MENT
RPRISE

by KARIN FONG

There's a special kind of discovery that comes from tweaking reality, from giving logic a little spin. It's the A-ha! Moment: the instant when images or words reveal an unexpected twist. This flash of revelation provides a powerful means of storytelling that can delight designer and audience alike. The A-ha! Moment is particularly potent in film and television, where the use of motion increases our opportunity to create surprise.

Simply stated, the A-ha! Moment occurs when the audience finds meaning by unexpectedly perceiving that one thing—an image, word, sound or situation—is also another. Optical illusion, puns and paradox: all these forms of play can create this effect. Children's books are full of instances. Take Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In chapter 23, titled "Square Candies that Look Round," a drawing of the candies in question reveals cubes that each have a little face. They're squares—they don't look round at all. But then you read that the candies turned toward the door. That is, they "looked 'round." That's the A-ha! Moment—a shift in perception that changes everything.

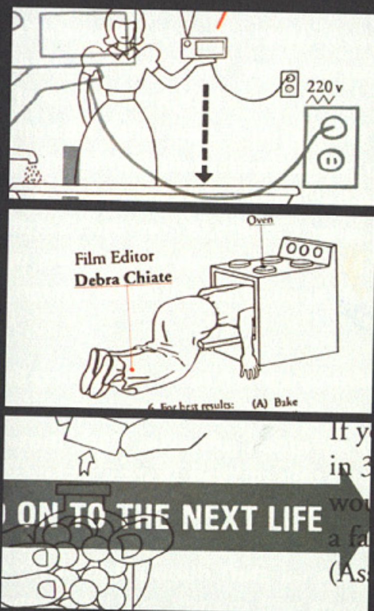
Dahl created a whole world of playful logic. So did Norton Juster in *The Phantom Tollbooth* and Lewis Carroll in his Alice books. These stories delight with double meanings. In Juster's book, for instance, there's a Watchdog that ticks. And in Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the Mouse's Tale takes the form of a tail, with its words curling down the page. The paintings and drawings of René Magritte and Saul Steinberg accomplish this same kind of visual ambiguity, by rendering words into pictures, thus forming landscapes that are both familiar and strange. It's a place where abstraction collides with reality to emerge as an A-ha! Moment.

A closer look at the A-ha! Moment in film and television shows the ways that motion enhances the designer's ability to construct surprise. They say the camera never lies. But as we all know, it not only lies—it sits up, shakes and rolls over. There's unlimited potential for surprise in motion design.

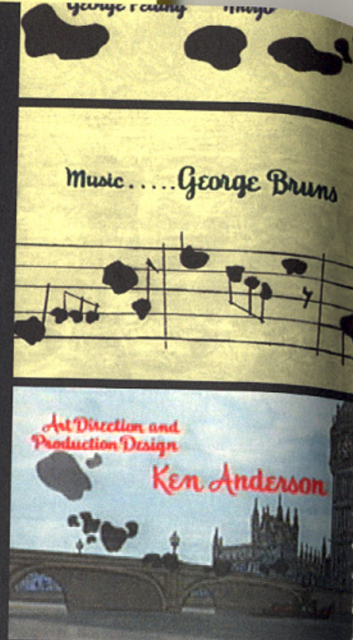
CONNECT THE SPOTS

The success of an A-ha! Moment often relies on getting the viewer to make unlikely connections between two things. Clever transitions are the key, and it's here that motion pieces hold so much promise. With motion, transformations can appear seamless. The main title of Walt Disney's classic *101 Dalmatians* shows how animation transforms the trademark motif of the starring dogs into a dynamic transition device, creating a series of visual puns. Graphic spots bounce across the screen, creating notes on a staff during the music credit, acting as a paintbrush to draw on new names and scenes, and later appearing as puffs of smoke from a boat. The lively splotches not only provide an active and unusual way to get from credit to credit, they engage the audience with the discovery of spots—abstract and representational alike—absolutely everywhere.

...ables. © Paramount Pictures.



Dead Man on Campus. © Paramount Pictures.



101 Dalmations. © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

We apologise for the fault in the subtitles. Those responsible have been sacked.

IT'S ABOUT TIME

When one is developing a surprise in motion media, timing is of the essence. Of course, surprise in print also involves the element of time, but that time travels, more or less, at a pace the audience sets. A reader decides where to look, how long to stay and when to unwrap the package. With film, the author has the great advantage of control—control of where the camera is looking and how fast it reveals information. The main title for *The Untouchables* shows how movement works with time to heighten suspense and enhance surprise. The camera starts close in on ominous shadows creeping across the ground that bring hulking mobsters to mind. As the camera slowly tilts up and pulls back, the audience sees that the dark shapes are not emerging from human forms, but from the letters of the film's title. This simple macro-to-micro camera move builds into a fine piece of visual drama that pays off by introducing the "Untouchables" as both men and movie. A key factor is the sequence's slow pace, which involves the audience by giving it enough time to imagine the scene's outcome.

THE HA-HA! MOMENT

Nowhere is timing more important than when telling a joke, something I experienced while designing the titles for *Dead Man on Campus*, a comedy about college suicide. My teammates and I plotted to create comic surprise by incorporating the credits into a mock SAT, a "suicide aptitude test." Not only would the credits function to display cast and crew, they would convey the film's dark humor by appearing in graphics that demonstrated proper hanging, suffocation and electrocution techniques. These how-to illustrations, we felt, would immediately communicate the movie's funny premise, so we created an edit that basically spliced them together as stills. But when we showed this early cut around the office, a terrible thing happened: nobody laughed. To our dismay, nobody got the A-ha! Moments, these carefully crafted diagrams that parodied standardized tests. Sure, some people commented on the altered technical drawings—*was that a woman with her head in the oven?*—but overall the response was one of confusion. It was then that I fully realized the value of motion and timing in comedy. Reworking the sequence with an editor, we found the ideas came through clearly once we used movement that showed only croppings of the exam, before panning across or zooming out to reveal the funny parts of the picture. Strategically timed motion allowed us to change the context of what the audience had just seen to remarkably humorous effect.

Surprise can pack a punch line. The funniest instances often result from tweaking common experiences and stereotypes. Fortunately for the comedian, the world of film and television provides plenty of clichés to subvert. The title sequence of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* plays off several cinematic conventions. The credits seem innocent enough at first, even crude, consisting of stan-

We apologise again for the fault in the subtitles. Those responsible for sacking the people who have just been sacked, have been sacked.

The directors of the firm hired to continue the credits after the other people had been sacked, wish it to be known that they have just been sacked.

The credits have been completed in an entirely different style at great expense and at the last minute

Directed by

40 SPECIALLY TRAINED
ECUADORIAN MOUNTAIN LLAMAS

6 VENEZUELAN RED LLAMAS

142 MEXICAN WHOOPING LLAMAS

14 NORTH CHILEAN GUANACOS
(CLOSELY RELATED TO THE LLAMA)

REG LLAMA OF BRIXTON

76000 BATTERY LLAMAS
FROM 'LLAMA-FRESH' FARMS LTD. NEAR PARAGUAY

and

TERRY GILLIAM & TERRY JONES

Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

dard white type on a black background. At the bottom of the screen, subtitles start to appear. At first, they seem like logical Swedish (Swedish?!) translations. But wait, did that card just say "Wi not trei a holiday in Sweden this yer?" In case you need a double take, the next subtitle reads "See the loveli lakes." All kinds of nonsense build from there, disguised in a centered, generic font—the typographic equivalent of keeping a straight face. There's a credit for a Moose Nose Wiper, for instance, and a thank-you note from President Nixon. Just when you're getting used to the silliness, a bulletin interrupts: Those who were responsible for the subtitles have been sacked. And later, another announcement: The titles firm has been sacked, and the rest of the titles were completed at the last minute, at great expense. Sure enough, the few remaining credits are "spiced up" with a colorful, flashing background, as well as an incongruously festive score.

The prank works by turning the familiar into the absurd. Within the cliché of a title sequence, the gags succeed by disrupting the "real time" flow of the film. Here, too, time plays a role—the gradual build of silliness certainly contributes to the comedy. But the joke also works by making the audience work a little bit for its meal. There's something satisfying about searching for all the ridiculousness sprinkled through the credits. These A-ha! Moments transform the viewer into an active participant. The joke may be on us, but somehow we feel smarter for noticing it.

THE WORD PLAY'S THE THING

Audiences—graphic designers, even—tend to view type as a separate layer that floats above image and serves to caption "reality." The A-ha! Moment occurs when type unexpectedly crosses this imaginary boundary and takes an active role in the narrative. Artist Saul Steinberg does this wonderfully with his drawings. One cartoon shows a blocky "E" envisioning itself as a more sophisticated letterform, refined with delicate serifs and an accent grave. Another depicts a "5" and a "2" falling in love, their conversation represented by mathematical equations. Motion can enhance this way of giving type a face, of personifying letters. Where I work, we constantly remind ourselves to think of the letterforms as actors. The puns and playfulness that are so effective in print have a new life onscreen, as motion gives the words the added ability to behave as characters. Animation allows type to switch back and forth between verbal representation and actual physical object.

The music video for Alex Gopher's "The Child" takes this idea to an extreme. The viewer is taken on a couple's wild ride from their apartment to the hospital delivery room. Every element—from the streets to the characters themselves—exists as type moving or standing in dimensional space. The cityscape is formed by letters that read "building." A "cab" zips by, chased by type that reads "cop." With the benefit of animation, the type can fully act out a story. With this journey through words, director Antoine Bardou-Jacquet one-ups Apollinaire, using lighting and movement to make an environment of concrete poetry in motion.

"The Child." © Solid/Le Village.

Gattaca. © Columbia TriStar.

METAPHORS BE WITH YOU

Sometimes just a touch of animation, added to typographic wit, can tell a compelling tale. Indeed, the A-ha! Moment is often most memorable when it conveys a complex narrative with a clever, economical twist. For example, there's the trailer for *In the Line of Fire*, a 1993 film about a presidential bodyguard who is troubled that he didn't save President Kennedy from assassination. The movie, set 30 years later, is about the bodyguard's chance for redemption. Liz Beloff's graphic trailer displays the date of Kennedy's death, 1963. As the sequence builds to the ticking of a clock (or is that a bomb?) the "6" makes a slow 180 degree turn, finally landing as a "9," changing the year to the present day.

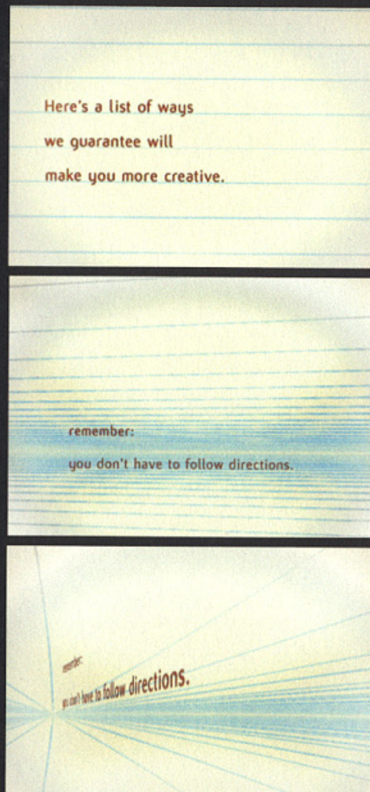
Two other film sequences by colleagues at Imaginary Forces use motion sparingly to effectively convey ideas. The main title for *Gattaca* takes advantage of all the meanings found in the letters of the movie's name. The film's plot deals with genetic engineering, so G, A, T and C have significance as the letters that represent genetic code. As each credit appears onscreen, these letters gently fade up first, before being joined by the rest of the name. Macro footage of hair and fingernails provides a backplate that further illustrates the idea of genetic fingerprinting. There's something enlightening about discovering these building blocks of DNA code within the letters that represent people's identities. Here, designer Michael Riley uses motion to create another level of hierarchy within typography, another way to assign meaning to the letterforms. Note that this is not just using motion for motion's sake. I once showed the sequence to my design class, causing one student to remark that he had recently seen a lot of television graphics that used a similar graceful animation style, so what was the big deal? I had to point out that the significance here isn't merely that the type moves, but that the animation contributes directly to unveiling a sophisticated concept.

For the main title for *True Lies*, a film about the double life of a secret agent, Kyle Cooper started with the observation that the words "true" and "lies" both have four letters. The resulting design shows us how the two words coexist as flip sides of each other. The short sequence begins with the dimensional letters of the word "True" rotating onto a black screen. As the type makes another rotation, the word "Lies" shifts into view as negative space carved into "True." A simple motion exposes an oxymoron, and the much bigger idea of duplicity. With elegant sleight of hand, motion conveys a key aspect of the story with a typographic surprise not possible in print.

IN TOO DEEP (AND IN THREE DEEP)

Optical illusions have always intrigued us with the idea of being caught between a flat and a three-dimensional world. M. C. Escher's illustrations never cease to fascinate by presenting impossible structures that bounce between 2-D and 3-D

20th Century Fox.



Qualcomm "Lined Paper" commercial.

"Let Forever Be."

realities. As in paintings, imagery in film and video exists on a flat surface, yet the laws of perspective have us interpret a dimensional scene. With motion, the designer can manipulate the illusion of depth to produce surprise.

This observation came into play when my colleagues and I were designing a commercial for Qualcomm, a high-tech company that wanted to convey how creativity functions. We decided to illustrate the power of imagination by animating a sheet of lined paper. Our first impulse was to merely move the lines to form new patterns, but that didn't seem to explain fully the idea of looking at the world with a new point of view. Then we discovered that by sliding the evenly spaced blue rules so that they gradually shifted apart, the lines could break out of a 2-D formation to suggest planes receding across a horizon. By fooling with screen depth, we could mess with the (blue) rules, to create a new perspective.

Motion can dramatically alter the perception of space. Imagine watching a triangle that scales up in size to eventually cover the entire screen. Now try to interpret that movement. Either a) that triangle is growing bigger on one plane, or b) it is flying toward you, appearing to enlarge as it moves forward in space, or c) the triangle is static but the camera is moving toward it, causing it to become larger in frame. Here lies ambiguity and the set-up for surprise. Motion, combined with other visual cues such as lighting and context, help the viewer figure out the dimensionality of the scene. But what if, like Escher, we were to mess with those cues?

That's exactly what director Michel Gondry does in his video for the Chemical Brothers, "Let Forever Be." The video features dancers moving in duplicate, an image that instantly evokes the memory of standing between two dressing room mirrors, where one's every move repeats into infinity. This effect is real-life surrealism, and that's how the video feels. Intellectually you know the surfaces are flat, yet you can't help but be captivated by the image of perpetual depth. But the illusion doesn't stop there. Periodically, the dancers move into a formation, then change to 2-D "cardboard cutouts" of themselves. The dancers then pop up from behind these flat images, and continue to move seamlessly between what is "real" and what exists as 2-D representations of reality. By completely exploring the paradox of depth onscreen and reflecting the contradictions back to us, Gondry creates a comedy of mirrors that works on many planes.

The use of motion enables a common phenomenon to become an extraordinary narrative. It takes us from the front of the looking glass right on through the looking glass. In creating surprise, motion can elicit emotion—and that's reason enough to keep things moving.