

## Blinded by light, just to see: Flashes and revelations (Paris, 17–18 Oct 24)

Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Richelieu, Oct 17–18, 2024

Deadline: May 5, 2024

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As early as October 1859, William Crookes, one of the editors of the *Photographic News*, mentioned the possibility of using magnesium to produce an artificial burst of light to illuminate a scene for photography. Flash photography became one of the most spectacular technical manifestations of commercial photography within a few years of its invention. Thanks to the most recent camera sensors (specifically the SPAD type), scenes can now be recorded with a minimum of 0.001 lux without any artificial light. Like film, flash could well eventually become a somewhat distant memory in a new technological ecosystem that both digitally alters and expands what is visible and recordable. It is therefore particularly timely to reopen this case in order to carry out an archeology of flash free of purely technicist narratives. The history of photography might easily be reduced to a rather narrow narrative of successive technological advancements that ultimately lead to its triumph over darkness. It is the aim of this conference to steer clear of such teleological readings in order to better understand the flash – a sudden emission of artificial light caused by a variety of technical means (from magnesium to the electric stroboscope via flash bulbs), in contrast to more permanent artificial light – not only as a technique, but as a connecting point between different ways to investigate the history of photography.

The photographic pyrotechnics cannot be separated from rich visual, cultural, and social contexts, as Jacob Riis's work in New York illustrates well. Through its history, flash has helped redefine contemporary visualities. From subterranean worlds to the nocturnal lives of animals and men, from the polar night photographed by Herbert Ponting to the sordid New York nights captured by Weegee, from ectoplasms frozen in their apparitions to pistol bullets captured in their flight by Harold Edgerton, bursts of burning magnesium have often made the unimaginable visible. Perhaps more than any other socio-technical device, the flash has contributed to photography's unique perspective on the world, this "optical unconscious" (W. Benjamin) materialized by its ability to reveal what escapes the human eye. Since its first developments in the 1860s, the flash has been part of a long history of the expansion of the photographable world.

Far from a purely technicist history, this conference wants to engage in a renewed technical history, considered in relation to cultural and social uses. The conference aims at engaging in a conversation about flash that traces all of its dimensions, whether aesthetic, cultural, or media related. Flash is never just light for instance, its manifestation has an important performative dimension that contributes to shaping the photographic event itself. An example of this can be found in the use of magnesium flash by Jean-Martin Charcot and Albert Londe: the noise and smoke it produced helped capture and triggered the pathologies they sought to understand. The stupor and

blindness caused by early flash photography technologies or the willingly invasive capacity of artificial light sometimes harnessed by photojournalists are two of the many manifestations of how flash can shape the actual photographic act. Magnesium flash was materially dangerous. Photographers were sometimes burnt by the burning magnesium and intoxicated by its fumes. The photographed subjects were often paradoxically blinded or even stunned by the sudden incandescence of artificial light. Photography as hazard may therefore prove to be an interesting avenue for research. Flash can also be approached as a trope or analogy that is particularly rich in meaning. Walter Benjamin's use of the word (*aufblitzt*) in *On the Concept of History* illustrates the use of the flash as a metaphor to understand the inner workings of memory. As made clear by snapshots of lynching scenes in the early-20th century United States for example, the flash, in texts and in images, entertains a peculiar connection with both blocked and repressed memories in the history of photography. The motif of the flash as an instrument of revelation also fuels many narratives about the struggle between photographic light and darkness (social, colonial, criminal).

In the history of photography, another axis of exploration involves the poetics and aesthetics of flash – or its definitive refusal, as demonstrated by Cartier Bresson's spite for the technology. The almost uncontrollable explosion of artificial light brought the medium closer to a mechanical image (the combustion of magnesium blinded almost everyone around, transforming the camera into the only seeing thing). This distortion of vision, as well as the other effects of the flash – its use as fill-in light, how it spectacularly whitens anything in the foreground against a dark background in night photography, how it surprises the unprepared subject, its ability to help capture objects in rapid motion – are not merely formal elements. A very dynamic part of photographic production in the 20th century exploited flash-induced immediacy effects to create new visualities, specifically in genres such as celebrity or wildlife photography.

Refused in the name of a purist approach, the use of flash draws technical and symbolic boundaries between art and non-art, well beyond the valorization of a blurred image in pictorialist photography at the end of the 19th century. During the latter half of the 20th century, one individual who utilized this distinction was Chauncey Hare. He aimed to differentiate between photography as a means of politically revealing narratives and photography as a medium used solely for creating aesthetically pleasing images. Flash can appear as a format, with which photographers have also played, in images that the flash marks ostensibly as ordinary images. The use of flash is thus evident in artist's work borrowing a snapshot aesthetic, such as in the *American Surfaces* series by Stephen Shore (1972), but also, until today, in any photography (including commercial) which plays with the deskilled image – whether this image is domestic or produced at the end of the night. Flash becomes an aesthetic associated with strongly signified visual practices and regimes.

The old-fashioned flash would seem to be turning into a species of photographic grain. In a period when the sensitivity of captors replaces the power of flash, it may be seen as not just a passing technology, but also as the sepia tone of contemporary lives. This archeological object is a still familiar element of photographic literacy, but who knows for how long. It appears increasingly marginal not just in contemporary visualities but also in theory. The ordinary light manifestation of the most common photographic camera, the cell-phone, is the flashlight used as a lamp, while the obvious flash of speed cameras is an exception to discreet and delocalized surveillance apparatus. The title of a 2020 movie about new visual forms of warfare declared, "There will be no more night." The most contemporary visual regimes thus require new thinking about what the flash has

materialized, and still materializes, between the elusiveness of light and the capture of the subject.

Proposals may explore, but are not limited to:

- the spaces of flash (physical and/or social)
- the temporalities of flash (instantaneity, arrest)
- flash as an event and a narrative
- the archeology of flash (the use and etymology of words used to refer to artificial light; the dissemination of the flash among amateurs via photography manuals; its degree of use)
- flash as sign, format, and aesthetic
- flash as photographic metaphor and metaphor of photography
- the visualities of flash and constructions of class, race, and gender

Conference particulars :

The conference will take place in Paris, 17-18 October 2024 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Richelieu). We will be able to help towards travel expenses for doctoral students and young researchers. To apply for these stipends, simply indicate in your email to the organisers that you wish to be considered and state the country you will be travelling from.

The conference will be followed by the publication of selected papers in the *Photographica* journal in 2025.

Submission:

Proposals for papers should include author name and affiliation, 300–400 word abstract, and a short CV. We invite proposals from scholars at all levels from early career onwards. Papers will be selected on the quality of the proposal and with the aim of ensuring a broad spread of topics for the conference. These should be sent to [flashconf2024@gmail.com](mailto:flashconf2024@gmail.com) by the deadline of May 5, 2024. They will be reviewed by the scientific committee.

References:

- Clément Chéroux, *Fautographie: petite histoire de l'erreur photographique* (Cisnée: Yellow Now, 2003).
  - Harold Eugene Edgerton, *Flash! Seeing the Unseen by Ultra High-Speed Photography* (Boston, Hale, Cushman & Flint, 1939)
  - Kate Flint, *Flash!: Photography, Writing, and Surprising Illumination* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2017).
  - Jodi Hauptman, "FLASH! The Speed Graphic Camera." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 11 no. 1, 1998, p. 129-137.
  - Chris Howe, *To Photograph Darkness: The History of Underground and Flash Photography* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois UP, 1989)
- Albert Londe, *La Photographie à la lumière artificielle* (Paris, Octave Doin & Fils Éditeurs, 1914).
- Alexander Nemerov, "Burning Daylight: Remington, Electricity, and Flash Photography," in Nancy K. Anderson, William C. Sharpe and .
  - Alexander Nemerov, *Frederic Remington: The Color of Night* (Washington, National Gallery of Art, 2003, 76-95).
  - Hélène Valance, *Nocturne: Night in American Art, 1890-1917* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018).

Reference:

CFP: Blinded by light, just to see: Flashes and revelations (Paris, 17-18 Oct 24). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 24, 2024 (accessed Apr 4, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/41049>>.