DIFFICULT DESTINATIONS
BACK TO UKRAINE

final personal project by
wouter de proost



INTRODUCTION

“Difficult Destinations” has been around since 2013. It’s a human interest show with a lovable host travelling to countries or specific areas that would otherwise be ignored by regular tourists. It is also one of the first human interest-series I ever worked on. Nine seasons as a post-production assistant, one season as a colorist.

For season 10, I was given the freedom to shift the stylistic direction toward a more cinematic approach—though still using the same LUT as the previous seasons. Unfortunately, it's one that packs both the look and the ODT into a single package. This changed with season 11, where I went back to the drawing board and built a LUT that carries elements from season 10 while better matching the heavier theme: Ukraine. I dug deep into the knowledge I'd gathered at the Color Grading Academy and pulled out all the stops for that tormented country.

In this document, I will first give you a technical walkthrough before showcasing the actual grade. Hope this will give you a good overview of how this show came to life on a visual level.

Belgian critics called it "the best series host Tom Waes has ever made." Whether the grading qualifies for that same praise, I'll leave up to you all.

Slava Ukraini.

REFERENCES (Difficult Destinations, season 10)













LOOK DEVELOPMENT

It was important for the director to approach season 11 from a human perspective. The focus is on the everyday lives of Ukrainians — lives that are marked by the war, but continue nonetheless. It was therefore important to go for a somber, but not too dark look. Lifted blacks play a key role in that. A compact signal without intense highlights, but with a soft character. So I adjusted the color temperature slightly cooler, maintained the blue tones in the blacks, reduced saturation, and softened the highlights post-LUT and post-texture.



SOURCE

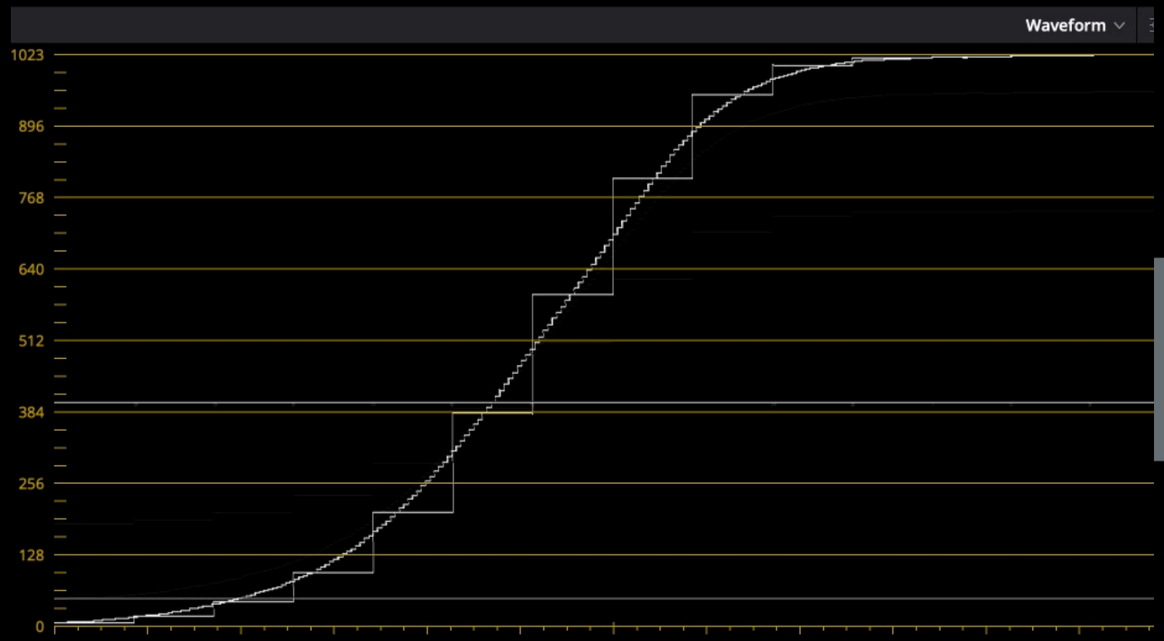


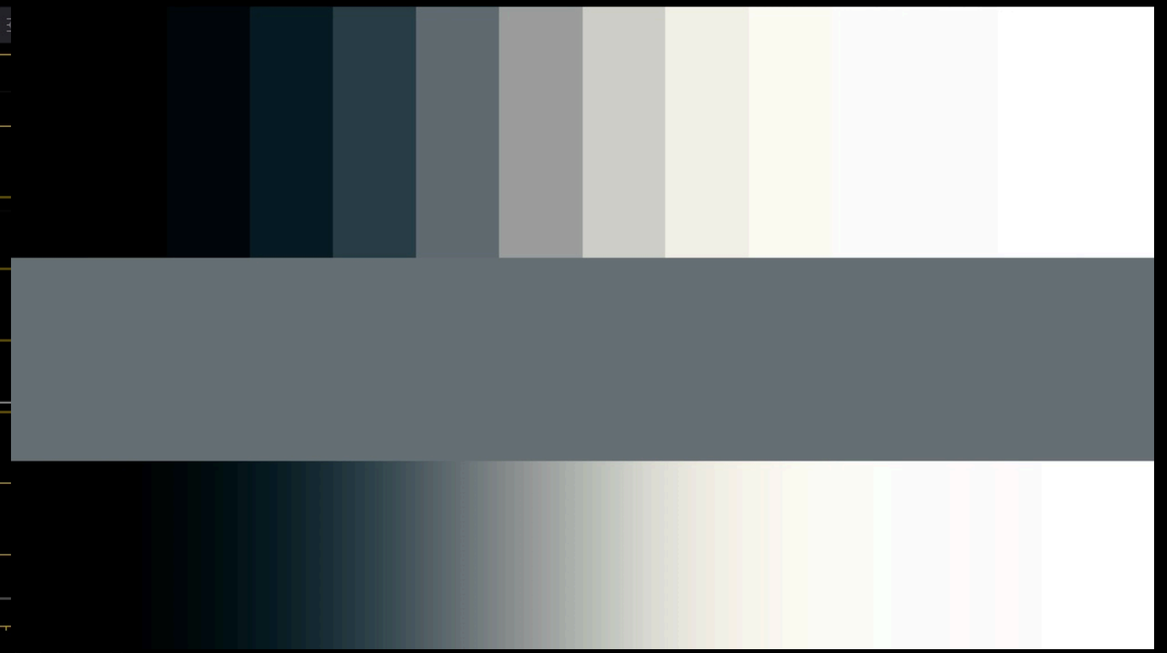
GRADE

LUT

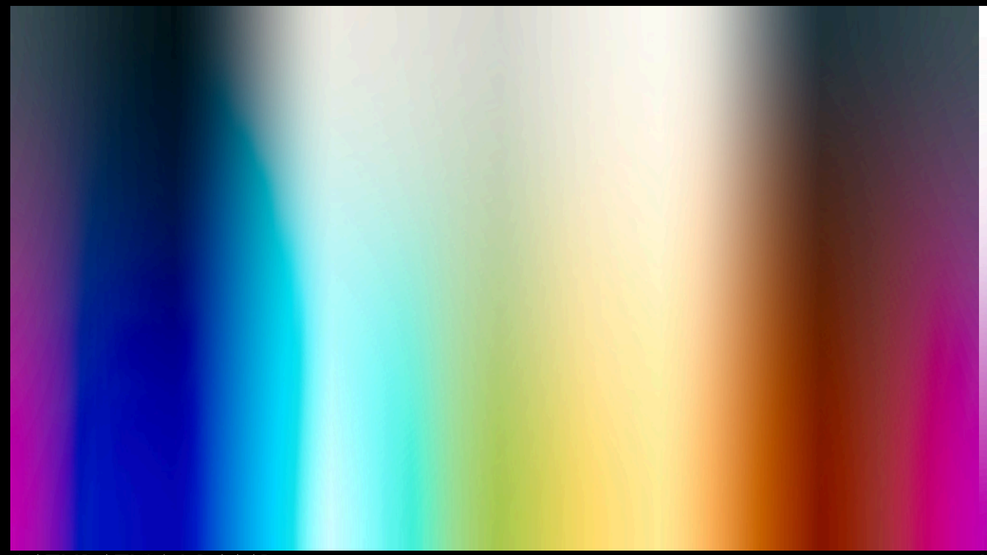
The LUT consists of a custom contrast-curve, Kodak Vision Color Print 2383 Print Stock and Kodak 5203 Vision 3 50D Negative Stock with an FPE at 500, using Look Designer for prints. I will showcase this LUT with following testimages.

This LUT works across all cameras in the series: Sony FX9, Canon G7 X, GoPro. It will also serve as the base for the flashback and archival looks.

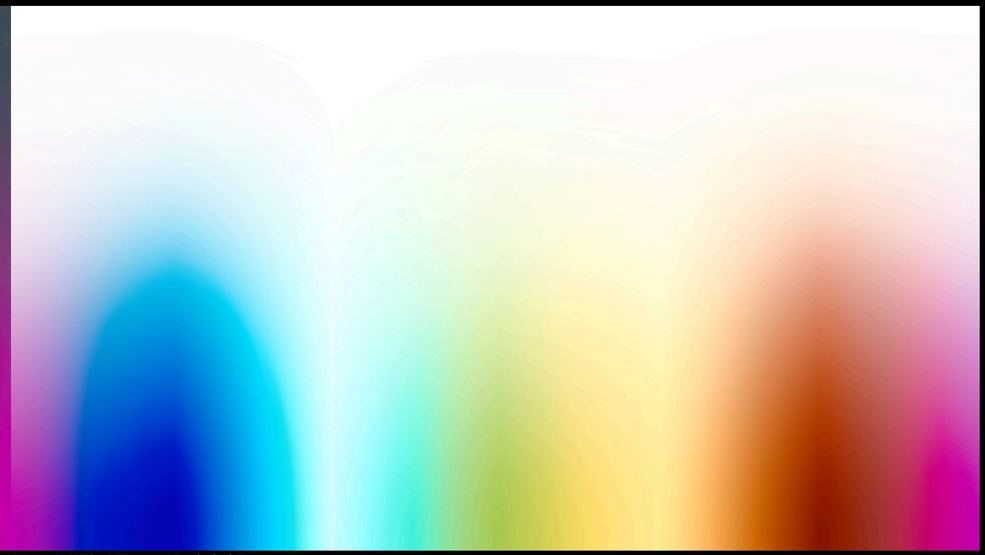




TONEMAPPING



SATURATION RAMP



LIGHTNESS RAMP



CIE CHROMACITY

VECTORSCOPE

FLASHBACKS



In later episodes, there are occasional flashbacks to earlier installments. For those, I use the base LUT, layered with a negative print of Photo Stock Ilford 400 at 0.240 strength. This gives the shots more character than what I could otherwise achieve with just the saturation knob.

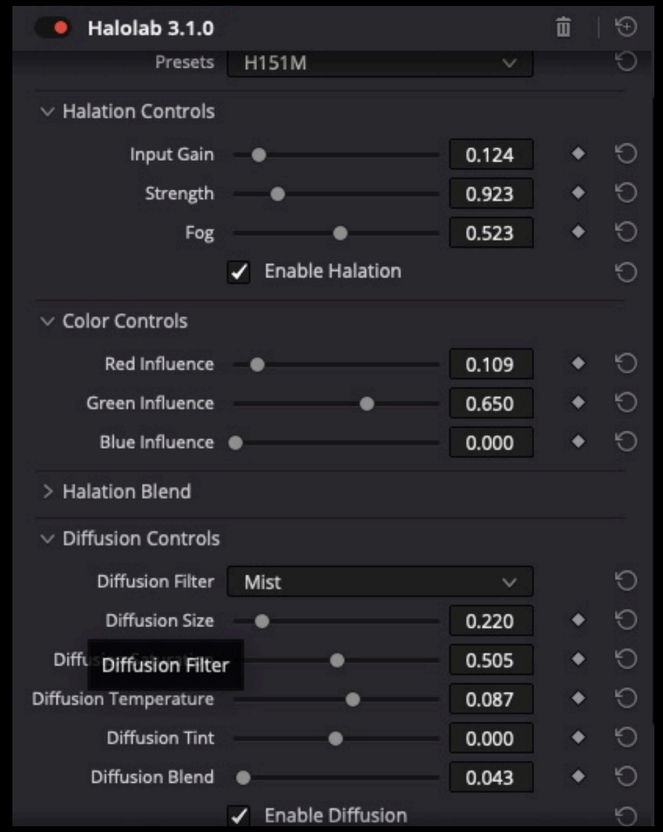
ARCHIVAL

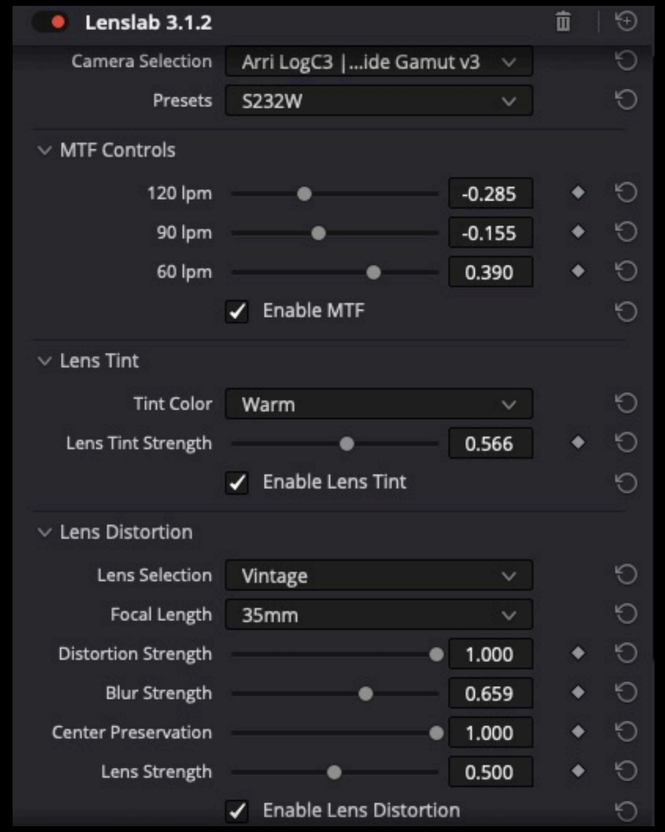


For archival footage, I combine the base LUT with Ilford 400, augmented with scanlines, smear, Analog Damage, and the occasional resize for material that doesn't fit the mask. This treatment is cooler in color temperature and employs a more pronounced halo in the highlights. The result is a clear visual frame (pun intended) that aesthetically distinguishes archival content from the rest.

TEXTURE







To complement the LUT, I also make use of texture tools: GrainLab, HaloLab, and LensLab. Everything is aimed at removing the digital character of the various cameras. Due to the compressed character of the highlights accomodated by the LUT, HaloLab's Pro-Mist will ensure an image where the highlights sit in better balance with the rest of the frame. Those highlights are subsequently tamed by a trim that lowers the HDR highlights.

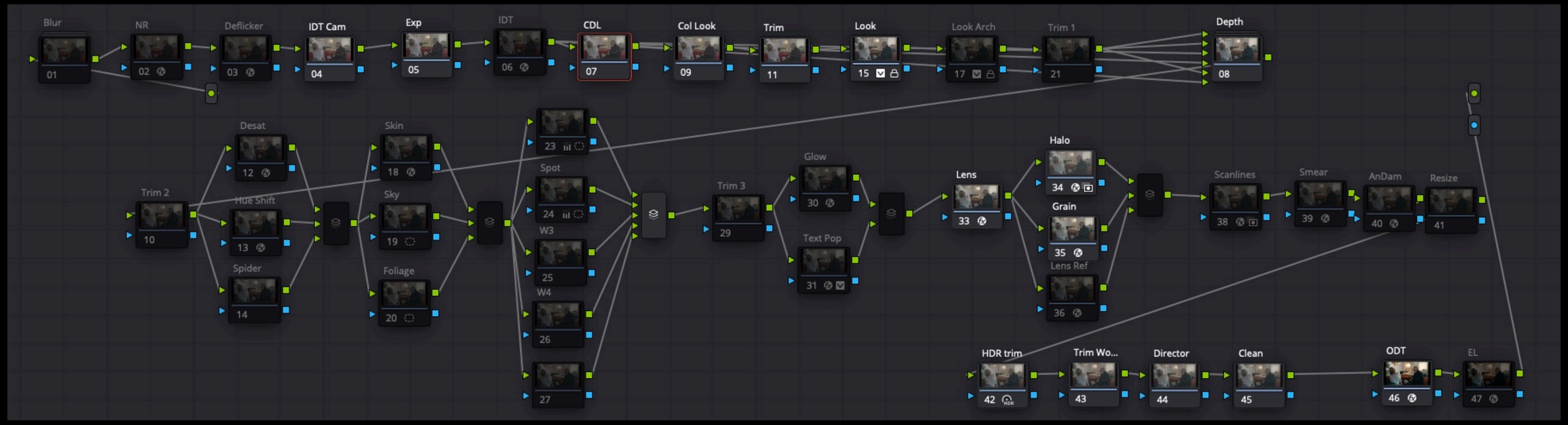


BEFORE TEXTURE

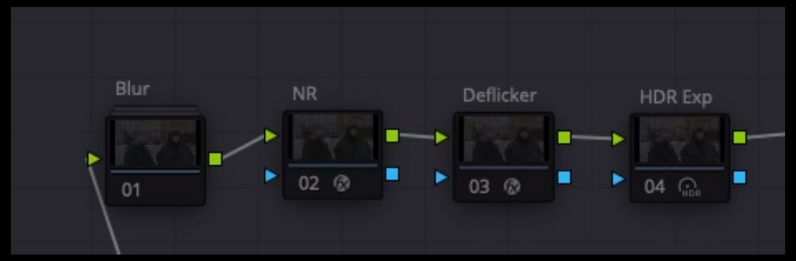


AFTER TEXTURE

NODE TREE



And here it finally is: my feared massive node tree. This is a human-interest show, so anything goes at any time. So I feel in this case, a big node tree is necessary. Let me show you around. Heads up: nodes don't necessarily run in sequential order.



01 BLUR: In case of blurs (and yes, they did ask me to do this in al three episodes). Best in front, so my texture tools can minimize the ugliness.

02 NR: Noise Reduction, never grade a human interest show without it. Neat Video.

03 Deflicker: For the occasional television, computer screen or a misbehaving lightbulb.

04 HDR Exp: I tend to use the HDR offset-wheel pre-IDT to fix the exposure on dramatically dark shots.



05 IDT: Transform from camera color space to working color space (in this case Arri LogC)

06 CDL: Base grade

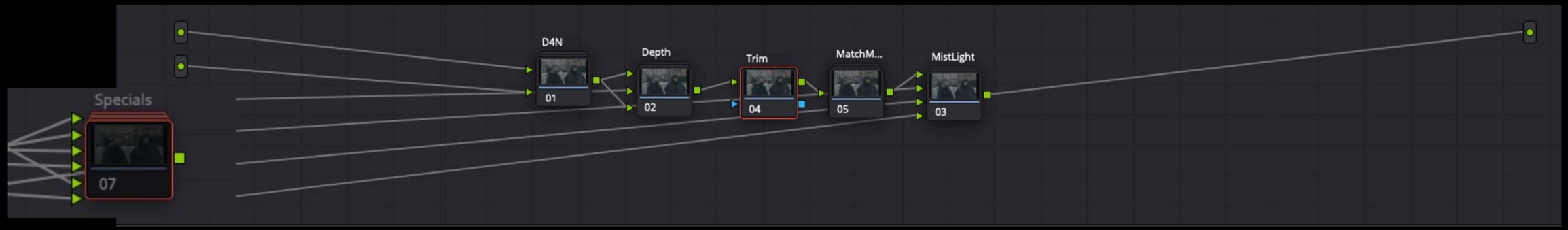
08 Col Look: When I want to give a particular scene a certain look, I can do it here. It works kind of like a trim node.

10 Trim: Pre-LUT trim

14 Look: Base-LUT, Arri LogC to Arri LogC

16 Look Arch: Archival + Flashback look

20 Trim 1: First post-LUT trim



Node 07 is a rather special one. Speaking of being prepared for anything, this is a good example. It's a compound node with five different functions.

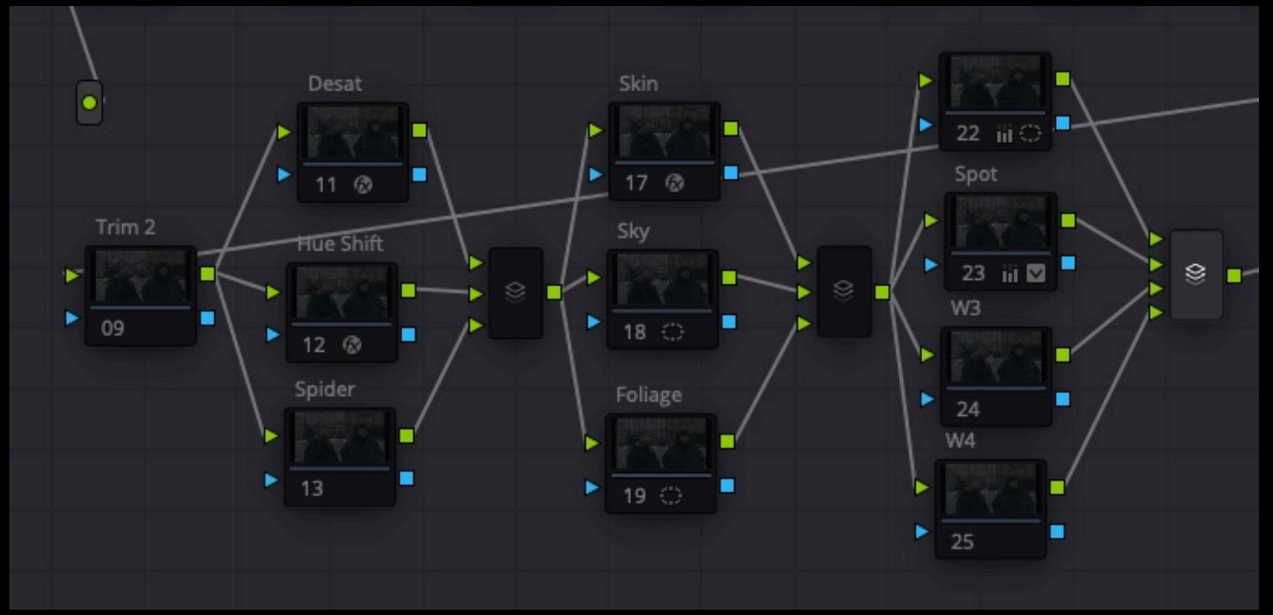
01 D4N: Day For Night. Happened many times before with this client, so I come prepared.

02 Depth: Depth map to accentuate backgrounds if needed

04 Trim: Basic trim node just in case

05 MatchMove: Misleading header, but initially used for replacing things. Now it can be anything, for example a second depth map.

03 MistLight: If I want to implement some mist or snow (which was a real possibility in this case)



09 Trim 2: Post-Specials trim

11 Desat: Node for Mononodes desat, useful with dominant colors

12 Hue Shift: Node for Mononodes Hue Shift

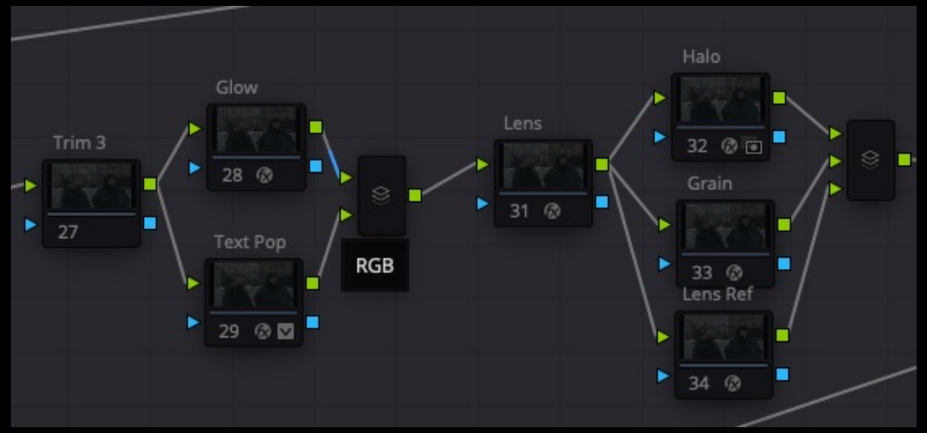
13 Spider: Spider, qualifiers, color specific curves…

17 Skin: Emergency node for skin

18 Sky: Sky fixes

19 Foliage: Foliage fixes

22-25 Power Window: Vignette, Spot, grads…



27 Trim 3: Trim node

28 Glow: In case I need more highlights for HaloLab to work with

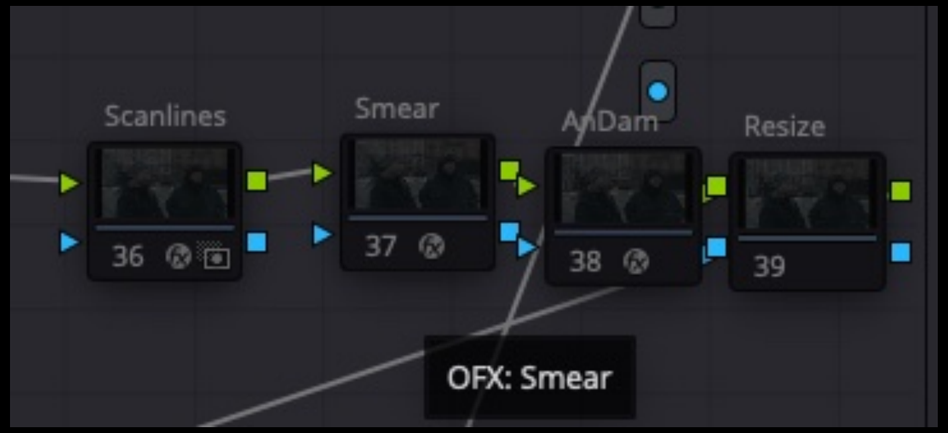
29 Text Pop: Used for softening GoPro's

31 LensLab: Lens emulation to smoothen the image

32 HaloLab: Halation, pro-mist effect

33 Grainlab: Grain emulation

34 Lens ref: Lens reflections



36 Scanlines: Scanlines, used in both flashback/archival footage. Stronger in archival footage though.

37 Smear: Smear for archival footage only

38 AnDam: Analog Damage, archival footage only

39 Resize: resize to fit archival frame if needed



40 Trim 4: Trim pre-ODT

41 Highlights: HDR highlight trim post-HaloLab to soften highlights

42 ODT: Transform working color space to display color space (in this case REC709byArri)

43 EL: Ed Lachman-zones in case of uncertainty

And that wraps up the technical walkthrough.
I almost forgot… **You guys want to see my grades?**


MOUSE








ДОНАТ ПЛЮС
ДРОН МІНУС



































АЛЬЯ





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