The Shock of the Flash: Prof. Flint on the History of Documentary Flash Photography

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“Flash photography startles, breaks into darkness, makes visible the concealed and the obscure, records and gives significance to that which might otherwise go completely unseen”, so began Prof. Kate Flint in her talk Intrusive Light: Flash Photography and Documentary work. Prof. Flint gave her talk at the Friday 15th November 2013 instalment of the “Birkbeck Forum for 19th-century Studies Birkbeck History and Theory of Photography Research Centre” series chaired by Prof. Lynda Nead, Pevsner Chair of History Of Art. In her introduction Prof. Nead touched on how Prof. Flint rose to the challenges of interdisciplinary research by boldly juxtaposing “national, disciplinary and chronological boundaries” and held up Prof. Flint’s book, The Victorians and The Visual Imagination (2000) as an example of this boldness.

The History of Flash Photography

Using the vehicle of the debate on the ethical and aesthetic merits of flash, Prof. Flint took us on a ride through a pooted history of photography. We started off with the 1900s American documentary photographers, stopped off in the 1930s with the iconic Farm Security Administration photographs and ended our voyage through history with the African American photographers of the 1940s and 50s.

Riis versus Beals: The Man Ray and Lee Miller of Documentary Flash Photography?

To start her foray through the history of documentary flash photography, Prof. Flint introduced us to the work of Jessie Tarbox Beals, a contemporary of Jacob Riis at the advent of the 20th century. In spite of being, what Prof. Flint described, as a “huge self-promoter” and “daredevil” Beals is overshadowed by Riis in the history of photography, even though the two worked together as part of the “early American documentary movement”. Prof. Flint told us that Beals, a pioneering woman photographer, often had her work confused with Riis’s or even wrongly attributed to him. The image that occurred to me while listening to Prof. Flint was a parallel between the story Riis/Beals and Man Ray/Lee Miller.

In a compare and contrast exercise of Beals with Riis Prof. Flint showed how Beals portrayed people, even on the margin of society, with dignity, while Riis on the other hand presented them as victims. As to their use of flash, while Beals used it as a tool of illumination, for Riis flash was a tool of “demolition”, with his outputs described as “exposures not photographs”. As to their views on flash photography, Beals was simply silent while Riis was
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practically evangelical. Prof. Flint told us how Beals, in her many radio broadcasts, talks and writings on photography and her photographs, simply did not mention her use of flash or the genre of flash photography.

Lange versus White: The Shock of the Flash

Moving firmly into the 20th century, Prof. Flint revisited the iconic output of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers of the 1930s giving us a fresh look, with the illumination of flash, at the FSA photographs. Drawing parallels between the uses of flash in contrast with natural light she introduced us to a sympathetic and ethical Dorothea Lange compared with an impetuous Margaret Bourke-White. Lange made a point of shooting subjects outside so she did not have to use flash, not just for aesthetic reasons but for ethical reasons also, she empathised with how the use of flash disturbed her subjects and saw no justification for intruding into their homes.

In complete contrast to Lange, Bourke-White’s use of flash presented an aesthetic metaphor for how she perceived her subjects. Bourke-White, in addition to using flash indiscriminately and without reverence, went on to put mock her subjects in the captions she put on her photographs. A jeering Bourke-White later described the reaction of a band of Christian worshippers to her flash as akin to the shock of being visited by avenging angels!

Parks versus DeCarava: Black or light

As examples of African American documentary photographers, Prof. Flint contrasted the documentary flash photography of Gordon Parks’ with the anti-flash rhetoric of Roy DeCarava’s photographs. Juxtaposing Parks’ output with the profile of the short-lived 1930s “negro” news and picture magazine, Flash, Prof. Flint showed us how flash photography played its part in the African American associated subject matters of being on the periphery, violent race relations and skin tone, or more appropriately, skin lightness.

Prof. Flint contrasted Parks zeal for flash with DeCarava’s “love for natural light” which he describes as having “a near transcendental significance”. Claiming he “hates it (flash) with a passion”, DeCarava’s principle was to let black be black and dark be dark. On this expressive note Prof. Flint ended, appropriately concluding “the vocabulary of flash photography has been an emotionally loaded one throughout its history”.

The contents of Prof. Flint’s talk, organised by Dr Patrizia Di Bello, form a part of her forthcoming book Flash! Photography, Writing, and Surprising Illumination. Prof. Kate Flint is Provost Professor of English and Art History at the University of Southern California (USC) and currently Chair of the Department of Art History. Before USC she taught at Bristol and Oxford Universities and Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey.
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