

Notes on the Cinematography of Bradford Young

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This PDF is a supplement to my video on the cinematography of Bradford Young. You can find the videos here:

- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KdH65PM15I>
- Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/197303440>

Cameras and lenses used

Bradford Young prefers the 2.39:1 aspect ratio, and typically favors anamorphic, though he shoots widescreen Super 35mm as well (like with Arrival).



He has shot on Red cameras, but nowadays exclusively prefers the Arri Alexa. He uses a wide variety of lenses, from Arri/Zeiss to Cooke, almost always primes.

He loves to shoot wide open, either T1.9 or T1.3. His focus pullers must be the best!

He operates the camera most times, either handheld or on dollies.

Underexposure

He is a student in the tradition of Gordon Willis and Harris Savides when it comes to underexposure:





He is predominantly influenced by Roy DeCarava, a legendary photographer (Wikipedia link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_DeCarava).

Upon reading a script he starts to create a collage of photographs off the Internet (a “Look- book”, typically found in fashion photography). Photography is definitely a bigger inspiration to him than paintings.

The underexposure helps in reducing specular highlights on dark skin tones and brings out the natural texture in the faces (the top lighting helps as well):



Lighting Style

Bradford Young tries to stick to practical light sources whenever he can. Practicals are often designed strategically (with the help of the production designer) and enhanced with dimmers and bulbs to get the right exposure and color temperature. Here's a shot from *A Most Violent Year* that shows how a practical can be prominent yet be the main source of light:



When it comes to lighting faces he loves a super-soft light, almost always bounced, rarely direct – and usually always as a book light or some kind of second diffusion to eliminate specular highlights. This is important for dark skin. When I light Indian skin (which can vary from light brown to dark brown, but never as dark as African skin tones) the number one problem I have is specular highlights reflected off skin. A super soft light is great to eliminate that problem.

He loves to use Kino Flos to get this soft look, and it is the de facto standard in the industry. Note: He bounces Kino Flos to make them even softer.

Motivation

He always tries to get the look motivated as if by a single source, mostly windows:



His key aim is to create an atmosphere or mood. The way he combines underexposure, lighting faces and motivated light is what delivers his signature style.

Exteriors

The oldest technique to shooting exteriors is to keep actors backlit. It's also a great idea to use white balance to play with amber and blue to get skin tones to look great:





Check out [Bradford Young's website](#), though I'm not sure he's updated it in a year or so.

I hope you've found this summary useful. Let me know what you think!