The Future is NOW! the first film shot entirely on iPhone4 took the Golden Bear at the 61st Berlin International Film Festival

we interview the DP Ju Sung-Lim and the crew of "Night Fishing" directed by brothers Park Chan-Kyong and Park Chon-Wook, winner of the Cannes Jury Prizes for "Thirst" (2009) and "Oldboy" (2004)

Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC:
“My school, my teachers, Italian Neorealism, and a few Soviet films which have made me who I have become.”

READ THE EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW INSIDE!
Note from the Publisher

Yuri Neyman, ASC

It looks like we hit the nail on the head in the November issue of Gamma and Density Journal, which we devoted to the “Future of Cinematography.” More than 10,000 readers from 32 countries read it, and we received many strong and positive comments such as “...the issue is terrific and very thought-provoking. Thank you for taking this initiative.” (Bob Fisher, Journalist, Honorary Member of ASC) and “What a fantastic publication...keep them coming!” (Ron Johanson ACS, National President of Australian Cinematographers Society).

We’re reading the next issue of the Journal and would like to invite you to advertise your product or service in our publication. It’s great exposure, direct to working cinematographers, and we think we’ve put together compelling content which people will really read.

Many read the previous Journal a few times and wrote to us with their private opinions about what the future has in store for cinematographers. And more than a few expressed “shock” that someone was seriously writing about the Apple iPhone as a cinematographer’s tool.

And guess what? The future is now the present: World-known South Korean director Park Chan-Wook (Winner of Cannes Jury Prizes for "Thirst" (2009) and "Oldboy" (2004)) and his cinematographer Ju Sung-Lim decided to experiment and creatively enlarge filmmaking horizons via the use of an iPhone 4 on their latest film—trying to state one more time the eternal axiom “Size is not Everything.” This film received the Golden Bear (Grand Prix-Short Film Competition) at the 61st Berlin Film Festival, and when directors of such caliber are getting actively involved with this type of technology, a lot of heads from around the world will turn in this direction and try to learn how they did it.

We spoke with Ju Sung-Lim, DP, along with colorists Park Jin-Young and Kang Sang-Woo, as well as producer Wonjo Jeong, about the technical details of this professional production with 80 crew members, cranes, dollies and night lighting, all shot with the iPhone4. The result was shown at the Berlin Film Festival and our interview is in this issue of the Gamma and Density Journal.

With “small” cameras becoming part of the new "toolkit" for cinematographers it makes even more important the main asset of cinematography, no matter what camera is used: The Man With The Camera. And who would could be a better cinematographer to talk with than one of the very few in our profession who can say without hesitation “been there, done that,” Oscar and countless Awards winner Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC.

In an exclusive interview, Vilmos talks about topics rarely discussed, but which are very important for understanding his creative path. The story of him becoming a great cinematographer encompasses the period from his days in film school—describing his teachers, his trials and errors, and his near-expulsion from the school—his constant search for new ways of expression his collaboration with such great directors as Robert Altman, Steven Spielberg,
Note from the Publisher (Continued):

Michael Cimino and many others, all illustrated by many never-before or rarely seen photographs illustrating Vilmos’ life and creativity.

And it’s also good sometimes to celebrate not-so-round anniversaries: exactly 172 years ago photography was invented. On January 7th, 1839, at the session of the French Academy of Sciences, the report on an optical-chemical method of creating images was presented. The inventor and artist Louis Daguerre who created daguerreotype was the author of the report, the first publicly announced photographic process.

Then German astronomer Johann von Maedler, on February 25, and English scientist Sir John Herschel, on March 14, 1839 made the word “photography” known to the whole world. G&D Journal presents a small visual excursion into the history of this art, the predecessor of cinematography.

And in anticipation of The American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) organized International Cinematography Summit Conference (ICSC) in Los Angeles (May 2nd to May 5th, 2011), the President of IMAGO (European Federation of Cinematographers) Nigel Walters, BSC shares with us his thoughts and ideas about the current state of cinematographic profession, in an article written specially for the G&D Journal. “The early nineties were tumultuous days for Europe: cinematographers faced fresh challenges as the old frontiers and social systems were demolished. To give a voice to the chaotic situation which faced our profession, the societies of Britain, France, Italy and Germany established Imago...to improve the standards of cinematography by promoting an international exchange of knowledge.”
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Imago:
“Friendship and Co-operation Among All Cinematographers”

BY NIGEL WATERS, BSC - PRESIDENT OF IMAGO, VICE PRESIDENT OF BSC

With six Societies of Cinematographers joining Imago in Estonia in March, the Federation, started in Rome in 1992 by Luciano Tovoli AIC ASC has become a worldwide leader in championing friendship and co-operation among all cinematographers.

The early nineties were tumultuous days for Europe: cinematographers faced fresh challenges as the old frontiers and social systems were demolished. To give a voice to the chaotic situation which faced our profession the societies of Britain, France, Italy and Germany established Imago.

The idealism thrown up by those early turbulent times still motivates today. Imago is run by volunteers, the board has representatives from Belgium, France, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

Although known officially as the European Federation of Cinematographers, Imago exists today for the same reasons for which it was established: to improve the standards of cinematography by promoting an international exchange of knowledge. In practice this is directed by our Technical and Master class committees and collaboration with schools, festivals, forums and trade shows.

Mid-May marks the third Digital Cinema forum Imago and the Norwegian Society have held in the last four years. The full extent of our activity can be found on Imago.org, a communication highway for many members of our Societies and affiliates.
Imago:
“Friendship and Co-operation Among All Cinematographers”

Within Europe, cinematographers of eleven countries receive royalties from films which are shown in some European countries. Imago is committed to establishing a harmonisation of European legislation on Authors Rights. Every cinematographer everywhere has rights as author of his cinematography; many sign them away too easily. Of importance also is the fight for the respect and the role of our profession as technological advances open new challenges and changes for film makers.

Unlike the USA where effective labour legislation is in force, in some European countries chaos and exploitation reigns. It would be irresponsible of Imago not to attempt further harmonisation through improvements in Working Conditions. Imago reacted to the challenge of Camerimage in Lodz by publishing our Model Contract with guide lines for working conditions. It has been adopted in Bulgaria and established as an approved standard in that country. There is no apology to be made in quoting the words of Conrad Hall ASC:” As cinematographers our responsibility is to the visual image of the film as well as to the well being of our crew.”

The 45 Societies which will shortly make up Imago bring together representatives of nations as diverse as Israel and Iran, Serbia and Croatia. The reward for those of us who work for Imago is to witness this unity of friendship and professionalism way beyond social and political divisions. The recent publication of the first World Directory of Cinematographers is the first tangible symbol that the World of cinematography has truly become a smaller one.
The Future is NOW!

the first film shot entirely on iPhone 4 took the Golden Bear at the 61st Berlin International Film Festival

we interview the DP Ju Sung-Lim and the crew of "Night Fishing" directed by brothers Park Chan-Kyong and Park Chan-Wook, winner of the Cannes Jury Prizes for "Thirst" (2009) and "Oldboy" (2004)

BY CHEMULPO INCHEON

It sounds like a rather trivial phrase these days - "the future is right here, right now...", but the brisk pace of technological and cultural changes means that the future reaches the present much faster than we ever previously imagined it could. The future is literally rolling towards us.

In the October issue of the Gamma and Density Journal, which we devoted to the "Future of Cinematography", we published the article by Debra Kaufman titled "Mobile On the Set - Why the Latest Digital Camera May be Your Cell Phone". Debra, a well-known blogger (http://mobilizedtv.com/), has covered the entertainment industry for over 20 years. Based in Los Angeles, she writes about new media, entertainment technology and other topics for The Hollywood Reporter, Variety, TV Week, Film & Video, and many others. Her work has also been published in Wired, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times and American Cinematographer. Her "fantasy world" regarding mobile cinematography was based on a very solid reality.

For those who expressed shock that someone was seriously writing that "more and more people will begin to use their mobile phones as their video camera," here is a surprise – a real world event literally brought what Debra Kaufman predicted in November to life. The world-known South Korean director Park Chan-Wook (Winner of the Cannes Jury Prizes for "Thirst" (2009)
and "Oldboy" (2004), with his co-director brother Park Chan-Kyong, and cinematographer Ju Sung-Lim, did just this! Together they creatively enlarged the filmmaking horizon via the use of an iPhone 4 on their latest short film “Night Fishing” – reiterating once again, the eternal axiom, 'Oldboy,' 'Thirst,' and the other films for which the Korean auteur is known, are all brashly cinematic Grand Guignols, larger than life sagas flecked with opera, dizzying camera movements, and oceans of blood. We'd sooner have guessed that his next film would be shot on 70mm than an iPhone 4.

"size is not everything." This film, the first shot entirely on an iPhone 4, took home the Golden Bear at the 61st Berlin International Film Festival.

The Industry has seen new possibilities through digital cameras and post-production applications for a long time, but now high-definition cameras really are in your hand!

A Park Chan-Wook film is always a major event, and it sounds like this is no exception. The blogger, David Ehrlich, wrote: "Park Chan-Wook isn't exactly known for doing things the small way -- but we would have been very, very wrong."

This unexpected use of mobile technology points us to the rapid changes in the visual culture of cinematography; it highlights the issues of culture change in both producing and viewing films and images. Aesthetics of images have changed too.

The image quality of "Lawrence of Arabia," "Black Narcissus," "Days of Heaven," and others films so many of us admire, are being re-examined by many young and talented directors in search of new, contemporary ways of expressing their vision.
In terms of art history, it is very similar to when a group of artists offered their work for public view in the former studio of the photographer Nadar, at 35 boulevard des Capucines, Paris, on April 15, 1874. Although some critics appreciated the "new paintings," most subjected the artists to ridicule. The work of these artists, the "Impressionists," eventually lead to what is now recognized as Modern Art.

Shooting video with a smart phone is nothing new, and many such videos already exist on websites. However, this is the first time someone of such high-profile has made an attempt to create an entire film on a phone. The director, known for his careful framing and often-difficult subject matter, said the limitations of using the small device brought creativity and life to the film.

In one interview, Park Chan-Wook said: "Movies that I directed before were meticulously planned ahead and shot just as pictured. Compared to that, shooting this film felt free..."

However, he also said "the medium would not outweigh the message," and that, "making a film with a smart phone might generate more interest at the moment, but as time goes by, stories and actors on screen will be seen as more important." He claimed that they, "went through all the same film-making processes except that the camera was small."

The entire film was created using as many as 10 Apple iPhone 4s, three of which the director controlled himself. The cost of the film was 150 million won ($133,000), and it took ten days to shoot.
We spoke with Ju Sung-Lim, Director of Photography, and long time collaborator of director Park Chan-Wook, and also with colorists Park Jin-Young and Kang Sang-Woo from CJ PowerCast post house, as well as producer Wonjo Jeong, about the technical details of this professional production with cranes, dollies and night lighting.

Night shoots proved especially challenging for the iPhone4, with the camera requiring a lot of lighting to get a clean image.

According to Ju Sung-Lim, Director of Photography, they rated the iPhone4 at 320 ASA for night scenes, and at 80 ASA for day scenes. He ended up treating those two separate ratings almost as if they were two different film stocks.

In the end, the night scenes were a bit grainy, so the directors later turned those scenes B&W, which resulted in an interesting look for the night sequences.

“We added grain throughout the film in post (with the colorist doing a great job here) to have a consistent look - since some of the day shots looked too clean.”
Another issue was how to ensure a consistent frame rate, so a lot of ND filters were used to achieve the correct frame rate of 30fps.

The scenes were shot simultaneously with two iPhones from different angles, but staffers also contributed by recording on their own iPhones.

The cameras were equipped with a Bubo OWLE mount with an EnCinema lens adaptor to allow the crew to use a full set of Cannon and Zeiss lenses. But use of adapters led to a “loss” of two and a half stops.

Ju Sung-Lim, Director of Photography said: “The director really wanted to see if we could sort of achieve something close to our film look by using something like an iPhone. This is why we chose to use the DSLR lenses and so forth. We were quite lucky that that stuff was available, such as the adapter and the mount, to make the full use of high quality lenses.”

“From an artistic point of view, we tried to create an interesting look for all scenes, especially for the night scenes. First we started de-graining, then it was an artistic choice to actually turn it into B&W... into a grainy 8mm film look. Then apply a slight grain throughout the rest of the film to hold onto some consistency. So those artistic choices were pulled out of some sort of limitations when working with the iPhone. We are all quite happy with what we ended up with at the end of the day. It was sort of an interesting thing that came out of this whole process.”
“The final task was to make a DCP conversion for digital cinema distribution. So we had to apply the film look up table and convert to 24 fps, and also blow it up to fit the specifications of the DCP. And of course we did a lot of sharpening, de-graining, re-graining and also we applied different algorithms to blow up the image.”

Jin-young was very excited to work with the iPhone images because she was able to watch very distinct camera movements which would not have been possible with regular field cameras. There is a shot where the DP actually flips the camera over, a rotation shot in one camera movement. She was very excited to watch and work with such creative and unique images. With the iPhone footage she was also able to accomplish very interesting color work in terms of grain texture and sharpness.

Director of Photography Ju Sung-Lim isn’t sure when he will have an opportunity to make another iPhone film, but if he was to do another one and had the time and resources, he would talk to programmers to custom design an iPhone app to serve his purposes. He felt the existing apps were quite limited. While he is very thankful to the creators of the Almost DSLR app, he wishes that the app would allow you to lock down exposure and color temperature.

“And also, the iPhone by its design, doesn’t allow you to monitor what you are shooting realtime/live. Because we had two directors, we had one looking at the camera and one at the monitor looking at playback. Of course there was someone always next to the camera. But in order for the DP to have it reviewed by both directors it was essential we had the video to view for the playback. This is also something he would hope to improve upon if possible.

All this being said, Ju Sung-Lim feels that he was able to identify and overcome most of the issues related to shooting a movie on an iPhone. The most challenging were to overcome the resolution issues and the shallow color spectrum compared to other digital cameras, however he feels very satisfied with the results. Overall, the visual palette of the film is very rich and the images are very good and artistically lit. It appears that Sung-Lim perfectly understood the limitations of the technology.

The use of the iPhone was also a challenge for Producer, Wonjo Jeong, who said, “we had about 80 crew working on the set and all the elements of usual filmmaking were there. We had dollies out, we were using a crane, we were even using a boat on the river. We had special effects, CGI, VFX, action choreography.

Image from camera tests with the iPhone4 (iPhone on the dolly)

Actually this is the whole concept of using the iPhone...the directors didn’t want you to know... they didn’t want to make any compromises and make something that was handheld, or something that you could go out and shoot easily. They wanted to create a film. The Directors wanted to create a proper film using the iPhone and that’s why we were doing all these tests. But in order to do that, we had a very limited budget to work with. If you can imagine a usual five-day shoot on a film where you have just have the camera switched to the iPhone. So the only difference is the camera rental.
Fortunately, on this production...the telephone company that carries the iPhone in Korea was sponsoring us, so they provided the budget for the cameras. So all the camera related costs and DSLR lens fees were not really worth a lot. In terms of post-production, since we were working with such a low budget, we had to find partners to come on board this interesting project look at it as a challenge and work together as a partner. Fortunately, we found CJ who were willing and kind enough to sponsor our production. So in terms of post production, again, it’s more sponsorship than a partnership.”

According to producer Wonjo Jeong and supervising colorist Kang Sang-woo from CJ PowerCast, “all post-production took about a week, including transcoding from H.264 to DPX, color correction, DCP, VFX... Obviously that estimate is just counting the overall hours, because it was actually spread out over about a month of real time.”

The director Park Chan-Wook sees ‘Night Fishing” as a precursor to shooting full-length feature films in this same manner. From his point of view “.. the democratization of cinema through relatively inexpensive cameras is the way to go.”

And he adds, “When I grow older and less popular, there will come a time when I have to shoot films on low budgets. This experience has meaning in that it has prepared me ahead of time.”

What a wise man Park Chan-Wook is!
IC Image Control brings Gamma and Density's 3CP On-Set Color Correction System to the Apple iPad and iPhone.

The new app will be shown for the first time at NAB 2011 at our development partner: Synthetic Aperture's Booth SL3327E (South Hall, Lower Level).
A Look Back at 172 Years of Photography

172 years ago photography was invented. On January 7th, 1839, at the session of the French Academy of Sciences, the report on an optical-chemical method of creating images was presented. The inventor and artist Louis Daguerre who created daguerreotype was the author of the report on the first publicly announced photographic process. Then German astronomer Johann von Maeder, on February 25, and English scientist Sir John Herschel, on March 14, 1839 made the word “photography” known to the whole world. G&D Journal presents a small visual excursion into the history of this art, the predecessor of cinematography.

The oldest known photographs of Joseph Nieps (1826)

LEFT:
“Abby’s Windows” by William Henri Fox (1835). The print from the oldest photo negative.

RIGHT:
Robert Cornelius, self-portrait, Oct. or Nov. 1839, approximate quarter plate daguerreotype. The back reads, “The first light picture ever taken.” This self-portrait is the first photographic portrait image of a human ever produced.
"Boulevard du Temple", taken by Louis Daguerre in late 1838 or early 1839, was the first-ever photograph of a person. It is an image of a busy street, but because exposure time was over ten minutes, the city traffic was moving too much to appear. The exception is a man in the bottom left corner, who stood still getting his boots polished long enough to show up in the picture.

BELOW:
“Artist Studio” by Luis Daguerre (1837)

TOP RIGHT:
Photograph of William Henri Fox (1840)

BOTTOM RIGHT:
“Coucher” by William Henri Fox (1840)
Louis Daguerre’s camera made by Alphonse Giroux in 1841.

First ever color photograph by James Maxwell (1861)

First ever photo montage by Henri Robinson (1858)

First ever HDR photograph by Henri Robinson (1877). The combination print from 6 negatives.
1940s: First High-Speed Photography Images
Dr. Harold "Doc" Edgerton, a professor of electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, works with National Geographic to perfect high-speed stroboscopic photography, freezing on film the rapid movements of nature that elude the eye. National Geographic publishes several of the images, including bullets frozen in mid-flight and stilled hummingbird wings. Nicknamed "Papa Flash," Edgerton's techniques are later used to illuminate the ocean's deepest abysses.

Photograph made by crew of Apollo 17 (1972)

First ever digital camera created by Kodak engineer Steve Sasson (1975)
Flashback to 1913: Sarah Bernhardt, a shining star on the stage, played a leading role in a French film titled Les Armure de la Reine Elizabeth (The Love of Queen Elizabeth). The silent film was one of the first successful four-reel movies.

A distraught newspaper critic asked Bernhardt how she could lower herself to act in a film. Motion pictures were considered lowbrow entertainment for the masses who couldn’t afford the price of plays on Broadway and other stages.

Bernhardt replied, “Movies are my best chance at immortality.”

It was a prescient observation. Guillermo Navarro, ASC said it poetically when he described movies as the Rosetta Stone of our times. Narrative and documentary films are how future generations will see who we were, what we did and how we saw the world.

I recently wrote an article about Niger ’66: A Peace Corps Diary which was produced and directed by Judy Irola, ASC. The film is the story of the experiences that she shared with 64 other Peace Corps volunteers who served from 1966-68 in the African nation of Niger and how it influenced their lives.

The film is visually punctuated with black and white and color still pictures taken by the volunteers and images from a 16 mm recruiting film that the U.S. government produced documenting the work they were doing in the poverty-stricken African nation.

Irola also used images culled from a 16 mm film that was produced in 1970 by a group of Yale University students documenting what life was like in the United States at that time in history. It includes people protesting the war in Vietnam, demonstrations by the women’s right movement and The Black Panthers advocating equal civil rights.

Niger ’66: A Peace Corps Diary was chosen for the 2011 American Documentary Showcase, a program supported by the Department of Cultural and Educational Affairs, which is a wing U.S. State Department. It is one of 20 documentaries that are being offered for screenings at film festivals and other venues by U.S. embassies.

Bettsey McLane, project director of the Showcase which was launched in 2009, says that the documentaries played in some 50 countries in 2010. She estimates that about one third of the films chosen for the Showcase make extensive use of archival footage.
“Preserving Today’s Stories for Tomorrow’s Audiences”

No Sub-Titles Necessary: Vilmos and Laszlo was featured at film festivals and other venues in Moscow and Vladivostok. The documentary was produced and directed by James Chressanthis, ASC. It tracks 50 years of history in the lives of Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC and Laszlo Kovacs, ASC. There are early scenes where Soviet tanks and soldiers are brutally supressing a 1956 civilian uprising against the communist regime in Budapest, Hungary. The 50 year old film stood the test of time.

“I could feel the emotional reactions of people in the audience,” Chressanthis recalls. “After the screening, a student told me they didn’t learn about that in school.”

The Academy and Library of Congress are in the final stages of preparing a comprehensive follow-up report focusing on independently produced narrative films and documentaries. The research was done by Maltz and Shetter who are co-authoring the report. They both speak passionately about the need to educate people in all sectors of the industry about what steps need to be taken to preserve today’s independent narrative films and documentaries for tomorrow’s audiences.

We will report on their findings in the next issue.

The historical value of archiving film is just part of the story. In late 2008, the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences published The Digital Dilemma, a 75 page report summing up a year long study comparing the cost and effectiveness of film and digital archiving. The report was co-authored by preservationist Milt Shetter and Andy Maltz, who is the director of the Academy’s Science and Technology Council.

New York Times journalist Michael Cieply summed up the findings, when he wrote, “…we could be watching Wallace Beery (silent films) long after more contemporary images are gone.” Cieply also cited a report published by Global Media Intelligence stating that approximately one-third of the $35 billion in annual revenues earned by the Hollywood studios comes from sales of older feature films to television and home video markets.
“My School, My Teachers, Italian Neorealism And Few Soviet Films Which Made Me Who I Have Become…”

INTERVIEW WITH VILMOS ZSIGMOND, ASC
CONDUCTED BY YURI NEYMAN, ASC

The influence of Hungarian photographers, cinematographers, and the Hungarian school of cinematography on the world’s photography, cinematography and visual culture in general is well known.

Many great photographers and cinematographers came from Hungary – Brassai (Gyula Halázs), Rober Capa (Endre Ernő Friedmann), Lisette Model, László Moholy-Nagy, Martin Munkácsi, André Kertész (see photos on next page).

Cinematographers Vilmos Zsigmond (ASC, HSC), László Kovács (ASC, HSC), Jenő Aittmann aka John Alton (ASC), György Illés, Sándor Sára (HSC), Lajos Koltai (ASC, HSC), Sándor Kardos (HSC), János Kende (HSC), Tamás Somló (HSC), Elemér Ragályi (HSC) and many others distinguished themselves not only as exceptional and visually gifted cinematographers, but contributed through their films to the growth of modern understanding of the importance of the visual part of cinema’s storytelling.

And for a small country of only ten million people - that speaks for itself.

Between 1948 and 1965 Hungarian films won more than 100 prestigious International Awards at many major film festivals and “from 1968 to 1996 Hungarian cinematographers won a total 122 international awards”.

Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC
Stills from Vilmos Zsigmond’s films

“Close Encounters” 1977
“McCabe & Mrs. Miller” 1971
“Deliverance” 1972
“The Long Goodbye” 1973
In this exclusive interview for Gamma and Density Journal with Director of Photography Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC, Oscar and countless Awards winner (1) “The Man With The Camera” who has “been there, done that,” and who also gave us many gems of imagery such as “McCabe & Mrs. Miller”, “The Long Goodbye”, “Deliverance”, “The Sugarland Express”, “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” and many others, he talks about topics rarely discussed. These topics include films school, the necessity of understanding of art for cinematographers, influences on him from teachers and mentors, his style of collaboration with directors, and the solidarity among cinematographers.

In our opinion those topics are very important for understanding sources of creativity for cinematographers. They are road-maps of their successes and in the example of Vilmos help us better understand his achievements, his creative path from school to the present and his input in the Art of Cinematography. The story of him becoming a great cinematographer starts in the early 1950’s — describing his teachers, his trials and errors, and his constant, un-stoppable urge to perfect his images.

INTERVIEW

Yuri Neyman, ASC - So here is my first question. You have been in the US for many years, but still are probably one of the best representatives of the Hungarian film school and Hungarian traditions.

In your opinion, what makes Hungarians so special in the world of photographic and cinematic arts? Is it a special way of teaching?

Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC - You know, basically the big difference is that first of all we had a film school that all the experienced and renowned DP’s were teaching at. That doesn’t really happen in many places...
Maybe in Poland or Russia or Czechoslovakia, because they had many teachers that were distinguished professionals, but in the Hungarian school all of them were the best cinematographers of their times—like György Illés, Barnabás Hegyi, István Pásztor, János Badal, István Eiben.

And then—there was a lot of work to do in that school!

They were teaching us 4 years—and not just one teacher... 4 or 5 of them. And the other thing was that in Hungary we started to make movies from the very earliest days when film was invented. You know?


Yuri - Yes, I read that in 1896 “was the very first attempt in the world to use films to shoot current events (newsreels)” and that in 1898 a feature film was made in Hungary.

Vilmos—It was only a year after they started to make films in France. And then Hungary built a studio where we were making movies, in parallel to what was happening in Western Europe—France, Germany and others. Hungarians were keeping up with Western Europe in those days, until we came under the Soviet influence in 1945.

And a lot of what was invented came from Hungary. For example the first subway in the world was in Budapest. (2)

Yuri - So, what you are saying is that there is something very special in the air or in the food in Hungary?
Vilmos: [laugh] No, it's actually the willingness of a small nation to prove itself, to prove itself against the world. That's why we had many people that were inventors in the past. An electric engine for the train was invented in Hungary.(3)

Many Hungarians scientists took part in the “Manhattan Project”, the atomic bomb development.

Yuri: Yes, like Leó Szilárd, Edward Teller, John von Neumann and a few others.

Vilmos: At one time even in sports actually we were terrific.

Yuri: I do remember the Hungarian soccer team.

Vilmos: Yeah, the soccer team, in the Olympics, I think it was in Finland. Hungary won Olympic gold and beat England in soccer in 1952. (4)

Yuri: When I was visiting the Hungarian Film School the Dean of the camera department

Máthé Tibor, HSC showed to me a very detailed questionnaire about fine arts, literature, music, photography, cinema, politics, technology - given to future cinematography students even before they take their entrance tests. Was something like this given to you back then at the time of your film school days?

Vilmos: I don’t think that those questions were given at that time. In my days, we had to go straight to an examination to get admitted to the school. It was a 3 day examination in photography, technique, all types of examinations. I lived then in Szeged – 180 km from Budapest, and the school gave me a hotel to stay at.

Yuri: Well, sounds like it was similar to VGIK, the Moscow Film School. It was two-weeks of examinations. First 3 days only “professional tests” - practical and theoretical photography, physics and photo-chemistry, and after that were additional tests about history, literature, arts, etc.

Anatolii Golovnia (5), the classical Soviet cinematographer who worked with Vsevolod Pudovkin (6) (and was the Dean of the Camera Faculty since 1934 created this system for the professional education of cinematographers in the 30’s and 40’s...)

Vilmos: There are a lot of similarities between the two schools.

“Mother”. 1926, Dir. V.Pudovkin, DP – Anatoli Golovnia (created the system for the professional education of cinematographers in the 30’s and 40’s)
Yuri - I believe what happened is when Eastern Europe became a part of the Soviet “empire” after WWII, film schools in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, East Germany and Romania were suggested to look into Moscow film school practices established since 1919 by Lev Kuleshov (7), the creator of the editing theory and Sergei Eisenstein (8).

Yet there is something very special in how people visually think and look at things in the Hungarian film school and there is something special in “the look” of Hungarian films.

For how long did you study the fine arts in school?

Caravaggio, “The Calling of St. Matthew” - 1600

Vilmos - Starting from the first year. We had a teacher, who studied art in Florence and who was teaching us about Caravaggio, Leonardo da Vinci, Dutch masters and other artists. And we studied the art and practice of photography also... had to take stills of statues, then portraits and reportage. Then we had to make a 16mm movie, and then we were “promoted” to 35mm. And then finally, the diploma (thesis) 35mm movie we had to shoot for graduation, and it had to be shown in a movie theater.

Yuri - What was your biggest artistic influence? We have talked about the influence that the movie “Village Teacher” had on you (USSR, 1949. DP - Sergei Urusevsky “I am Cuba”, “Cranes Are Flying” (9)) Anybody else?

Vilmos - For one thing, I think since we were basically under the influence of the Soviet system, you know, we went to see Soviet films, and we had to... But when I fell in love with Pudovkin’s “Mother”, Eisenstein’s “Potemkin” Dovzsenko’s, “Earth”(10), it was because they are great movies.

A lot of Soviet movies were political junk, but some of them were very good and we in the school did not care about the politics in the movies – we looked at how they were shot, how they were edited.

“The Village Teacher” 1947. Dir. Mark Donskoy. DP. Sergei Urusevsky (“I am Cuba”). His work was a strong influence to Vilmos.

And the important thing about our cinematography education was the character of our teachers. We studied in the film school for 4 years, day and night, and I didn’t feel like I was a slave of the system, because I became a...
Yes, we had a few political classes to go to, they were very boring. But most of the classes were about Art. Half of the morning was art education class. History of fine arts, drawing, painting, and then in the afternoon, were only cinematography workshops in the studio, to light.

We used still cameras first and we “graduated” to 16mm movie cameras and then in the third year to 35mm.

We kept doing it again and again with teachers present until we could actually shoot the whole thing by ourselves, without anybody getting involved to help us. We had to do the movie the way we saw it.

Yuri - You were allowed a lot of creative freedom? Because at some schools, I know some teachers would say, “do as we say” or “these are the rules.”

Vilmos - No, no. They were teaching us the basic things, but we were controlling the workshop. We could do anything we wanted to do. Maybe in the end for the graduate movie, there might be a teacher behind us, but they would only interfere if there were something really bad because they knew that the movie had to be shown in the theaters. Only if something was really bad they would try to correct it.

"111 - es", 1937. DP István Eiben, one of Vilmos’s Professors, was a great influence on Vilmos in filmschool.

Yuri - Unless there was something horribly wrong?

Vilmos - That’s right! A funny thing happened. We had an old teacher István Eiben. He was a great Cinematographer, like Gordon Willis of Hungary. István used the same technique of overexposing and under-developing black and white negative to get those incredible details in shadows...

"Earth", 1930. DP D. Demucky, dir. A. Dovjenko

"Mona Lisa", Leonardo da Vinci 1519 sample of sfumato style

Similar to the painting technique called sfumato - soft contours and details in shadows (11) and I really loved his style. I imitated his style a lot of times in my school films.
Yuri - If I recall it was a technique invented or enhanced by Hungarian photographer and inventor Jenő Dulovits in the 40's. He was well known in the Soviet Union, because he invented a SLR camera with the instant return mirror and the automatic diaphragm, at least ten years before these features became commonly used, and his book “My Technique, My Pictures” (in Hungarian it was known as “Művészeti Fényképezés” (“Artistic Photography”) – it was very inspiring. He was a “believer” in a very soft, underdeveloped negative and a very high contrast print combined with over exposure of the negative.

Vilmos - Yes, I remember this book, and read it when I was young, before film school.

Yuri - He would say you need under-development to have fine grain. And then make a high contrast print and you would have the best range.

Vilmos - I don't know if he invented that or not, but he was known for using that technique. He mostly shot everything with backlight, that's what gave him this beautiful backlight on the hair.

Yuri - In his book he said backlight is the most important light to everyone. Which was very interesting because backlight is very expressive, and Dulovits was always saying that everything has to be “beautiful” no matter what. Yet what was beautiful in the 40's is not necessarily beautiful now.

Vilmos - But of course you should not use backlight all the time. It is too beautiful and pretty. And when you are doing a documentary style you want to avoid that type of look.

Yuri - When you came to the United States after escaping from Hungary, were you able to stay in touch with Hungary? How long did it take to restore your relationships with your friends?
And of course we could not talk about politics in the mail. We had to be very careful when writing to each other. Then we met with my teacher Illés, I don’t remember the year. It was maybe around 1968. 12 years after I left. It was when György came to Los Angeles with the film “The Boys of Paul Street”. It was a beautiful film directed by the great Zoltán Fábri. György Illés shot it.

Yuri - I remember another beautiful film of Zoltán Fábri’ photographed by György Illés - “20 hours”. And I remember Illés’s film “Spring in Budapest” – also beautifully photographed.

When I saw it the first time I was very young, I didn’t even know that the cinematography profession existed, but I still remember the film. (12)

Vilmos - Oh really, that’s funny.

Yuri - I’ve seen it on a very small b/w TV screen in Russia, 4x6 or something. It was a very tragic film. I remember a few close ups. I still remember the shots still now.

Vilmos - I was corresponding, basically with György Illés and Béla Bojkovszky. Béla was a great gaffer, who could have been a cinematographer. He did the lighting for many cinematographers. And he was brilliant at it.

I was also in touch my friend Tibor Vagyoczky, with whom I don’t think you’ve met. We corresponded with each other all those years, even today.

Illés’s Professor.
Vilmos - It is interesting, because I shot a film, my diploma film at the same location that Illés shot “Spring in Budapest”. It was shot in the spring of 1955 in the ruins of the Budavar castle. The movie was about what will happen when the war ends, the people’s aspirations and what the future will hold for them.

Yuri - Tell us about György Illés, your teacher. He was a legendary cinematographer and a great teacher. Where did he come from, what was his influence on you? What made him such a great teacher? Everybody still talks about him, he was part of the new wave of the “Hungarian School of Cinematography.”

Vilmos - He came from the bottom of the film ranks actually in the late 30’s–early 40’s. He was working as a gaffer for a long time, and he taught himself to be a cinematographer when the Soviets came to Hungary in 1945, at the end of the Soviet-German War. The new communist government was looking for some new talent they could trust, and got rid of the Horty regime “establishment” like older cinematographers István Eiben and Barnabás Hegyi.

György Illés was a new and great cinematographer. He probably had to join the Communist Party, otherwise he would not have been a DP in those days, in the late 40’s and 50’s.

The first thing he did – he advised the government to keep these experienced and talented DP’s like Eiben and Hegyi for the sake of teaching the new generation of cinematographers. During those complicated times he didn’t harm anyone. In fact he actually saved many older cinematographer’s jobs and the Hungarian film industry in this way.

Yuri - What, from a creative point of view, were the main characteristics of Illés style?

Vilmos - A very realistic approach to imagery. He was a cinematographer that would tell you that everything had to be naturalistic and real – very much according to the requirements of “social realism”, which was the predominant artistic style in use in the USSR and Eastern Europe.

I didn’t really like this style too much. I had invented my own style and didn’t even know I was inventing a new style at that time.

Yuri - That’s the best way, when you don’t even know you are doing it.

Vilmos - They were telling me then that I was a poet with the camera and I liked that. István Eiben’s style was very influential to me. He was the oldest teacher and he had this style, you know, that was amazing. I liked his style much better then Illés. I also liked Hegyi Barnabás’ approach to cinematography, which consisted of a lot of handheld shots.
Yuri - Do you have images from your student films? It would be interesting to see how your style developed.

Vilmos - Yes, yes I have images from my student film “A Föld” (My Land).

Yuri - It is very exiting to see the beginning and evolution of your creative style, your style of visual poetry. Student work often indicates what kind of cinematographer someone could become.

Vilmos - It’s interesting, that at the beginning I was finding it difficult to tell the story with images. I didn’t grow up in the movie industry and didn’t know much about it. I got into the film school by having experience in still photography.

Once I was in the film school I had to tell a story with eight photographs – as one of my assignments. On the first attempt I was not really that good.

In fact, I remember that Illés probably wanted to throw me out of the school...

And the assistant professor, János Badal (who left for France in 1956, and worked with Jaque Tati later) saved me.

Without him, I don’t think I would be here today. Once they kick you out of the school, you have a very hard time to get back in.

Badal liked me and he knew that I was probably better then what I was showing at that point, so he gave me another chance. This was a wake up call for me. What the fck am I doing wrong? So I had to work harder the next year. That’s where I started to do things that came out quite nice.

A frame from "Tender Grass" 1965. Dir. James Landis. DP Vilmos Zsigmond
I graduated with a diploma, which let me work in a feature film studio. I started to work as an assistant with Janos Badal. I was so happy when he let me operate on a few shots. Before I escaped from Hungary, I photographed only two short films, and one of them was about folk dancing.

Yuri - Can we say that your artistic sensitivities were formed in Hungary, in the Budapest film school?

Vilmos - Yes.

Yuri - But when you started your cinematography career in the USA, with your first feature film, who was your biggest creative influence? Still Hungarian cinematographers? Hungarian school? Or did you try to adapt yourself to work more like American cinematographers of those times?

Vilmos - My biggest influence in the film school days from 1951-55 were Italian neo-realistic movies (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_neorealism). Since the Italian movies were mostly socialistic in those days, we were allowed to see them. And they were very artistic, not primitive communist propaganda.

They were about people. They were in the neo-realist style like the films of Vittorio De Sica, and his “Bicycle Thieves” (13).

And those films were very influential for me, because in Hungary and in the Soviet Union, they were preaching about the advantages of the socialistic system and all that. They were preaching about realism and it was not really realism, it was, you know, “social realism” which is not realism at all.

Italian neo-realistic films were the real thing. They were not throwing socialist ideas at you, just showing you how people are living and struggling. showing you real life things. Standing in line for example. Like in “Rome 11 o’clock” (14) - hundreds of women waiting for a job interview as a secretary. That was also very influential for me, yes!

“Rome 11 o’clock” (1952) DP Otello Martelli, Dir. Giuseppe de Santis

Zavattini, De Santis, Rossellini, Antonioni and Visconti were many of my favorite filmmakers in those days. “Umberto D” (15) was my favorite neo-realist film; it’s just a perfect movie. As poetic realism, it was just incredible. It was basically like a silent film, about an old man and his dog. One of the greatest movies ever made. This is a film to teach students how visual images can tell a story.
We didn’t suspect the scale of his influence on neo-realism, but when you look at those films again, one more time you can start to see what the Italians saw in it.

Vilmos - Then of course the old Soviet classics, “Potemkin”, “Ivan the Terrible”

Vilmos - Strangely enough, I also loved many films that were from the Soviet Union. “The Village Teacher” shot by Sergei Urusevsky (16) was one of them. And I also liked all of the Mark Donskoi directed films (17). They are very similar to neo-realism.

Yuri - It was very surprising to us in the Moscow Film school to learn that the Italians first of all and Europeans in general consider director Mark Donskoi as the father of neo-realism.

And later on when I already was in America, came the French new wave. I don’t know when it started basically... From “400 blows?” (18)

Yuri - “400 blows” (“Les Quatre Cents Coups”) was one of the first well known and also Godard’s “Breathless” (À bout de souffle) with its new bold visual style brought to us by Raul Coutard, AFC (19).
Vilmos - Right!

Yuri - When you started – how did you deal with directors?

Vilmos - You know, I started as “the hired hand”, the cameraman for hire. I remember a Western, very simple Western, very simply done. Directed by somebody who never directed before - an actor - Peter Fonda. It was called “Hired Hand”, 1971 I had to be more involved in staging and composing the image, screen directions for example, so I had to guide him the first couple weeks. After this, he took over.

Once time I started to line up a shot and he stopped me and said, “you think you are going to put the camera there? I will tell you where the camera goes.” So he graduated to the job of a director after just two weeks of “education.” I was so happy about it, because I didn’t want to direct the whole fcking film. I just wanted to help him gain experience.

Yuri - That’s interesting, because when I spoke to Lajos Koltai, ASC, HSC (20) he told me that the Hungarian film school has a very interesting approach to building relationship between the director and cinematographer. A student DP is always prepared to be the right hand of a director, to learn the director’s skill, just in case everything fails. It is a very thoughtful system.

Vilmos - And as you know, we are not only next to the director, we are also the first audience. We are watching what we are shooting and always thinking about what is going to be shown in the theater. And that also goes for editing. I have to know how sequences, scenes and shots will edit together. Many directors should be thinking about this too, but sometime they don’t.
In our Hungarian school we had all those classes. We had to understand lighting for continuity so that things would match. We learned why it is important to know which shot will follow which shot. If you don’t know that, there is a possibility that it won’t work. We are also thinking about that ahead of time. It’s how we light and compose the pictures and also the size of the pictures for the continuity. Many directors don’t even suspect that we know that.

Yuri - Let’s go back to discussing Hungary now. The Hungarian film industry got a lot of awards for films and specifically for cinematography. Very visual directors like Miklós Jancsó, István Szabó, Béla Tarr, Márta Mészáros, Zoltán Fábri and a few others appeared in the 60’s.

Jancsó and Szabó are probably the most known in the West (21). So can you tell me if for example Jancsó’s visuals are typical of the Hungarian style in film? He is very unique, but how unique is he?

Vilmos - Well you’re basically talking about his favorite “device” - one shot per 1000’ roll.

Yuri - Not necessarily. For example, he and DP János Kende did the film “The Red and The White” (“Csillagosok, katonák”, 1967) where there are very different shots, some of them one shot per roll, some not, but the framing and composition in all shots are very distinctive. Or “Uprising”, (“Szegénylegények”, 1966. DP – Tamás Somló, (23) one of his earlier films.

He always created a very special visual atmosphere. No matter who the cinematographer was that he was working with, he still dominated in a sense that he created a very visual fabric. Very powerful, rather complex compositions, with low horizon, plenty of sky and lots of people at the bottom of the frame. Is this traditional? Did it come from Hungarian paintings? Is his vision a part of Hungarian visual traditions?

Vilmos - I don’t think that it resembled anything that was done before. I don’t know any directors that have used the style as effectively as Jancsó has.
Yuri - If you would talk about your style, how would you describe it?

Vilmos - Basically, I would call it poetic reality. I am really trying to be very honest with the lighting. As far as sources go, light coming through windows, coming from lamps. I always want to see the sources for the light in the room. I want them to be real for the location and what’s there, and I don’t want to work against it.

Otherwise, people realize they are not seeing the “real thing.” On the other hand, I like to design and place those light sources myself in order to follow up the mood of the scene with my style of lighting. I would say it is a little bit better than just simply real, but it’s still real. More like the painters do.

Vilmos - Absolutely.

Yuri - Nowadays, people are paying less attention to lighting and more attention to color, it’s an art – the style, and elements of style come and go.

Vilmos - I think you are right about that. But you know, I still think that light is very important even today. You still see a lot of movies that are lit right. I don’t know if you saw the movie, “Biutiful”.

Yuri - Yeah. Rodrigo Prieto. (25) He is one of the most gifted cinematographers today.

Vilmos - I just saw that last night, and I think he did such a great job. And it’s colorful. He enhanced the colors for this film, probably in a digital intermediate, or possibly he specially selected them ahead of time. Most of the time, I like to do the opposite, de-saturate the colors. I like to make it more real by not overdoing the colors. The lighting should be real for the mood of the scene, not the colors.

Vilmos - I like Wally Pfister’s (26) work with the director, Christopher Nolan. I think that Wally is really great with lighting. I don’t know how much Chris has to be credited for that because all of the movies are so beautifully lit and I am sure Christopher must like that himself and Wally plays into his hands. Wally does such a great job.

Yuri - What current work from any cinematographer do you think highly of? What has impressed you most?

Vilmos - Obviously, we cannot miss the issue of digital cameras. How do you think digital cameras change or will change what we are doing?
Vilmos - I don’t think it will make a difference to what I am doing. I just shot a digital film in the summer in Hungary, a dance film, I just lit it the same way I would light a film movie. And it looks like how I would have shot it on film. It’s interesting, you know, that I don’t think anybody could tell that I shot it on digital because that’s the way I approached it. Some people are forgetting that younger people, or newer cinematographers, working with digital cameras, may not have experience in lighting. We were trained to create the mood of a scene, mainly with lighting. And that is the problem.

Yuri – The base of cinematography is an ability to “write” with light.

Vilmos – Correct! This is also true for digital movies like “Slumdog Millionaire” or “127 Hours” by Anthony Dod Mantle. (27) I like very much his use of lighting, which looks more natural than mine. His close ups are really marvelous. His use of a tiny digital camera is important. He uses cameras that he can put into small spaces very close to the actors face.

Roger Deakins (28) uses lighting incredibly well, even when shooting with a digital camera. I am sure it will be beautiful and no one will be able to tell he used a digital camera. I don’t care what tool it is. A digital camera is just a tool. I can’t understand why people are so afraid of digital cameras.

Yuri- What can you say in a few words about what they taught you, Laszlo, Lajos and others in the Hungarian film school? Obviously, they gave you all something that nobody else had.

Vilmos - I can just say something that Illés used to tell me, “Think about this - an average movie has 400-500 cuts. Every shot has to mean something for that movie - every shot. You cannot give up one shot. You give up one shot here, you give up another shot there, and then the movie is going to suffer because of that. Everything has to mean something. You cannot compromise.” It is very difficult to do when a producer is standing behind you. You have to say, “You hired me to do a job. If I can’t do my job then maybe I am the wrong person.”

Yuri - A producer once told me, “Yuri why are you lighting this little shot so beautifully? You have plenty of other shots in this scene that are beautiful enough.” I said, “No, this shot should be good too because it is a part of the same scene, and you all will forget about this conversation in one minute and then you all will ask me later – “Why does this shot not match? Why is this shot not as good as the others?””

I remember a story about a very famous Russian director Michail Romm. He was supposed to start making his first picture, and he came to Sergei Eisenstein and asked, “What advice do you have for me? Tomorrow is my first day.” And Eisenstein answered, “You know, you have the time between the beginning of the day and lunch. In that time you have to make some very nice shots, because if during lunch you go outside and are killed by a car, then everyone will look at your first shots and say: “what an amazing director died.”

Vilmos – That’s a very funny story!

Yuri – What is your favorite film you’ve worked on?

Vilmos - If you want to ask me which one is the film I like the best, I would say “The Deer Hunter”. It is a complete film and I like everything about it. I like the cast. I like what the actors did, I like the directing, and I also like the photography.
Yuri - What is so special to you about this movie? What happened in the making of this film that may not have happened in any of the other films you did?

Vilmos - It was a great collaborative effort. I remember how happy I was when doing that film because I had a great time with Michael Cimino (29). He is a talented director with many good ideas and he also lets the people around him be collaborators. I had 100% input in that movie because Michael didn’t always tell me how to set up the light or set up the camera, he left it up to me most of the time. Sometimes we did it together, and sometimes he just let me do it. He gave me a lot of freedom in that sense.

Yuri – And then you worked with him on his next film?

Vilmos - Right, then we did “Heaven’s Gate” (30), but we didn’t have as great of a time with that film because we had a lot of pressure from the studio. We went over budget and over schedule. So that was not as happy of an experience as it was on “The Deer Hunter.”

Yuri – Why did this happen after “The Deer Hunter”? What happened to Cimino after this?

Vilmos - Well you know, the studio gave him a hard time, because “The Deer Hunter” got best picture and best director Oscars, he wanted to make “Heaven’s Gate” an even better film. He wanted to spend more time and spend more money on the movie than what the actual budget allowed. This created a lot of misunderstanding between the studio and him.

Yuri - He thought that after his Oscars he had carte blanche and the studio didn’t think the same?

Vilmos - The studio didn’t think that way because they didn’t have that kind of money. In those days there were a lot of studios that were almost bankrupt. “The Deer Hunter” was done on schedule and on budget. When they required the same thing on “Heaven’s Gate,” he would not accept the limitations. Michael Cimino wanted to make the best film and the best western of all time. And that’s where the problem began.
Yuri – Can we say that the director’s creative problem was parallel to that of Orson Welles (31), who also after creating a great film, “Citizen Kane,” was not able to do anything else equally great because he came into conflict with the studio system?

Vilmos – These examples are very similar. It happens to all directors who become “the bad boys,” so to speak. They think that they are allowed to do anything they want for their art. And its unfortunate that happened in this case, because “Heaven’s Gate” was later considered a classic film.

When the film was released, the studio wanted the film to fail to send a message to other directors. They didn’t realize it would be such a big mistake for them. When it failed, they went into bankruptcy.

Yuri – Well the history of cinema has many examples where the current prevailing taste is not always right. Look at “Citizen Kane” and cinematographer Greg Toland, ASC (32). While it is still one of the most artistic and pioneering works in the history of cinematography.

The Oscar for camera work went to another film. But the film that is remembered by all and is still a very inspiring sample of camera art is, “Citizen Kane.”

Vilmos -Those things happen all the time… The best judge is time!

Yuri - Let me ask you a question about one of my favorites of all your films, from a cinematography perspective. “McCabe & Mrs. Miller” (33) I think this film is one of the best “impressionistic” films with some of the best imagery in any film ever done.

So how were Robert Altman (34) and you able to make this unusual western?
Vilmos - Those times were different, we are talking about the early 70s, when new filmmakers came into the Industry (35). Altman certainly had 100% control of his movie. We were shooting in Vancouver, far away from Hollywood, and no studio executives could come to the set to watch what we were doing.

Robert said, “you guys hired me as a director and the only reason I accepted it was if I could make all the decisions.” When the executives saw the footage, they hated the dailies and they complained about the photography. We flashed and pushed the negative, it had a grainy, underexposed look...an interesting look that we loved and the studio hated.

And they voiced their opinion that he should fire his cinematographer because “he doesn’t know what he’s doing, he doesn’t know how to expose film, so fire that SOB!” Altman defended me to the producers, “wait a second, the quality of the film is not as bad as you think, because I know these prints are not perfect...the lab doesn’t know how to print properly. There is a beautiful negative there...don’t worry about it, you are going to love this film when it’s printed in Hollywood!” But those were different times. Not only on that movie, I remember we made three studio films with Altman and no studio wanted to interfere with him. Except one time, when they tried to interfere with “The Long Goodbye”, because they didn’t like one day of dailies.

They hated one scene we shot on the top floor of the 9000 Sunset Blvd. building. Mark Rydel, who was the leader of a gang, told the gang members to all “take off their shoes, take off their shirts, take off everything, let the truth come out.” Then we see Schwarzenegger. That was his first film, you see Arnold’s shirt off and he is a muscle man.

The execs hated that whole scene when they saw the dailies the next morning. They called Altman on set and told him that he had to reshoot the scene. Altman asked, “you think the scene is no good?” and they said, “it’s no good, you have to reshoot it.” Altman hung up the phone and left the set. Everyone was setting up to shoot the next segment at the same location and he left. They asked “where are you going?” and he said, “Listen, I have to go. If the studio calls while I’m gone, don’t tell them where I went, and say you don’t know where I am. I’m not around.” So they had to report to the studio that the director had left the set.
Yuri – Sounds like, “Houston, we have a problem!”

Vilmos - He left set and left the message for the producers, “to call him back when you like the dailies.”

Yuri – So how long did it take for them to “like” the dailies?

Vilmos - It took them a couple hours to call back, and when they asked to talk to the director, the people on set responded saying they didn’t know where he was.

Yuri – What happened next?

Vilmos - We actually didn’t shoot that day. At the end of the day, they finally found Altman and apologized to him. He said they should never ever question him again. But this was an exception. I don’t recall any other time where the studio wanted to change something while we were shooting. I remember working on “Sugarland Express.” (37), and Spielberg who was very young at that time was always in charge.

They tried to interfere with Steven also. We were shooting in a camper parked next to a drive-in theater, where a cartoon was being projected. We decided to build a miniature drive-in theater screen near the camper and project the cartoon images using our projector we normally used for dailies.

The idea was that the actors would actually react to the cartoon, we could only get their performances right if they could see the cartoon at the same time. The studio executives said that to do it right, it would cost a lot because we would need a background projection system, which would come from a special effects company. And because of the cost involved, it would be too expensive to do it this way, and they wanted to do the effect optically later. Steven said this wasn’t going to work, because his actors would have nothing to react to, and insisted on using our way, with the miniature screen and dailies projector.

It was a complicated thing though and I made a test beforehand so I knew how it was going to work. The studio said it wouldn’t work, and you know what Steven said? “Well my cinematographer said it’s going to work, and I believe him.”

That was the end of the discussion. We ended up doing it and everything was perfect and everything worked fine. That was the one and only occasion in the whole movie where they tried to interfere.

Yuri – And when you worked with Spielberg on “Close Encounters”?

Vilmos - That was a big problem.

Yuri – Why?

Vilmos - From the beginning to the end we had budget problems because that was Steven Spielberg’s “Heavens Gate.” Except that it ended up being a success, and “Heavens Gate” did not at that time. That was the big difference. But “Close Encounters” was really something.

That was really disturbing to the studio because we started with a budget around $10 million and we ended up spending around $30 million. But! The dailies were incredibly successful. That’s why everybody said we didn’t have a choice; we had to go on and on and on until it was done.
“Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (1977) Dir. Steven Spielberg, DP Vilmos Zsigmond, ASC

Yuri - So did the studio try to fire you this time?

Vilmos - Well...

Yuri - Really?

Vilmos - They contacted many DP’s who had previous experience in special effects movies to come in and take over, but they wouldn’t.

Yuri - What was the problem?

Vilmos - A lot of lights were required... A lot of locations were found late and they required an amount of lighting that wasn’t in the original budget.

The first day we went into the big hanger where the landing spot scene was about to shoot, and I was asking Steven “when are we going to pre-light the set?” And they said, “Well, it’s lit.” And I am looking around and I said, “I don’t see anything lit, except those four stadium lights in the corner of the set, and they are lighting up the hanger. But I don’t see any lights coming from the doors or windows of the buildings, or on the landing field.” Doug Trumball was the special effects designer, who also worked with Kubrik on

“2001: A Space Odyssey” and he said, “I’m sorry to say this, but I think Vilmos is right. This is a classy picture. This is a different kind of picture, it is not a documentary, this is a fantasy. This is bigger than life.”

Then the producers asked, “Well, what do you need to do that, Vilmos?” I said, “Well... I need at least 20 x 10Ks and at least 12 HMIs. We need lighting inside and outside buildings, we need a couple more generators...”

So the budget went up incredibly, and they said that was all my fault because I didn’t tell them what we needed before. But if I would have told them that before we started shooting, we probably couldn’t have gotten what we wanted.

Yuri - But why did this happen? Why didn’t you tell them before?

Vilmos - It was not discussed properly in pre-production. We didn’t have anything planned about it, it was not planned to make this a big movie. So it was basically a production issue. The proper discussion would have added another week of filming and they were not up for making this movie a “big movie.”
Yuri – So the studio had no vision?

Vilmos - Well maybe they had a vision, but not the same vision that Doug Trumball, Steven and myself had. Steven just quietly said, “Give Vilmos what he needs” and walked away.

Yuri – I vividly remember the impression it made on me, the scene with the aliens coming through the rays of light from the spaceship. This effect was done with mirrors, correct?

Vilmos - That is my favorite scene of the movie.

Yuri – This scene has a really uplifting feeling, it has a kind of eerie and strange mood. The light is coming from outer space. And I thought, “How did Vilmos do it?” Because you have a white background and we still see the rays of light coming through. Can you tell us what you did to achieve this effect?

Vilmos - I had to change the lighting that was done by the rigging crew before I even walked into the set. 1000 x 1K Quartz lights were hanging from the ceiling. It seemed like this would be a tremendous amount of light coming from the ship. But they didn’t realize it wasn’t the quantity of the lights, it was the quality that we needed.

Yuri – So how did you solve this problem?

Vilmos – When we turned all the lights on, the effect was not working, there was no magic. I was thinking, “What’s wrong?” And then I realized “we should have used HMI spot lights, not so many bulbs.” So we replaced the bulbs with spotlights, and the shafts of light still did not appear. Then we thought “how should we do it now?”

We had already placed a huge mirror at a 30-degree angle on the floor of the spacecraft exit, but the shafts were still not appearing. I said, “what we probably should have done is use about 1,000 small mirrors instead of one large mirror in order to break up the light.” My key grip was listening to these problems and came up with the idea, “did you consider that you could break a solid mirror into 1,000 pieces?”

Yuri – And place them at different angles?

Vilmos – So we took some hammers and did what we had to do; broke up the entire larger mirror. That’s what actually created the different angles and broke up the light.

Yuri – When I saw it, it looked like it was thousands of little spotlights. So you’re saying each small piece of mirror reflected it’s own beam?

Vilmos - Exactly, that’s what created the effect, along with adding smoke in the hangar. So that was the solution.

Yuri – That was one of the most brilliantly shot films. Each shot depends on the light. If there would be no light, there would be no movie.

Vilmos – In post-production, Doug Trumball (38) added the alien ships flying over the landing area, and they all had spotlights on them. We had to have very bright spot lights that simulated these lights. Because our set was so big, we had to bunch three 10K fresnel lights together in a spot position and pan with them like it was one big spotlight effect, especially because we were sometimes using colored gels on the lights. All these extra lights, generators and electricians that we ordered, elevated the budget tremendously.
Yuri – So they needed somebody to blame for this?

Vilmos – The studio was very nervous. They depended financially on the success of this movie as well. That’s why they wanted to fire me. But they couldn’t. I think Steven wanted to have me, so he would not let that happen. And no one would have accepted the job anyway. Ernest Laszlo, ASC (39) was the king of those types of special effects movies. I remember he was in Canada, in Montréal, watching the Olympics. They called him to replace me, and he said, “Are you crazy? You want me to leave the Olympics to take over the job that Vilmos is doing better than I could?” I remember other people that were offered the job and they didn’t take it either.

Yuri – It’s good to have friends like that. Now what would you like to tell young cinematographers who are just starting? They are working in a very different world from when you started. You began when there were no digital cameras and totally different aesthetics. Even the creative approach was different. What is important to cinematographers, and what do they have to pay most attention to?

Vilmos – Well the evolution of digital cinematography is a good thing and a bad thing. The good thing is that you can easily get a digital camera and practice doing low budget movies. You can even do a personal movie with a small cast in an inexpensive way. It is good that students can get a hold of these cameras. But the “bad” thing is that in order to become a great cinematographer you have to know about lighting – difference. A good movie, if it’s lit right, creates the mood in every scene. So many people don’t pay attention to lighting. And lighting makes the difference. A good movie, if it’s lit right, creates the mood in every scene. You have to accept the idea that for a good feature film, the lighting has to fit the mood of the story.

Whoever starts out learning cinematography digitally can have that problem. You turn the camera on and you already have an image, even when the scene isn’t lit right. So it’s easy for a producer looking at the monitor to say, “let’s shoot, I really like what I see,” and you have a hard time convincing people that it would be better if you lit the scene properly. That’s a big problem for future students; to learn to do the right lighting for each scene.

And you have to remember all the time - there is a big difference between a guy painting the wall in a room with a roller and an actual painter doing a painting like Rembrandt and using a brush.

Rembrandt van Rijn, “The artist in his studio”, (1628)
VILMOS INTERVIEW FOOTNOTES

2. Hungary's capital boasts the first subway on the European continent. Line 1 also known as 'Földalattó' or the Millennium Underground was built in 1896 and added to Budapest's UNESCO World Heritage entry in 2002 http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/156
3. A development by Hungarian engineer Kálmán Kandó "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%A1lm%C3%A1n_Kand%C3%B3"
10. http://www.theshootpictures.com/dovzhenkoalexander.htm,