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The laboratory as camera: experiment and the photographic archive of Victorian science

The history of early photography and its relation to science was until recently the history of a handful of famous, beautiful images: photographs seemingly at home on the gallery wall as much as in the laboratories in which they were made. As historical scholarship has moved productively toward an understanding of science as visual culture (rather than considering science in relation to visual culture), we are beginning to understand how deeply embedded photography has been, from its inception, into the day to day practices of science. Through examples from To See a Spark, my forthcoming book on the electric spark as a scientific and aesthetic object in Victorian Britain, this paper argues that understanding photography’s role in the visual and material culture of Victorian physics can bring more historical specificity to our understanding of nineteenth-century science.

Chitra Ramalingam received her PhD in History of Science from Harvard University in 2009, after a BA in Physics and Philosophy from Harvard and an MPhil in History and Philosophy of Science from the University of Cambridge. She was a British Academy postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Cambridge before arriving at Yale. Her research and teaching range broadly across topics in science and visual culture, with a particular focus on the visual culture of physics (19th and 20th centuries); on 19th-century “ways of seeing” (especially optical illusions, optical toys, and the pre-history of cinema); photography in the scientific laboratory and the science museum; and changing discourses about photography as “art” or “science”.

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