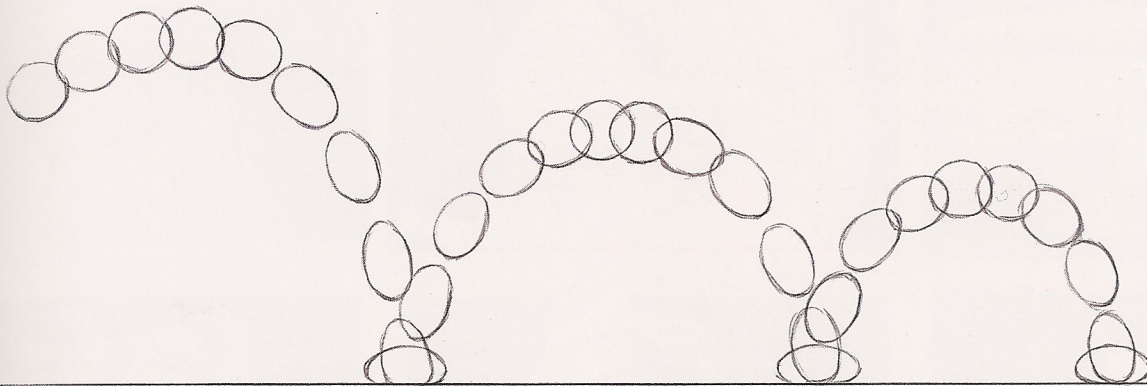
You could say that animation is the art of timing. But you could say that about all motion pictures.

The most brilliant masters of timing were the silent comedians: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy.

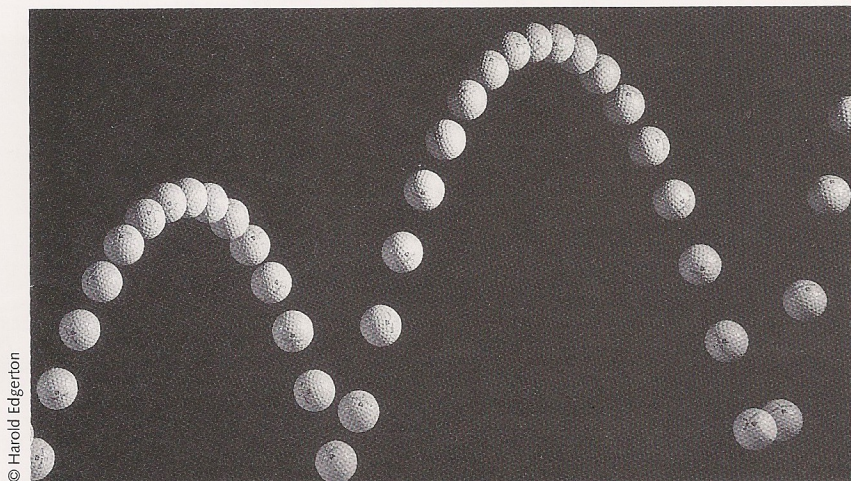
Certainly for a film director, timing is the most important thing. For an animator, it's only half the battle. We need the spacing as well. We can have a natural feel for timing, but we have to learn the spacing of things.

One other thing: The bouncing ball example is often used to show animation 'squash and stretch' – that is, the ball elongates as it falls, flattens on impact with the ground and then returns to its normal shape in the slower part of its arc.

It *might* squash and stretch this way if it was a very soft ball with not much air in it, but what



I've found is that you can get a good enough effect with a rigid coin – *provided* the spacing of it was right – so this added technique is not always necessary. Certainly a hard golf ball isn't going to bend all over the place. In other words, if you do this squishy squashy thing too much, everything comes out a bit 'sploopy', like it's made of rubber. Life ain't like that. At least most of it ain't. More about this later.



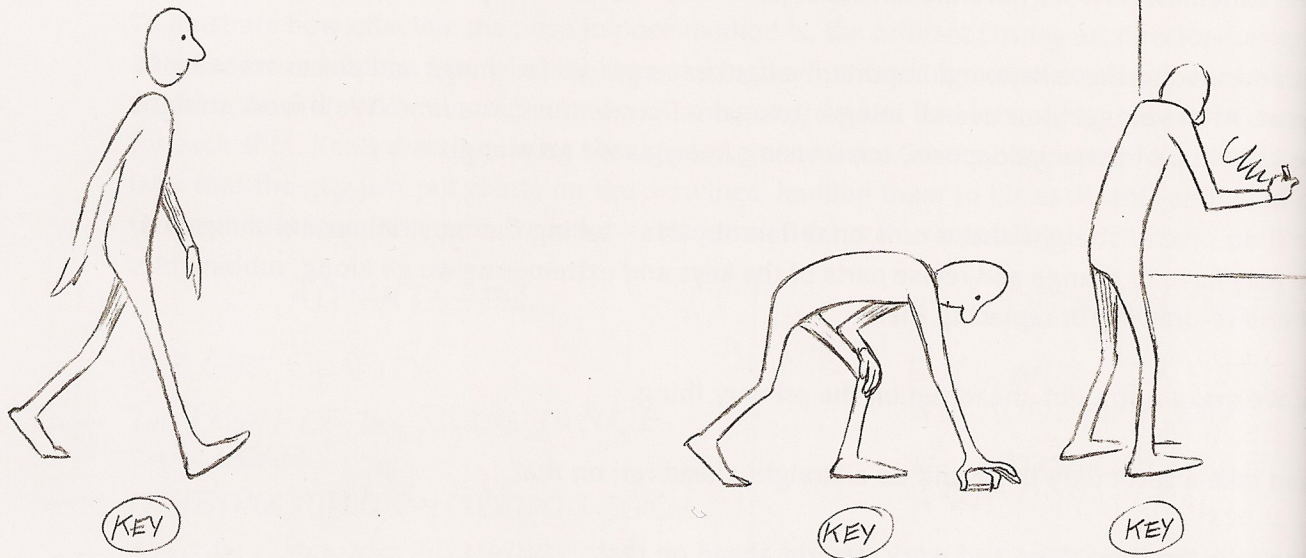
© Harold Edgerton
Golf ball bounce, 1951

Having established all this, let's go to lesson one:

Let's take our man going over to the blackboard again.

What do I do first?

Answer: The keys – the storytelling drawings or positions that *have* to be there to show what's happening. Put it where you can see it . . . so it *reads*.



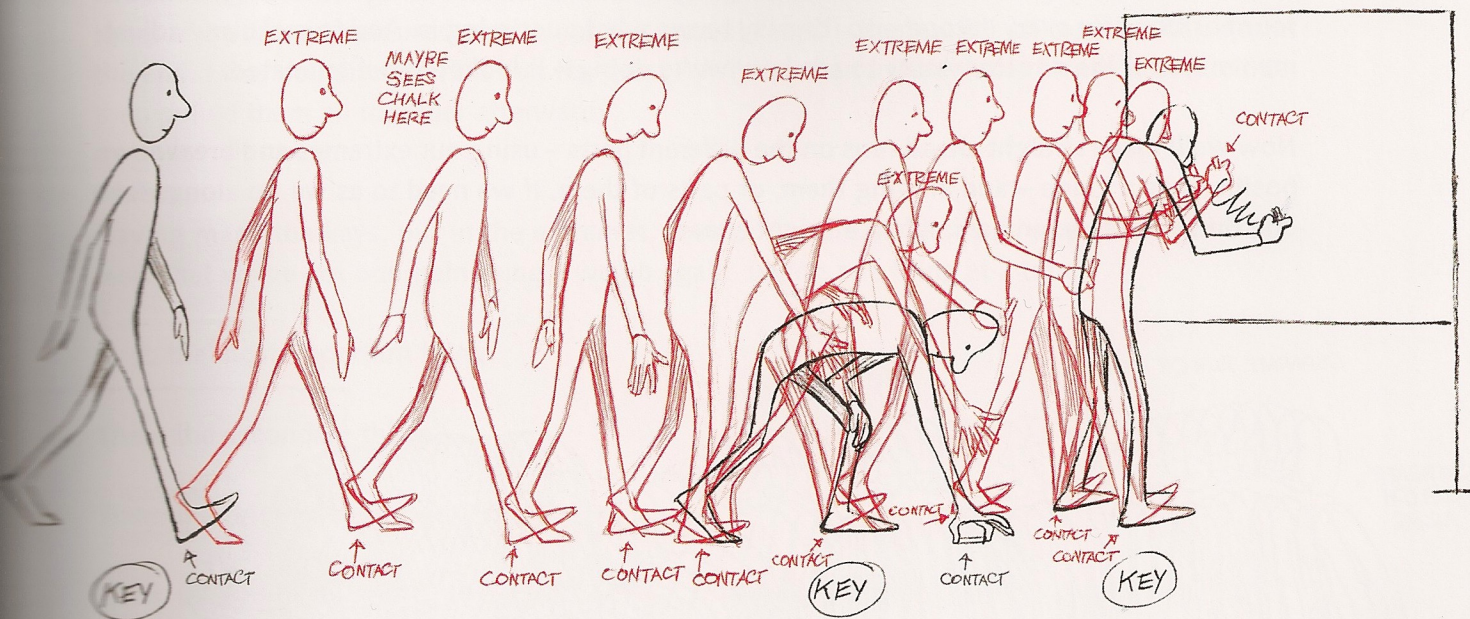
What do we do next?

Answer: Any other drawings that *have* to be in the shot. Obviously, he has to take steps to get over to the chalk – so we make the 'contact' positions on the steps where the feet are just touching the ground.

There's no weight on them yet – the heel is just contacting the ground. As with the fingers just contacting the chalk – they haven't closed on the chalk yet.

If we act all this out, we might find he takes five steps to get to the chalk and bend down. I notice that when I act it out, I automatically pull up my left pant leg as I bend down, then I put my hand on my knee before my other hand contacts the chalk. I would make an extreme where the hand just contacts the pant leg – before it pulls up the pants.

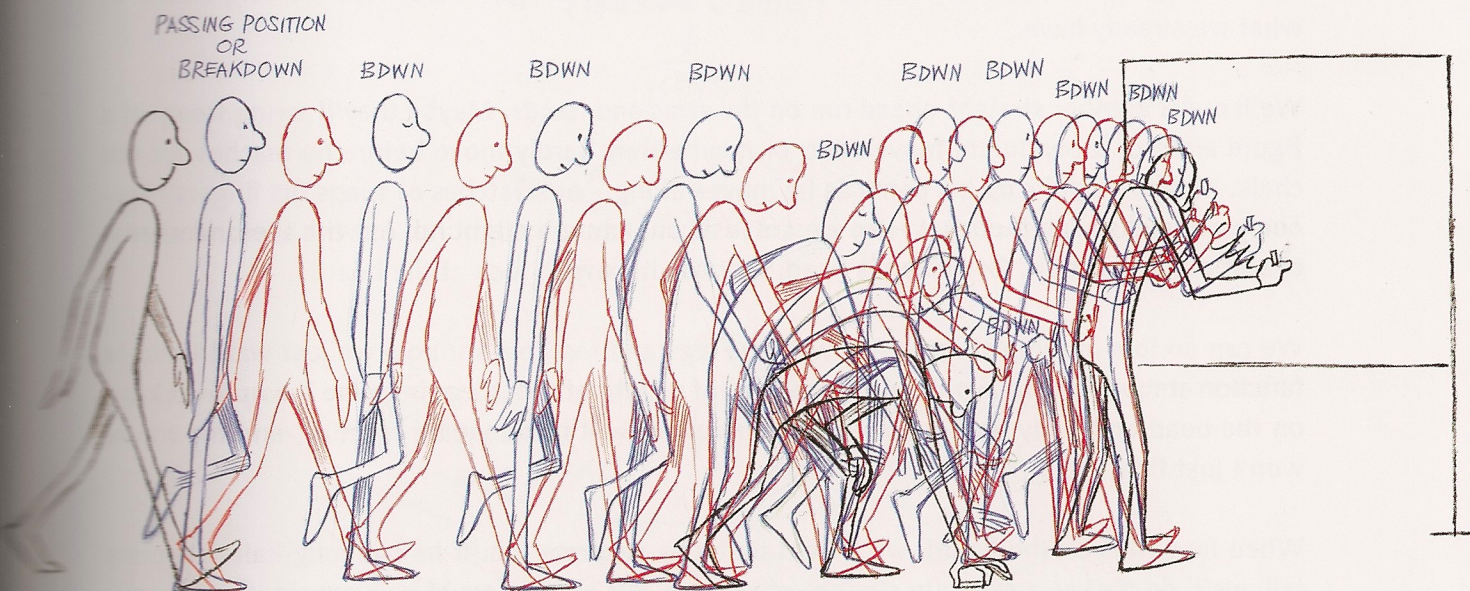
These will be our extremes. We're working rough, sketching things in lightly – although we probably have made rather good drawings of the keys. (I haven't here, because I'm trying to keep it simple, for clarity).



We could act it out, timing the steps and putting numbers on the extremes or we could leave the numbering till later. I would probably put numbers on it now and test it on the video to see how the timing feels as his steps get shorter – and make any adjustments.

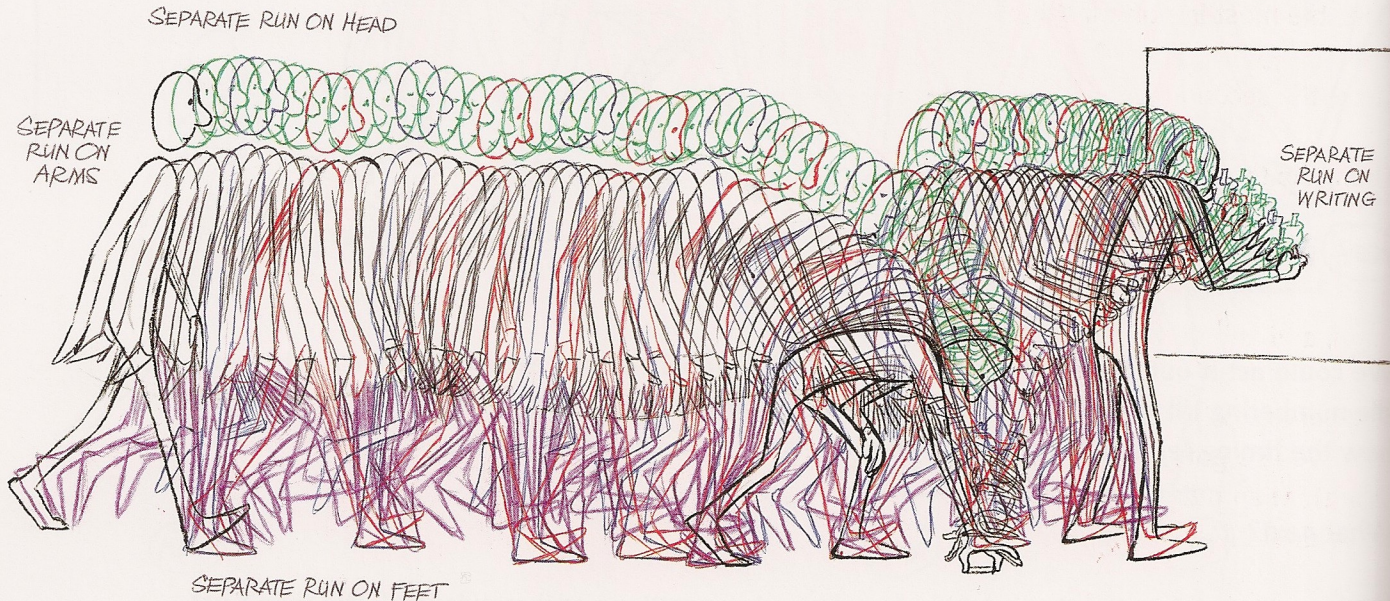
What next?

We'll break it down, lightly sketching in our passing positions or 'breakdowns'. We won't get fancy about it now – the fancy stuff comes later in the book. For now, we'll just make the head and body raise up slightly on the passing positions of the steps – like it does on a normal walk.



We'd probably have numbers on the drawings by now, and when we test it, we've got three or four positions for every second – so it's easy to see what our timing is. And to make any adjustments. And if the director wants to see how we're doing – it looks almost animated.

Now we'll make straight ahead runs on the different parts – using our extremes and breakdown positions as a guide – and altering them, or parts of them, if we need to as we go along. Take one thing at a time and animate it straight ahead.



Maybe he's mumbling to himself, or maybe he's talking – maybe his head just wobbles around with self love. Whatever it is, we'll treat it as a separate straight-ahead run, working on top of what we already have.

We'll make another straight-ahead run on the arms and hands. Maybe they'll swing freely in a figure eight or a pendulum movement; or maybe they hardly move before he reaches for the chalk. Maybe he pulls up his pants as he moves along – or scratches or snaps his fingers nervously, or cracks his knuckles. When we arrive at our key, we might rub out the arm and alter it to suit our arm action. Or delay his head. Or raise it early to look at the board.

We can do lots of interesting things with the legs and feet, but for now we just want them to function smoothly. (I'm avoiding the problem of weight at this stage because the up and down on the head and body that we have at the moment will be adequate for now, and the figure won't just float along.)

When he writes on the board, we'll treat that as a separate run. If he has long hair or a pony tail, we'll do that as a separate straight-ahead run. His clothes could be a separate run, baggy pant legs following along. If he'd grown a tail, that would be the last thing we'd put on.

I've shown these things in different colours to be as clear as possible. In my own work I sometimes use different coloured pencils for the separate runs – then pull it all together in black at the end. I was delighted to find that the great Bill Tytla often used colours for the separate bits, then pulled them all together afterwards.

To recap:

Having made the keys, put in the extremes, then put in the breakdowns or passing positions. Now that we've got our main thing – we go again, taking one thing at a time.

First, the most important thing.

Then, the secondary thing.

Then, the third thing.

Then, the fourth thing etc.

Then, add any flapping bits, drapery, hair, fat, breasts, tails etc.

The general principle is:

After you've got your first overall thing – go again. Do one thing at a time (testing as you go along). Then pull it all together and polish it up. Make clear charts for the assistant to follow up or do it all yourself.

It's like this:

