CB: Could you please introduce yourself?

YN: My name is Yuri Neyman, I’m a Director of Photography member of ASC. I’ve lived in this country for many years. Originally I am from the Soviet Union. I worked in the Soviet Union as Director of Photography and then due to circumstances I had to leave the Soviet Union and start working in the United States. And I’ve worked in the United States for many years as Director of Photography. I’m also an inventor, I invented an on-set color correction system, I believe it’s the first in the world. I’ve also become an educator and a writer now. Vilmos Zsigmond and I created the Global Cinematography Institute in order to teach cinematographers a new profession, a new approach to the profession in a very fast changing world.

CB: In GCI you talk about Expanded Cinematography and Director of Imaging. Can you explain those terms?

YN: Cinematography as an activity, as a profession, is a very wide term. There are different kinds of cinematography
existing in the world. Feature film cinematography, documentary cinematography, special effects cinematography. We basically started to teach what is called Expanded Cinematography, which expands borders, lines of cinematography. It’s expanded because it’s very inclusive, it includes not only traditional methods of photographing subjects, but also non-traditional methods based on computers, based on virtual cinematography. So Expanded Cinematography just synthesizes many kinds of cinematography into one big subject, which is very necessary for today’s stage of development of cinema and cinematography. Because in many cases cinematography requires a lot of new technology, cinematography requires a lot of knowledge which has kind of belonged only to programmers or computer designers, but for modern cinematography, the cinematographer, in order to express himself visually more effectively, needs to know a lot of new disciplines, and we combine them in one subject called Expanded Cinematography.

Director of Imaging or Image Director … is basically what we call, for our purposes of education, a different name for the same position. Because the profession is still the same, the profession is Cinematographer. But starting from theories, cinematographers have a new position, not a new profession. This happened because sound came and multi-camera shooting came and one person simply could not do everything, he has to work with light, with camera, with team, so a new profession appeared on the theories, called Director of Photography. Very often he does not operate a camera himself as cinematographers did in the past, when the camera operator did everything. He has a team of people who do special effects, and he became Director of Photography. What we are suggesting now in our school is to consider Director of Imaging or Image Director as a person who goes to a next level. It’s the same profession, cinematographer, but the position will be probably different. The Director of Imaging will be probably able to lead people not only in traditional professional cinematography but also people who work in special effects, visual effects, in computer graphics, in virtual cinematography…He has enough knowledge to give the right direction, the right advice, and has the authority to
suggest the use of tools for better aesthetical and visual effects.

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?

YN: In the last 5 years, at least in the level of the American Academy, the Oscars, it just happened that films which had been nominated for Best Cinematography also received (nominations for) Best Visual Effects, because they were very heavily loaded visual effect movies. Virtual effect, virtual cinematography effects, virtual graphics effects...So images in those movies had been so intertwined between traditional cinematography, virtual cinematography...that’s very difficult to say what part of image belongs to what. Most likely it belongs to everybody, but it’s not like your grandfather’s or father’s traditional cinematography, where only one person was in charge, but it’s not also pure special effects, because traditional cinematography elements are also involved. And I do believe that people now is a little bit confused and decided to give awards to DP in the category of cinematography and Best Visual Effects. There is a lot of discussion in the academic community, in the cinematographer’s community, in the ASC, about whether it’s possible to split what belongs to Virtual Cinematography from what belongs to Traditional Cinematography, how to nominate, etc. It’s a very complicated question, we cannot look for one full formula but it’s still very difficult and maybe impossible. But as a sign of the times, in the last 5 years, as a fact, best cinematography award in the Academy shared the award to best Visual Effects for the same movie. So probably it will happen one, two or more times, and then hopefully we will find a solution to this phenomenon, how to split it.

CB: Do you imagine in the future a unified team integrating the Cinematography and the Special Effects departments?

YN: Well, it’s what we are calling basically “Expanded Cinematography” or Director of the Imaging or Imaging Director. The new profession is the same, cinematographer, but the position will be different... But again let’s see what
happens with these Oscars, with the nominations, what films are nominated, maybe this time such a film will not be nominated for traditional cinematography. Possibly. But it’s necessary to split apart these two categories because, for example, in the last 2 years there were a lot of good, well shot films in traditional cinematography, but they had no chances to compete with blockbusters. What is important probably is to split apart the traditional cinematography award from the Expanded Cinematography Award. This would be a step in the right direction. And then start to work towards to what components are in Expanded Cinematography. It’s in progress like everything else during the last tears, but I think it will happen.

CB: Nowadays, how is the cinematographer related with the special effect department?

YN: They have to work together and in the best case scenarios they are part of the same team, but I say best case scenarios because cinema is an art and artists and people have their egos, they have their creative positions, technical positions... We try to think that Expanded Cinematography and Director of Imaging will provide that position. In most cases, as far as I know, everyone works together well, but again, people are people and they may have some issues, it’s ego, creativity, is a creative activity, artistic activity and with people involved in artistic activities sometimes conflicts are unavoidable. So a good director is someone who can run everything well, and then everything goes smooth. But so far everybody’s working together, so far, as far as I know.

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

YN: Well certainly, special effects create new kinds of images. By definition, new kinds of images create new aesthetics. Like aesthetics of traditional cinematography changed in 1977 because of Star Wars. Star Wars was probably the first major picture where aesthetics of special effects overpowered traditional aesthetics. It was the beginning of the trend which we are observing now. If traditional cinematography is inspired very often in traditional cinema,
in classical photography, in painting... people of special effects have the tendency to be inspired more by video games, by pop art, graphics... It depends, but this is the next step. The nature of cinema is changing. But yes, special effects create new aesthetics. Aesthetics of traditional cinematography and aesthetics of special effects work together for one purpose: how to visualize script.

CB: Can you think of a movie that is a good example of this mix between traditional cinematography and special effects, where the cinematographer participated in all the instances of the project?

YN: Gravity is a very good example. Chivo Lubesky is a very talented cinematographer, he did a lot of great films with special effects and he brought his experience to... the director and the production... His knowledge, his talent and experience helped to work very close with special effects. The same I can say of Claudio Miranda, he has a very good education, he knows technology very well, so for him it was also very easy to adapt to. This is an ideal case when everything works well together. And that is one of our purposes in our school Global Cinematography Institute, to start raising students of this kind, who can feel comfortable both in traditional cinematography and in virtual cinematography, all under the roof of Expanded Cinematography. Very often people ask questions like ‘Why special effects people cannot be cinematographers or take the position of Director of Imaging?’ It’s very simple, because for cinematographers (who have been doing that for many years) imagery is more important than technology. People working in virtual cinematography, who are doing special effects, are very often inclined to associate their life and creativity with the technology of special effects. Cinematographers basically associate their activity with images by itself, no matter what technology is used.... It’s imaging, every else is technology under supervision of people who understand which images are more important.

C: Why do you think it’s so important today for cinematographers to know the basis of special effects, virtual lighting, virtual cinematography...?
YN: Because the nature of cinema is changing little by little, and there are certain trends in movie going audiences. ...If there is a new technology which is market required or audience required, we need to know about it. It was the same with sound... When sound appeared, audiences required sound...Almendros said: 'It would be better that sound was invented 10 years later, it would have given cinematography more chances to develop much more effectively into a form of art'. Which I agree. ... In the beginning, until cinematographers realized how to work with sound, it was not the best time for cinematographers because basically sound persons were saying what kind of light should be used, otherwise there would be a shadow of the mike. In two or three years it was fixed up. Market required sound, the same happened with television, ...then people started to make wide screen films, so anamorphic technology appeared, so cinematographers had to deal with it. And color came, people like to see in colors. The trend was to have colors, so little by little, for many years, cinematographers realized how to work with color. So now it’s virtual cinematography, previsualizations, new ways to create images so cinematographers must learn new technologies, there’s no difference with everything else in general. Probably this new technology is slightly more distant from traditional cinema technology, but cinema changes by itself.

CB: What is Gamma & Density? Can you speak about 3CP project?

YN: Gamma & Density is based in an invention which I introduced many years ago... started when commercials and feature films stopped to print dailies. We had to start to see dailies on tape. And while negative-positive lab process was very strictly regulated and everybody was trained how to do it and labs worked fine... so if you were doing everything right in terms of exposure and colors, dailies came in predictably how they were supposed to be. Every cinematographer knew how to read printing lights, they knew it could be lighter, it could be darker, dailies are dailies and....

They could read timing shades, they could see the quality of the negative and be sure that everything was fine. There were not so many variations which could go wrong and it’s
important that there were standards of how to process negatives and how to print. Telecine time came and the dailies started to be covered on tape and standards simply did not exist then, so every day dailies were coming different. If in traditional cinematography negative-positive film you have only 3 or 4 parameters you can change, in dailies is up to 4 or 3 then. So basically when I worked in commercials and films and realized that my dailies, which I shoot with the same team the same crew, same lighting basically, more or less... I knew what I was supposed to see but I used to see something different and I realized that people who worked in telecine were not really understanding what the cinematographer is doing and they were adjusting gamma and luminance the way they felt it, not very consistently. So basically I suggested a special chart with different fields of color and gray which had to reflect a certain brightness of the screen. IRE. I suggested to expose this chart at the beginning so colors can be adjusted. I did it for myself first of all and I brought my idea to Kodak, but Kodak said that it was absolutely not necessary to do it because...I don’t know why...it was so strange to hear that... So I did it basically by myself, I did the chart for myself and it became very effective. And then people started asking to make charts for them, then I opened a small production company, Gamma & Density, where we started to make charts, and they have been all over the world. So by using the chart people are telling the colorist how to adjust the telecine. And it became a kind of novelty, and the US Patent Office gave me a patent of this, because nobody thought about this idea before. The chart is very simple but not many people understood charts and IREs, so we had to find out a different way, and I developed a program called 3CP cinematographer’s color correction program, where you on your computer can previsualize how you want to do it, how you would like to see the image, obviously on a calibrated monitor, and then a method of transporting these Look up Tables, looks of the material to the telecine or datacine or postproduction house. So it became 3CP. Now we have version 7 coming, it now works with every camera, every system. It was the first time system of previsualization on a set...how your image was supposed to look like. First it came in very big bags, now it’s in a
laptop, Iphone or Ipad, and people is using it in practically every country.

CB: So, it’s a tool to having control over the quality of the image.

YN: It’s a tool for transferring your visual ideas to the colorist, how images are supposed to look. Basically cinematographers are in charge of the image and they have the idea about how it’s supposed to look like. Sometimes it’s difficult to tell the colorist over the phone how it has to look like. 3CP sends not only images, it sends Look up Tables made for each color machine. And 3CP works with a calibrated monitor, the same calibration that people have in post, so it’s very difficult to make mistakes.

CB: Can you recommend me bibliography about the integration of cinematography and Visual Effects?

YN: Unfortunately there is not so much written yet. There is only one written document which is our White Paper. There is an article which I wrote about this problem in the Creative Color Magazine, about the importance of the creative part in cinematography, because only creativity will save the profession, not technology. It was published probably a couple of years ago. Only aesthetic quality, not technology, will save cinematography as an activity. Technology never saves any artistic activity.

Cinematography is now coming through next waves of change and transformation, but it’s coming with changes in cinema in general, because cinematographers are helping people to visualize the ideas of the script, the ideas from the directors. And sometimes visualizing becomes more complex and more sophisticated than it used to be. Subjects became more sophisticated and some of them require more sophisticated imagery and some don’t. Some ideas are very traditional and don’t need to have very complicated imagery. It depends on tone, taste, genre, it’s art, so it’s very difficult to put rules. But the cinematographer must be ready for any changes, this will save the profession. Everybody can buy a camera now, but to have a camera doesn’t make you a cinematographer, you become just a shooter. The cinematographer is the person
who visualizes and not just registers something. The cinematographer interprets what is in front of him and he makes visual statements, how it’s supposed to look like. Contrast, brightness, color, framing, movement, they symbolize some kind of his thinking, associations and the way he interprets reality. Not just registers. Then you are a cinematographer, with any camera. Ninety nine percent of great films were done with less technology than there is now, and were simple compared to today’s standards….Artistry is the most important thing.