

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

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

Eliane de Larminat, Paris

"Blinded by light, just to see: Flashes and revelations" – conference coorganised by LARCA (Université de Paris), HICSA (Université Paris 1 Panthéon Panthéon Sorbonne), and INHA.

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.

## PROGRAM

OCTOBER 17, 2024

9.00 am: Registration and coffee

9.30 am: Keynote: Sara Dominici, Senior Lecturer, University of Westminster

10.30 am - 12.30 pm: Panel 1 - Flash: History and Counter-History / Le flash: histoire et contre-histoire

Niharika Dinkar, Associate Professor, Art Department, Boise State University [EN] - Flash-gun: Photogen, Gunpowder and the Pyrotechnics of Photography

Shannon Perich, Curator, Photographic History Collection, Smithsonian's National Museum of American History [EN] - Insidious Violence in Flash Photography

Giulia Paoletti, Assistant Professor, Department of Art, University of Virginia [EN] - An Archeology of Flash as Seeing: The Xoymet in Senegal

Laura Wexler, Professor of American Studies, Yale University [EN] - "An Adequate Idea" - Mammoth Cave by Flashlight

12.30 pm - 2.00 pm: Lunch

2.00 pm - 3.30 pm: Panel 2 - The Flash as Commodity: Workers, Inventors, Consumers / Le flash comme produit: travail, invention, consommation

Monica Bravo, Assistant professor, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University [EN] - There in a Flash: Magnesium, Mercury, and Mining Photography at New Almaden

Stéphanie Barbier, Docteure en histoire de l'art, HICSA, Université Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne [FR] - Dimitri Rebikoff, le flash électronique et ses usages

Michael Pritchard, Independent scholar and consultant to the Royal Photographic Society [EN] - Amateur Flash: 'not so popular as it deserves'

3.30 pm - 4.00 pm: Coffee Break

4.00 pm - 5.30 pm: Panel 3 - Powder, Lightings and Smokes / Poudres, éclairs et fumées

Denis Bernard, CEHTA, Centre d'Histoire et de Théorie des Arts, EHESS [FR] - L'éclair magnésique : vers un nouvel imaginaire photographique

Isabelle Lynch, PhD candidate, History of art, University of Pennsylvania [EN] - Subterranean Fire: Photography by Magnesium Flash in the Dark Rooms of the Earth

Zsuzsanna Szegedy-Maszák, Curator, Historical Photo Department, Hungarian National Museum [EN] - The Aesthetics of Cave Photography

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OCTOBER 18, 2014

9.00 am: Coffee

9.15 am - 10.45 am: Panel 4 - Stage, Backstage / En scène et en coulisses /

Arnaud Rykner, Professeur des Universités, Institut de Recherche en Études Théâtrales, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle [FR] - Le flash au magnésium et l'invention de la photographie de spectacle

Colette Morel, ATER à l'Université Grenoble-Alpes, chercheuse associée au LARHRA [FR] - « Ébloui par le noir ». Le tourisme visuel des amateurs en coulisses

Meghan Angelos, PhD Candidate, Art History, University of Delaware [EN] - Flashes of Movement: Flash Photography and the Development of American Dance Photography

10.45 am - 11.15 am: Coffee break

11.15 am - 12.45 pm: Panel 5 - Photogenics and Visual Experiments / Photogénie et expérimentations visuelles

Julien Faure-Conorton, Chargé de recherche et de valorisation scientifique des collections, Musée départemental Albert-Kahn [FR] - L'éclair artistique: usages, enjeux et popularité du flash dans la photographie pictorialiste

Allison Pappas, Independent Historian and Curator of Photography [EN] - "The Aerial Observer": Motion, Space, and Flash in Photography's Instrumentalization of Vision in the 1940s

Cole Robertson, DPhil in Fine Art (Practice Led), Royal College of Art, London [EN] - Figured, Grounded: Flash and the Photographic Gestalt

12.45 pm - 2.15 pm: Lunch

2.15 pm - 3.45 pm: Panel 6 - Flash and Visualities: Narrating Social Spaces / Flash et visualités : mettre en récit les espaces sociaux

Lauren Pankin, Doctorante, LARCA, Université Paris Cité [FR] - Flash(back): La vieille France qui s'en va

Myles Little, PhD candidate, Art History, University of Southern California [EN] - Bruce Davidson's Underground Nightmare

Yechen Zhao, Assistant Curator, Art Institute of Chicago [EN] - Lighting Up the People's Republic

of China: Flash Photography and the Electrification of China After 1990

3.45 pm: Coffee break

3.45 pm - 5.30 pm: Round table on the ethics of flash with Marvin Heiferman, Zeynep Gürsel and Thy Phu – moderated by Audrey Sands

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Further information and registration:

All information and (free) registration can be found on this website:  
<https://flashesrevelations.weebly.com/>

Reference:

CONF: Blinded by light, just to see: Flashes and revelations (Paris, 17-18 Oct 24). In: ArtHist.net, Jul 19, 2024 (accessed Apr 7, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/42370>>.