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I dream to see a movie for which computers will make graphics without the participation a human at all

Why the artist is hard to work for movies, Apollinary Zakharov - Russian lead specialist in the field of postproduction told about the styling and features of the profession to Lydia Petrova.

- The programmer. Seems that this is not a right profession for the film industry. What do you do in the movies?

- For America I work as a VFX Artist and Compositor - a compositor, that is, a person compositing layers. Everywhere in Russia, the word compositor is replaced by the word composer, which is wrong, because the English word composer just means that a person is writing music. But we compose visual images. Everyone represents reality in his own way, but the artist has the opportunity to create images that remain in the material world. I drew from childhood and I always envied the "real" artists. While studying in the technical school, dragons and monsters lived in my notebooks(A4), unknown plants blossomed, and in the middle of all this Tolkien world, placed lectures of microcircuitry and peripheral devices written by print letters.

One teacher exchanged my notebook to A+ on a final exam. My pictures looked like surrealistic illustrations of the Polish painter Jacek Yerka. So sorry I did not become a professional artist, those people have some special ability to express thoughts graphically.

- You created graphics, animation and special effects in 30 films, in commercials and clips. Do you have the power to create a new reality?

- I was always interested in the stories in a mist of secrecy. At the beginning of perestroika, I sang in the Russian Orthodoxal Church Choir, I played in a rock band - this was my first opening of a mystery - what is behind the scenes? Such a Harry Potter story. Then, on a wave of interest in computer games, even Windows did not exist, I was fascinated by programming. I thought I was getting into another mystery like what is behind a shell of the computer game. It was important for me not only to play but also to know how it works.

I graduated from university but it turned out that the work of a programmer is just to maintain the accounting or logistic. I should visit 17 factories monthly over the whole Belarus, check how the software works and sign the papers. So a romance about the programming ended quickly. So when FLASH have appeared then all my academic base smoothly covered its ideology. Flash combined graphics and programmed animation. To use the program you need to know Action Script that I perfectly knew how it works. I was inspired by all this because suddenly my knowledge acquired in ten years become useful.

I started copying little games like Pacman and Tetris but with my own design and bravely asked a position in companies that dealt with software for slot machines and online casinos. In Petersburg, the products of the company "Octavian" had a special success. And I got to them in the early 2000s. At that time it was the largest office, they did everything on a grand scale, so on each street corner, there were their slot machines. There was a musician and sound engineer in Octavian. I loved to come in and record my professional voice: "Jack Po-o-t! Kubysh-sh-k-aa! ". Then every day the Petersburg champions in the casino heard my voice when win. But it was just for fun, I spent a long time learning a game design. And in the evenings at home with a friend we did casual games and sold them to different online platforms. They published our games on the Internet and after 5000 downloads we received \$5,000 at the end of the week, which was very cool. The games were for the office workers who wanted to play secretly in between a business like play the balls or jump a frog. I was also interested in making games because I was interested in computer graphics, which later become my job in the movies.

Speaking of cinema, the first important projects for me, of course, are the "Mongol" by Sergei Bodrov and "Wanted" by Timur Bekmambetov. These films revealed me the next mystery once again. I saw a back side of the screen. Not everyone knew how the film studios use a green screen and how an empty field in the frame turns into a picture where the actors are running over the skyscraper roofs. Or, for example, in the film "The Irony of Fate. Continuation» Bezrukov walks on the roofs to fix Beeline's antenna. No one would bring the camera and equipment on top and risk the life of an actor who can fall down. All these things are filmed in cinema-pavilions. So I discovered the secrets, which, at that moment, were a pure revelation.

- You became a master at creating reality in the cinema. Is it freedom or the possibility to deceive with impunity?

- Realism in movies is a stylization. The film concept is determined by the director. And 3D technology in the cinema is an additional tool in his hands, this is only a support for the idea. Of course, visual effects lead to a distortion of reality. But after 10 years the cinema we are creating today will become a document of the era. In this frame of reference, we can even build a conspiracy theory. Creation of the film involved a large number of people. And each person contributes something of its own, multiplying the effect of distorting reality. For example, I just fix the flaws but this is not a full replacement. However, it is clear that any field of cinema includes an element of fantasy.

- A brilliant frame in movies is a mainstream or an art necessity?

- Actually, sometimes happens an opposite situation. For example, in the film "Dovlatov" by Alexei Herman jr., we removed all the glowing lights of Petersburg... Wires, masts of ships, advertising signs, cars, lanterns, storm drains. Fortunately, I lived in the USSR (whenever I could say that) and remember that the plastic windows did not exist at that time. In the movie, the windows were replaced by wooden. There was a lot of like that. We made the things older as we can. We turned time back with a digital cleanup. This was my longest postproduction. We 10 months laid out stones, cut trees, scattered pieces of paper, rusted pipes, broke stairs, dimmed and "spoiled" the city. But if we talk about the daily work on the picture - it's true, now the frame is over clean, sometimes it's too bright, too pure. I do not always agree with this, but I think it's good to clean up the picture because during filming something unwanted could get in the frame. At the same time, I always try to look the actor natural. This is a special work because usually, we are dealing with a ready video without a possibility to be retaken.

On the other hand, today everything is replaced by post-production. Logos are cleaned, outdoor advertising, all the seams are leveled, if there is no sun - we will insert, shot in the afternoon - we'll make a night landscape. And of course, sometimes the picture becomes over too fine. Previously, more attention was paid to making decorations, removing unnecessary objects from the frame, perfect makeup the actors. Now it's easier to draw or clean up with CG.

- And how the task is described? What eventually you should keep in the frame, what to remove, what to add?

- For example, it was very easy to work on the film "Mongol". In the desert, a little town was built for filming. And then we all together sat with the director and discussed the location. What materials were used in those days, which technical devices could be there, and which could not? Can we put a water winch on the roof not? What should be the roof - wooden or thatch? All this stuff was discussed. "Dovlatov" was different. We had pictures of Leningrad of the 60s with which we could compare the picture in the frame. And I can assure you that we have achieved a great historical certainty. In the "Irony of Fate. Continuation" I did a lot of houses and yards of St. Petersburg. And I daily went to take a picture of the historical part of the city. And then I used these photos in my work. So in the frame, the geometry of the arches, the texture of the walls, the lanterns are perfectly natural. If to talk about the beauty works like facial cleanup when the wrinkles or moles need to be removed, then I'm totally free to decide myself. I've been doing this for so long time that the directors just trust my vision.

- The time for working on a shot is always limited. How do you determine how much effort would it take to create an image worthy of the content of the film? What are your criteria for beauty?

- In this matter, I am guided by the director. Managing the attention of the viewer is a different profession. Once I tried to shoot a clip. But I realized that this is not mine way. Often I happen to disagree with the director, something might seem to look naive. But the idea is usually revealed at the end of the work. So I just trust those who are responsible for it. It's also a question of what it takes to be a compositor. This question was answered by my teacher, turning two fingers to the eyes: "This, he said, is the most important thing - to observe the life"! You can know the algorithm of the program, be able to turn the knobs and click the buttons. But you must see the final result - and it's like in nature. It is impossible to explain where should be shadows, reflections, and glare. Even a bear can be taught to use a software. But you have to be an artist. And an adventurer. Composer every day does something for the first time. He must be the inventor of the method - how to represent nature in the monitor so that it would look like it is. It does not matter which software you use, Fusion or Nuke. There is an algorithmic and technological base. And having mastered one software you'll get the other too. Photographers are not taught just how to press a button. Cool photos could be taken by a chemist or physicist. But those compositors that studied in art universities work quite differently with texture, light, color. It turns out to make a movie artist need to be a programmer and a programmer to be an artist. So today the situation is like the mathematicians which make methods of creating computer graphics, very seriously affect the post-production. Their software can only be used by technicians. Therefore, there are almost no professional artists in post-production. It's sad, but that's reality.

- Do you know the films where you don't realize a thing is graphics or natural?

- We don't film Dragons in movies. But such cases happen when the plot is more important than the video. When I'm working on a project, first of all, I try to determine the main and secondary. But do any graphics with fun. And in the film industry, there is a moment of personal play. I like to clean up something and add it to the frame. This is such a personal signature - Easter eggs. Put in my apartment decor in some pictures or stick my photo on a cup. In the movie "Irony of Fate. Continuation" there was a soldier who broke the antenna on top of the house. We painted everything: the house, the roof, the wreckage ... And some moment he hangs on the edge of the roof and drops his cap down. It was a 3D object and I replaced a star on a cockade to the skull and bones. He ruined everything around so I made him a "nazi" (that was a sarcasm). There was an episode In "Wanted" in which the actor flies through a window and flies from one skyscraper to another. So I put on him a military cloak. At that moment I was making graphics for the game "Stalingrad" and I had cool 3D models of German soldiers(I modeled the whole of their staff). And then put them all into the cinema. Let them be there, on the wide plans, not an actor flies, but some game characters. That was funny.

- What is missing in modern post-production technology?

- I dream to see a movie for which computers will make graphics without the participation a human at all. Imagine that at some point, anyone who can play Tetris will be able to manage software for postproduction. I think that now there is not enough algorithm that can understand the artist. Thousands of animators, modelers, composers daily solve the same problems again and again. They spend much time on this. At a time when nature has not changed for a million years. And I hope to live up to the time when simple programs can recognize and design any person's mind, even he doesn't have a special qualification to use that programs.

- What kind of stories do you like?

- I love fairy tales. Soviet books about the pioneer heroes. Here Timur and his team for me are very believable characters. What they did can be repeated in real life, to come and help the grandfather and thereby identify himself with the hero of the book. It's impossible to repeat that what the Superman does. It is clear why Timur and his team helps to return the lost goat or why Zhenya leads to his father. You can do it too. Heroes of fairy tales are ordinary people. But it's not clear why you need the Bettman's magic to do good. I never liked fantasy. But now I can draw everything in movies. On the one hand, this is freedom, on the other - the possibility of deception. Of course, there is a director and an artist. But only I know how many wrinkles were removed from the face of Angelina Jolie. "Mongol" was filmed in the desert and the cities there were created by me. I've always been interested in discovering secrets. And now I create them myself. But any adult person understands that cinema is just an image. Even if that is so beautiful. Therefore, there is such a phrase in post-production: "Well, it's just a cartoon".