

# Nelson Cragg: working hard on the fast track

Nelson Cragg accepted the Conrad L. Hall Heritage Award for student cinematography at the American Society of Cinematographers (ASC) Outstanding Achievement Awards ceremony just five years ago. Since then, the 2003 graduate of the University of Southern California has built an impressive and eclectic body of work including feature films, television shows, commercials and music videos.

"I think working in different genres helps strengthen your skills, but my expertise and interest has always lain in simple narrative storytelling," says Cragg. "The glamour and glitzy lighting is fine, but artful lighting is all about emotional storytelling. I think of lighting as something that needs to come from the material. The 'look' can't simply be applied to a story randomly. You need to interpret the material first and then organically create images based on what you feel."

Cragg recently completed cinematography for the independent feature *The Canyon*, which follows a honeymooning couple who get lost in the wide expanse of the Grand Canyon. "The director, Richard Harrah, and I both wanted the film to feel large in scope," says Cragg. "Since the film only has three actors, we needed the canyon to become a fourth character." Cragg and Harrah agreed that the best way to achieve the epic feeling they envisioned was to shoot in 35mm anamorphic format.

"The only way to really capture the grandeur of the amazing spaces we were in was to shoot in a widescreen format," says Cragg. "I went with my favorite combination of KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 film for night and interior scenes, and KODAK VISION2 250D 5205 film for daytime exteriors. I can shoot in almost any situation with these two versatile stocks. For example, we would often shoot late into the day and I would inevitably end up losing the light. But the 250D film would allow me to just start pulling the ND from behind the lens and keep shooting until it was near dark."



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In addition to *The Canyon*, Cragg's feature credits include *Screw Cupid*, *Splinter*, and *Victim*. He has earned an impressive list of television credits including the miniseries *30 Days of Night: Blood Trails* and most recently, the popular CBS series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*.

"CSI is a really well-oiled machine," says Cragg, who joined the show in 2008. "You step into the system and bring your personal interpretation to an already great-looking show. The look for CSI involves working with darkness and shadow, and I think that it has pushed dark, noir lighting further than any show out there."

Cragg uses various Panavision Panaflex cameras including a PanArri 35-3 for high-speed work and an ARRI 2-C handcranked camera for double exposures. He primarily uses spherical Panavision Primos, and carries 11:1 zooms, 4:1 zooms and a full complement of prime lenses for handheld and Steadicam work.

"I also use nets on the back of the lenses for most of the interiors," says Cragg. "This gives the highlights that classic CSI glow that I really loved when I first saw the show." CSI is recorded on KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 and 250D 5205 films. For the flashback sequences, Cragg uses KODAK EKTACHROME 100D 5285 film and cross-processes the reversal stock to create grain and add contrast. He often pushes the film two stops to get extra grain and contrast.

"When I was hired, the producers at CSI really stressed that they wanted me to push the look as far as I could and to bring my own style to the show," says Cragg. "I tend to try to keep things simple and clean, and make decisions that are bold. At the pace we work, I don't have the time to tweak for hours, so I need to make large, sweeping choices that work for the scene and that have maximum visual impact."

Cragg's advice to recent graduates who hope to be on a similar career path is simple: "Shoot as much as you can," he encourages. "I shot around 15 thesis films at USC. I think every project I work on leads to some new contacts and opportunities. I try to make each job as beautiful as I can, and all I can hope is that people recognize my eye and like what they see."