

The Single Source

Jordan Cronenweth, ASC



At the beginning of his career, the late Jordan Cronenweth, ASC, served as an assistant cameraman and then operator for Conrad Hall, ASC. Years later, John Toll, ASC worked as an operator for Cronenweth. The passing of knowledge from Hall to Cronenweth to Toll is a wonderful example of the role that apprenticeship plays in the world of cinematography.

Hall explains the sense of kinship among directors of photography: “I feel as if Jordan was my brother. He was part of my family. There’s something about cinematographers, and the passion we bring to our work, that gives us the sense of being blood brothers. We have a love and admiration for each other, and a desire to help each other out.”

That spirit of camaraderie and support manifested itself when the time came for a follow-up interview for this chapter. At the

time, Cronenweth was gravely ill, and therefore unavailable. His two close friends and collaborators readily agreed to expand upon Cronenweth’s original comments, and to discuss his distinguished career.

Hell in the Pacific

Hall still remembers one story as if it happened yesterday. Cronenweth was Hall’s operator on *Hell in the Pacific*, a beautiful film directed by John Boorman about two enemy soldiers — one Japanese and the other American — who learn to co-exist on a desert island during World War II. On the day in question, Cronenweth was executing a handheld shot that tracked the Japanese soldier (played by Toshiro Mifune) as he struggled through the jungle on the island location.

The island was littered with debris, making it very difficult for Cronenweth to move smoothly. Hall recalls, “Jordan was handholding a Panavision camera, probably with a 1000-foot mag. It was hot, 90 degrees or more, and the humidity was 95. We were all drenched in sweat, wearing swimsuits, tee shirts, and sandals made of rubber thongs. Mifune went over a hillock full of vines. As Jordan followed him, shooting a side-angle, he stepped on a wooden board. It was a rotten board with a rusty nail sticking out of it, and the nail went right through Jordan’s thongs, through his sole and out the top of his

Actors Kate Hall and Bill Brady re-enact a scene from *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Opposite: These stills from Cronenweth's workshop footage remind us that cinematography is a dynamic art of lighting changes over time. In this case, the actor is a moving source of reflected light that illuminates the actress. Below: A closer view of sweater fill at work.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Lens: Panavision Primo 35mm

Iris Setting: T2.1

Camera: Panavision Platinum

Film Stock: Eastman Kodak 5247

Film Rating: 125 ASA, process normal

Lights Used: 1 Mole Richardson 10K (tungsten)

Other: Smoke machine was used

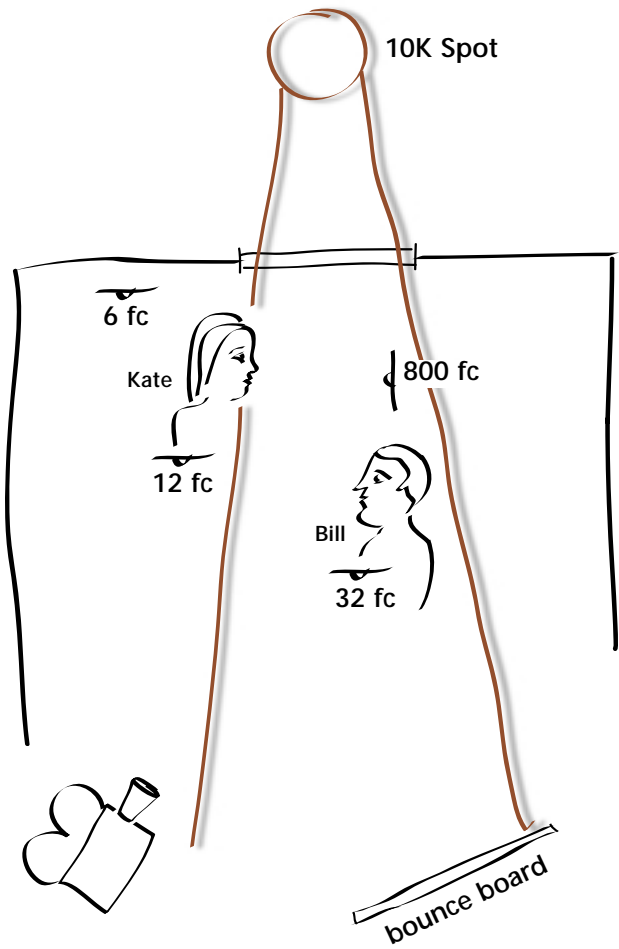
Sound Stage: Cinema/Television School, USC

Processing and workprint: Technicolor Lab

Printer Lights: Yellow = 24, Cyan = 50,

Magenta = 48





LIGHT VALUES

(with reflected light meter)

Zone System

Left-hand wall	-2 stops
Kate's face	-1 stop
Bill in light	+5 stops
Bill in shade	+0 stops

(with incident light meter)

Left-hand wall	6 footcandles (3 stops under key)
Kate's face	12 footcandles (2 stops under)
Bill in light	800 footcandles (4 stops over)
Bill in shade	32 footcandles (1/2 stop under)

Note: Kate's face increases in value as it receives reflected light from Bill's yellow sweater.

foot. But Jordan was so into the shot that he didn't even feel it! He kept right on shooting. He lifted his foot to take a side-ways step, and up went this six-foot board attached to his foot. Jordan was trying to shake the thing off as he kept doing the shot! Finally, mercifully, someone yelled 'Cut!' That was Jordan: he was so deeply into cinema that pain came second."

Fighting the pain

Cronenweth had to deal with a lot of pain in his life, but he constantly overcame it to create superb work. For the last 15 years of his life, the director of photography waged an on-again, off-again battle with a misdiagnosed and debilitating illness, making the wonderful cinematography he created during that span all the more amazing. On the set of *Blade Runner*, Cronenweth was in such a weakened state that he sometimes had to be carried to the camera. The resulting work speaks for itself, a testimony to Cronenweth's extraordinary courage and talent.

In addition to his role as operator on *Hell in the Pacific*, Cronenweth worked for Hall as a camera assistant and operator on such seminal films as *In Cold Blood*, *Cool Hand Luke* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. "We were totally interchangeable," Hall maintains. "I would get sick with pneumonia or something, and he would shoot for a week without me. You couldn't tell the difference.

"I don't want to say that his work was *better*," Hall adds with a wry laugh and a twinkle in his eye, "but it was equally good. In any case, the point is not about whose work was better, it's that he always filled in when I needed him. And when he did fill in, he did it as well as I could imagine anybody doing it." Coming from a cinematographer who has earned two

Academy Awards (for *Butch Cassidy* and *American Beauty*) and six other Oscar nominations, this is no small compliment.

Peggy Sue Got Married

When Cronenweth was invited to conduct a workshop at USC, he chose to re-enact a scene from *Peggy Sue Got Married*, a film he shot for Francis Ford Coppola. The film is an eccentric mélange of *Back to the Future* and Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Mired in an unhappy marriage, the title character goes to her 25th high school reunion, where she faints dead away. When Peggy Sue awakens, she finds herself back in the early 1960s, reliving her 18th year. Given a chance to do things differently, she reproaches her boyfriend and future husband for things he hasn't done yet, and briefly considers running off with the school rebel.

In the workshop scene, the once-again-youthful Peggy Sue goes down to the basement of her parents' house to sneak a cigarette. Her boyfriend, confused by his paramour's odd behavior, follows and confronts her. Coppola shot much of *Peggy Sue* in a real house that served as the heroine's old home, and naturally set the scene in question in the structure's small cellar. Because there wasn't much room for lights, Cronenweth was faced with a difficult problem. He worked out a simple solution, which he duplicated in the USC workshop.

One light

In an interview conducted after the workshop, Cronenweth explained that he chose the scene "because it is a graphic representation of what can be done with one light. The choice to use one light was the result of the small cellar location. There

was only one window in the basement; if I had brought the light inside, I would have been forced to hide a bunch of tiny units. It would have been spotty, so I decided to use one source instead. The window was the answer. It was at least worth a test.”

In the workshop, the cinematographer placed a single spotted 10K outside the window, blasting in a beam of moonlight. Cronenweth used a smoke machine to fill the shadows, along with a small bounce board at the back of the set facing the window. One of the most intriguing aspects of the setup was that the fill lighting was principally created by the actors themselves — or, more specifically, by the male actor’s yellow sweater as he moved toward the woman, who was sitting with her back to the window.

The lighting scheme was a gutsy one. The 10K beamed through the window of the workshop set from left to right, defining the edges of the staircase and little else. The smoke provided the barest minimum of fill. The woman sat at the window, her backlit face on the edge of darkness. The man sat opposite her, dramatically lit in profile. The setup’s lit areas were overexposed, while the rest were barely visible.

When the actor moved, however, the lighting was transformed, creating a wonderful dramatic moment. As he advanced toward the woman, his yellow sweater acted as a moving bounce board, a soft source that gradually and beautifully revealed her face when he reached her.

The lighting lesson was one of simplicity and motion. By using the actor’s position to change the exposure, Cronenweth underlined the dynamic nature of cinema. More importantly, the lighting complemented the story of the scene, culminating with the characters’ dramatic confrontation at the window.



Overhead view of workshop set. Note bounce board on lower right.

Jordan’s feel

Cronenweth said that his approach to lighting was simply that of a problem-solver. “You are always working under changing conditions,” he noted. “Every location has its own set of problems. As you learn your craft, you find more and more solutions to problems, solutions that allow you to work with the style that you have chosen. When you choose the lens and other equipment, you have to ask yourself, ‘What do I have to do to this room to give it the proper look?’ Let’s face it, though: a lot of photography is done simply by feel.”



In a scene from *Peggy Sue Got Married*, Kathleen Turner goes through her steps for grip Billy Beard, operator John Toll (with viewfinder) and Cronenweth.

Cronenweth's "feel" was based on a thorough knowledge of the film stock. Prior to any production, he always conducted a series of careful tests. "I shoot a series of exposure tests and have them printed and timed so they all look the same," he said. "You can see whether your lights are too high or too low, and you move them to either underexpose or overexpose for the next test. This will give you a pretty good idea what your printer lights are, but there is nothing like actual shooting. When working with the first day's dailies, you try the lights that you tested. If they work, fine; if they don't work, you time the day's work and go to the next day, when you can try a one-light. Sometimes it takes several days to get into the groove. There are so many variables that affect the way film looks. I'm glad there are, though — if it was easy, anybody could do it!"

Married thief

With characteristic humor, the cinematographer described the laboratory as an essential partner. "It's like being married," he joked. "I get involved with the lab when I

start testing. We discuss various questions, such as: 'Why is it so red when it's supposed to be blue?' 'Why is it so blue when it's supposed to be red?' 'Why is it so dark?' 'Why is it so light?' 'What are you doing to me? You're killing me!'"

In the same jocular style, Cronenweth acknowledges his debt to other cinematographers: "I see tons of movies, and I steal every good idea that I can. Perhaps 'borrow' is a better word! I also find that there is some really good work on TV. It's amazing to me, because those cinematographers have so little time."

The single source

John Toll, ASC, is in a privileged position to comment on the workshop footage. Toll made history recently by becoming the second cinematographer to ever win back-to-back Oscars, for his superb work on the 1995 films *Legends of the Fall* and *Braveheart*. Before embarking upon his own career as a director of photography, Toll served as Cronenweth's operator on two films, including *Peggy Sue*.

According to Toll, the idea of a single source, as demonstrated in the workshop, was essential to Cronenweth's approach to cinematography. "Jordan was very serious about the idea of having one light," he says. "I don't think that we were able to actually shoot whole sequences with one light that often, but in terms of developing a concept and visualizing a scene, that's where he started from. For the basement scene in *Peggy Sue*, I think he started with the 10K through the window just to see how it would look. As soon as he saw it, he knew he wouldn't need anything else. Of course, the real trick in that type of situation was *recognizing* that he wouldn't need anything else. The great thing about that sequence was its simplicity: he started with



an idea, turned on a light and watched what happened. If you need to enhance it, you do it; if you don't, you walk away. If he had turned on another light, he would have messed it up. The hard part is to know when you're messing it up, and Jordan had a great sense of that. He didn't turn on another light because he knew he didn't need it. I'm sure he used a light meter at some point during that scene, but readings didn't mean that much to him. He had a great eye and a real understanding of his craft."

Seeing what the film sees

The constantly changing exposure of the workshop footage made it a bit difficult to evaluate. The incident readings indicated an extreme contrast between the overexposed man in the light beam and the underexposed shadow area. But the addition of smoke made the incident readings meaningless, because of smoke's abil-

From left: An unidentified crew member, assistant cameraman Bobby Thomas, operator Cronenweth, director Richard Brooks and cinematographer Conrad Hall ready a shot for *In Cold Blood*.

ity to lower contrast. The reflective readings bore this out, yielding a lower contrast and bringing the woman's face up into the visible range. In short, Cronenweth's exercise was a prime example of a scene that could only be truly evaluated by eye.

Toll recalls his former mentor's ability to light while looking through the eyepiece. "Jordan really had a fantastic ability to see the image as film sees it — to look through a lens and interpret what was going to happen on film. He evaluated a scene through the lens and made lighting adjustments based solely on his knowledge, experience, and eye. He had an idea for a particular mood for the *Peggy Sue* scene, and he found it by looking through the lens. He relied on his eye more than

anything else to tell him it was right. I think all cinematographers attempt to do this; he just happened to do it exceptionally well. I remember watching dailies on *Peggy Sue* and being in awe of his ability to create such beautiful images. There is an incredible subtlety and richness to his work that really makes it unique. I consider him to be one of our greatest cinematographers.”

Masterworks

After his own apprenticeship with Conrad Hall, Cronenweth went on to make his own powerful imprint as a director of photography. He was widely acknowledged among his peers for his work on such films as *Play It As It Lays*, *Altered States*, *Cutter’s Way*, *Gardens of Stone* and *State of Grace*. The respect he was accorded by other cinematographers was further evidenced when the American Society of Cinematographers gave Cronenweth its first ASC Award for *Peggy Sue*, which also earned him an Oscar nomination. His talents stayed contemporary, and he was sought out by different generations of filmmakers; after shooting two films for Francis Coppola (*Peggy Sue* and *Gardens of Stone*), he also worked with up-and-coming directors like Phil Joanou and David Fincher.

Blade Runner

Cronenweth’s best-known work is undoubtedly *Blade Runner*, a revolutionary film by Ridley Scott that redefined audiences’ vision of the future. In sharp contrast to the pristine world of *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner* presents a dirty, overcrowded futurescape in which many aspects of society simply don’t work. Like most masterpieces, the film succeeds through a

conjunction of many elements, marrying a great story with a talented cast and crew. Cronenweth’s contribution, in particular, is nothing short of brilliant, and his visual approach to the film influenced an entire generation of cinematographers.

Toll places *Blade Runner* in a historical context. “Jordan told me that *Citizen Kane* was his biggest inspiration for *Blade Runner*,” he reveals. “When he told me that, I sort of dismissed it, thinking, ‘Well, who *isn’t* influenced by *Citizen Kane*?’ But when you look at *Blade Runner* in that context, you understand what he means. You see a wonderful blend of the classic, stark, high-contrast compositions of *Kane* and highly original contemporary lighting, aided by stunning production design.”

Ironically, *Blade Runner* was not well received when it first came out, but Cronenweth’s work on the film earned him the English BAFTA prize for Best Cinematography.

Don’t overlight

Taking stock of Cronenweth’s career, Toll discerns a pattern of continuity and artistic progress. “*Blade Runner* was the landmark, but everything he did after that got better and better; he just kept refining his skills. *State of Grace* is fantastic. It wasn’t like he got stuck in a time warp. He became a cinematographer in 1970, and he stayed original and innovative the whole time he was working.”

Soon after the workshop at USC, Cronenweth gave future cinematographers an important piece of advice: “A lot of new camera people make the same mistake — they overlight. You can light very simply and still have a very effective result.”