

The Cinematography of John Alcott

By Sareesh Sudhakaran | wolfcrow.com

This is a supplement to my video on the cinematography of John Alcott. You'll find the original videos here:

YouTube: <https://youtu.be/g3YXN4KG6Ts>

Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/212080733>

Links to videos and sites

Here are some of the videos and links I used in my research. Please note some of them might be taken down in the future, so no guarantees!

1. [Six kinds of light, John Alcott segment](#)
2. [Leon Vitali on working with John Alcott](#)
3. [Donald P. Borchers, Production, on working with John Alcott](#)
4. [ASC article on Barry Lyndon](#)

The naturalistic style

John Alcott was clearly influenced by Stanley Kubrick's style, and preferred naturalistic lighting. This meant using practicals and sources that

augmented the available light, and not trying to artificially create something.

Here are some great examples:



My favorite work of course, is Barry Lyndon:



You can see in the above shots he used windows as the prime source. This doesn't mean he relied on sunlight. He augmented it with Mini Brutes through diffusion to get the image to match paintings of the period.

Probably the most famous shots of this movie are the candlelit scenes:



This was shot with a modified Zeiss 50mm f/0.7 lens. For wider shots they employed a wide-angle adapter to get a 37mm equivalent. For the rest of the movie they also used a Canon T1.2 lens wide open.

Some facts not mentioned in the video

John Alcott always used a light meter. I believe he was a fan of the Gossen because it had a greater sensitivity at the time.

He shot black and white Polaroids of the scene to check for exposure, and only then decided on the stop to shoot in.

He was a stickler for a proper lunch. Donald P Borchers tells us he used to set up camera boxes and a tablecloth over them so he could eat on plates and cutlery. On one occasion when lunch wasn't up to his standards, he refused to shoot until proper lunch was served.

Kubrick hated the directors' viewfinders of the time, so Alcott designed a special "tube" that Kubrick subsequently used for all of his work:



Kubrick could adapt any lens to it and found it suited his style.

For Barry Lyndon, to get the painterly look, he used a [No. 3 Low Contrast Tiffen filter](#) and sometimes even a brown net for a warmer look.

Lighting faces

He stuck mostly to a side lighting pattern:



He also used top and Paramount lighting a lot, and didn't worry too much about shadows:



The contrast ratio was around 2 stops to one, or more. When lighting straight on, the subjects were backlit with the face in the shade, slightly underexposed:



I hope you found this additional supplement useful in understanding John Alcott's style.

Let me know what you think!