CB: Could you please introduce yourself?

FD: My name is Frederic Durand. I'm what they call a Computer Graphics Lighter. That means that I use lighting to tell stories, to enhance stories. I use computer generated lights rather than traditional lights. It’s pretty different but pretty the same thing as traditional cinematography. A little bit the same and a little bit different.

CB: How is your team composed?

FD: We have different departments, because contrary to popular beliefs all these tools become more and more complex, more and more sophisticated and it’s not possible to know about everything, so people specializes in doing things. In computer graphics, when you come to the look of the images you are going to have people who refine the images, color grading, compositing, that’s a special trade, you have people who is going to light, like me, you are going to have people who is going to shade what has to be lit, as well as people who is going to model, people who is going to animate all these things... it’s really a tree with many many compartments there. What I do is lighting, usually what we have ... we use the concepts of key shots like, you have a sequence, the sequence is maybe 20 shots, 20 shots come from one shot in particular that we are going to walk first to give the feel of the others. So that’s going to be the task of the lighting
supervisor, CG lighting supervisor or CG lighting sequence lead (other term for that), and once that’s done it’s going to be like the master that other people, other lighters are going to use as a reference to light the other shots. What we have is Lighters, we have a Lead Lighter that’s going to lead a sequence and we have Lighting Supervisors that are going to make sure that if there are many sequences related, they all work together and more than that to make sure that technically things are under control. We talk about computers, about lots of data to manage and because of that there is a lot of engineering that’s taking place. So it’s not just only about art, about placing the light well, as well as how to use the tools, how to control the tools where is a lot of engineering, a lot of development, the technical aspect is very very heavy. So that’s why we have all these different people…. Plus there are engineers to make sure that everything works fine.

CB: How is your work related to cinematography? Do you work with the cinematographer in any part of the process?

FD: Yes and no. I suppose that you have a lot to say about our work, but it’s really a battle, it’s a fight. It’s really a battle in progress, different production, different people, different ways of doing things. I would say that generally unfortunately (there are) compartments... the cinematographer is going to take care of what happens on the shoot because it’s a different team, maybe in a different city, maybe in a different country. Things are totally separated and in these cases communication is not as streamlined as it should be, that’s for sure. An on top of that there’s certainly a kind of fight between classic cinematographers and computer generated cinematography. It’s different people, different ways of dealing with light and it sometimes end up like a political battle.

CB: How do you think it should work? Do you think it’s useful the opinion of the cinematographer?

FD: Of course, I teach at different schools and I can really tell that. I always tell my students: ‘You want to do photo real images well, do you know how to use a camera? And if you don’t, how can you pretend to do photo real effects if you
have no idea what a photo is?’ Ninety percent of CG artists have no idea whatsoever about how a camera works. So that explains why what you see on the big screen sometimes looks fake. Because they have no idea, because sometimes they do something and they think: ‘It looks good, it’s enough’. But it doesn’t feel good. So what the cinematographer brings on the table is the feel, they know how light works, they know how grain or exposure works, on that ground of the image. If you don’t have that as a background, you create stuff that’s artificial. It happens all the time, so it’s usually important for both sides to communicate and to merge, I think that’s happening.

**CB:** Do you think it will be possible in the future to imagine a team integrating both cinematography and VFX departments?

**FD:** Yes, it has to be. Because what’s happening when you compartmentalize too much in a state of the business when productions are scattered between different countries it becomes more and more complex to manage, it becomes more and more difficult to guess, to estimate what people do, to make things work together and the unity is broken. We can see that in movies where different companies take charge of different parts. You can tell that it doesn’t fit. And I think even when a cinematographer is involved, the poor guy has no time, not enough power to deal with everything. So we have to work together, he has to be more consistent. Hopefully, with better communication, better way of communicating it’s going to be easier.

**CB:** In the last 5 years the movies awarded by the Academy for best Cinematography were also awarded for Special Effects. What do you think about that?

**FD:** I think that’s the old way of compartmentalizing art, and that has to change. Award for sound effects has been removed because people don’t understand what it is. That’s a lame excuse as possible because, what do you mean? That even professionals don’t have an idea of what it is? That’s very scary. Things have to change, there’s a lot of ignorance about all these things... We have to learn. Everybody has to learn more. Cinematography, CG cinematography, I think in 10
years, in 20 years it’s going to be something very outdated, that’s for sure.

CB: Do you think special effects and color grading bring new aesthetic possibilities to the cinematographer?

FD: Yes, that’s for sure. When a new technique is invented, new images are created with new people. There is new people that have no idea or don’t care about how things were done before and they are going to create new stuff. So, yes, new images are going to be created that we have no idea. Now some people is going to think that it’s bad, for example these big camera moves around battles with thousands of people fighting each other and camera going forth and back and things like that... So creativity is still the key, it’s not because you can do it that you have to do it, it’s not because you can do it that it makes sense. I think that all the super hero movies, they are going to go away ... In the 70s I was very fan of disaster movies, I loved disaster movies but they died. In 1982, finished. I’m afraid that if we are not finding something else to tell with special effects superheroes will not be enough. We have to do something different.

CB: So, you don’t think that the cinematographer has the control over the image in that kind of movies?

FD: Zero. Nobody cares...I mean, everybody cares, but it’s money, it’s explosion, like some people say: ‘We care about relationships, we don’t care about explosions’. All these movies, they are about bursting through crushed buildings and people fighting very fast. I don’t think there is anything interesting to say. After a while you see a battle, you’ve seen all of them. I think when movies became talking, talking movies, cinematography for a moment fell down. It took 3 or 4 years for people to get used to talking movies and create new stuff. I think that’s what we have now because with all these special effects we tend to forget the art. But I don’t think that’s going to last, we have to change. Big battles, big robots. I don’t think you can make transformer movies forever. But if it’s possible, well, that’s very sad.
CB: In an article you wrote you speak about Natan. What is the meaning of that concept?

FD: If you go to the bottom line, lighting is about light and shade. You have the light and you have the shade. That’s it. If you think just about light it’s one thing, if you think about shade, it’s a very different way of thinking about the world. Natan is this Japanese idea like Ying and Yang, that things are connected, it’s one whole thing black and white, good and evil, light and dark. When I have time to think about art, not a lot, but I try, thinking about the shade is more important than thinking about the light. Thinking about the shadows, the quality of the shadows that give me a better understanding of light. If I just focus on light I think that’s a surface, that’s my feel. The Natan concept really reconciliates, it’s a whole, we have shade, shadows, lights, everything has to work together. In CG it’s very easy to separate all these things, that’s a problem. In CG we have different methods, different techniques and we focus too much on one thing but you forget the next thing. You create images that can look fake, because it’s totally separated.

CB: Do you use references for your designs?

FD: Talking about the Natan, (Maurice) Escher is always telling me a lot of things about lighting, about how the world works basically. I would say the Victorian painters, you know, all the Victorian painters, Lord Leighton, Alma-Tadema... the official painters of the 19th century. I look at that paintings and I have no idea what mind do you have to have to paint something like that. Rembrandt, Caravaggio. In contemporary art James Turin, could be someone I’m interested.......... Cinematographers, I would say Dan Spilatty, Vilmos, of course, the film noir, the very very early movies, like Griffith’s. When I look at these very very early movies I think ‘This people invented everything from scratch, they had to think about everything’.

CB: Do you think a cinematographer can become a Virtual Lighter?

FD: I think it’s similar, I think that beyond the tools it’s the same thing. Like Yuri said once, we are all talking about
the same thing. From different angles we are talking about the same things, how to tell stories, how to be engaging, how to tell something that is relevant to our world, so it could be CG, it could be classic cinematography, I think it’s all the same. Right now with a clash, that’s for sure, but it won’t last.

CB: Can you give me an example of a movie where you had a productive relationship with the cinematographer?

FD: In the first Tom Rider I’ve done the lighting and shading of the big robot that fights Angelina Jolie at the beginning. I remember that to light the robot I had all the data from the set, I had all the photos from the set and I could light almost automatically the robot from these data. I noticed something when I was doing that, the robot was really included in the footage, visually it had the same colors but I noticed something, it was like a prop. It had no glamour, no star quality. That taught me something, that CG is good if the lighter is good. If the artist is no good CG has nothing to do, so what I do is start from scratch, key light, aim light, bottom light, fill light to make the robot look like an actor. So I have modern tools but I’m glad I know all the way of doing things because that saves the day. Key, rim, fill, bounced light, and that was it.