

Rhophographic Photography and Atemporal Cinema: The Link Between Ralph Ellison's Polaroids and *Three Days Before the Shooting...*

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“Here in this country it’s change the reel and change the man.”

—Senator Adam Sunraider in *Three Days Before the Shooting...*

“A paradox: the same century invented History and Photography.”

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

When Ralph Ellison passed away in 1994 at the age of eighty, he left behind a treasure trove of published writing that includes numerous short stories and book reviews, more than two volumes of essays of literary and cultural criticism, and his masterpiece *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953. He also left behind two archives—and two enigmas—that are the subjects of this essay. The first is the sprawling manuscript of an unfinished second novel upon which Ellison labored for forty years that was carefully pieced together by John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley and published in 2010 as *Three Days Before the Shooting....* The other is a collection of hundreds of Polaroid photographs taken by Ellison over the last thirty years of his life, the subjects of which consist almost entirely of objects instead of people.

When viewed in relation rather than in isolation, these two archives become less enigmatic. Instead, they appear as homologous components of Ellison’s lifelong exploration of visual technologies of mechanical reproduction and the role these technologies play in reducing temporalities to form. That a tight connection exists between Ellison’s photography and his fiction writing was first fully realized by Sara

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Blair, who convincingly demonstrates how the historical critique of *Invisible Man* is informed by, if not rehearsed in, Ellison's early street photography. In this essay, I extend Blair's argument by examining Ellison's later photography alongside his post-*Invisible Man* fiction. In the process, I illustrate how Ellison spent the last decades of his life using pen and camera together to trouble the temporal construct of static time that subtends progressive, linear histories—histories that underwrite the racial cartographies Ellison so lucidly critiqued in *Invisible Man*.

To understand both the importance of Ellison's Polaroids and the ekphrastic logic of *Three Days*, Ellison's "instant" photographs need to be viewed as antidotes to the ways of seeing formalized by the sequential photographic apparatuses that organ-ize the identities of two of the novel's principal characters. In *Three Days*, Ellison juxtaposes the first-person narratives of two white subjects who internalize the form(s) of mechanical visual reproduction associated with his current and/or former profession. Book I of the novel is told from the point of view of a journalist and self-proclaimed liberal named Welborn McIntyre who unconsciously objectifies and thereby "mortifies" African Americans with a photographic gaze reflexively doubled by the still images that surround him. Book II, in turn, is partially told from the perspective of a U.S. Senator named Adam Sunraider whose atemporal filmic creations, traces of his younger days as a cinematographer, erupt into and overwrite his own disjointed personal history. These characters' modes of seeing and the technologies through which they are formalized represent two different, but equally problematic relationships to the past and, by extension, U.S. racial history.

Crucially, each character's way of seeing is simulated ekphrastically in the respective books that constitute Ellison's novel. McIntyre views history as a linear progression, a view Ellison explicitly likens to a work of narrative cinema and, more pointedly, the sequential still images of which motion pictures are comprised. Because of McIntyre's unconscious racism and concomitant impulse to view black subjects as "object[s] of historical knowledge" (Gualtieri 155), his cinematic narrative is populated with still shots and freeze frames of African Americans. McIntyre's photographic gaze therefore photogrammetrically reproduces the imaginary static material of which progressive history is made. Unable or unwilling to recognize the return of the repressed photograms in the temporal/cinematic illusion of his vision of history, McIntyre persists in his evasion by relegating black people to the expository margins of his narrative and relying upon his tape recorder, another form of mechanical reproduction, to reconstruct the stories of persons of color like Lee Willie Minifies who resist and subvert his mortifying gaze.

While McIntyre tries to deny the blackness *within* the illuminated frames of an historical narrative in which he has blind(ing) faith, Senator Sunraider suppresses the blackness that *frames* his personal history in an attempt to escape the trauma of his imaginary loss of whiteness—a loss that followed rather than accompanied his entry into black subjectivity. I refer here to the moment in the novel when the Senator, recalling his youth from his hospital bed, reflects upon his days as Bliss, a boy raised by black parishioners to become preacher in the church. At more than one point during this recollection he remembers being "claimed" by a white woman who crashes a Juneteenth camp meeting and declares the young Bliss to be her son. The

would-be Senator's subsequent attempts to escape the blackness of his past and "project" a whiteness, for which his role in U.S. legislative history was at the time a precondition, take the form of cinematic creations both literal and figurative within the novel. As a young man and prodigal foster son, the future Congressman steps away from his life as a boy preacher in the black church and becomes a filmmaker who, while passing for white, attempts to "master" time through cinematography (279). The disjointed filmic creations of his youth are ekphrastically quoted within Sunraider's cinematic recollections of the past, further warping and distorting the diegetic temporal frame of his narrative.

Still images also appear within Sunraider's cinematic memories, but unlike McIntyre's explicitly racist photographic caesurae, the pauses in the Senator's recollection oscillate between two interdependent forms of composition described by Norman Bryson: rhopography, which depicts "those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that 'importance' constantly overlooks," and megalography, "the depiction of those things in the world which are great—the legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crises of history" (61).¹ As the boy named Bliss becomes the man named Adam Sunraider, the rhopographic still-life images associated with his recollected youth give way to megalographic still shots and freeze frames of his approaching assassination. The connective tissue between these two modes of seeing, as well as the two identities whose priorities they articulate, is the future-Senator's role as "Mr. Movie-man," a filmmaker who turns black subjects into "ghosts."

Ellison's historical-temporal critique in *Three Days* hinges upon the constitutive relationship between still photography and cinematic projection, or between the projected apparition and the photograms of which motion pictures are comprised. Throughout the novel, Ellison refers to the simulation of duration created when sequential still images are passed through a motion picture projector as an extended metaphor for progressive history and the static temporality upon which it depends. In the process, he illustrates how historical time so formalized stands in opposition to Henri Bergson's concept of a genuine duration.

Ellison read widely on the subject of time, and many of Ellison's sources have been thoroughly examined by scholars. However, the influence of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1911) has yet to be fully appreciated. Integral to both *Creative Evolution* and Ellison's explorations of temporality is Bergson's concept of duration or dynamic time, which Bergson juxtaposes against the Newtonian construct of static, spatialized time. According to Bergson, a life is not a linear progression or series of transitions from one state of *being* to the next; rather, a life (indeed, life itself) is a durational whole that qualitatively unfolds in an incessant and insistent process of *becoming*—a process characterized by "invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new" (11). Time, in other words, isn't a backdrop against which events *take place*, but is integral to and thus inseparable from the actualization of difference. Time, for Bergson, *is* difference, for becoming is the uncoiling of difference, the actualization in the present of something virtual from the past bound up in the present. Bergson's prioritization of (dynamic) becoming over (static) being is radically anti-mechanistic, anti-teleological, and

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entirely unlike the Newtonian framework embraced by the empirical sciences.

Mediating our experience or understanding of the unbroken time of becoming is something Bergson dubbed “The Cinematographical Mechanism of Thought and the Mechanistic Illusion,” which he illustrates with an extended visual-mechanical metaphor essential to Ellison’s filmic conceit in *Three Days*: “Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things,” laments Bergson, “we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality, and, as these are characteristic of the reality, we have only to string them on...to imitate...becoming itself.” This, observes Bergson, is how a complex, chaotic, and durational reality is transformed into a progressive linear sequence of static moments or images: through language and thought-forms that reify this mechanistic illusion. When we think about becoming in this way, he writes, “we hardly do anything else than set going a kind of cinematograph inside us” (306).

Bergsonian duration in general and this photographic/cinematographic metaphor in particular are integral to the three-fold critique of linear temporality, progressive history, and structural racism at the heart of Ellison’s unfinished novel—a critique that hinges upon the ekphrastic references to photography and cinematography Ellison makes throughout the text. Ellison’s portrayal, in *Three Days*, of history as a process of qualitative unfolding, in which the past conditions the present but does not determine the future, is inseparable from Bergson’s critique of spatialized time as both realized in and reinforced by these visual technologies of mechanical reproduction. If Bergson emphasizes his point about static time with allusions to photography and cinematography, then Ellison simulates these visual forms in his novel to allude to Bergson as part of a broader assessment of progressive history and the temporal construct that subtends it.²

In McIntyre and Sunraider, Ellison has crafted characters whose perceptions and actions are antithetical to the Bergsonian process of creative evolution and the durational temporality upon which such evolution depends. The Polaroid photographs Ellison made while working on *Three Days*, by contrast, articulate alternatives to spatialized time and thereby recover what Tamsin Lorraine, invoking Deleuze’s adoption of Bergson, calls the “dynamic tendencies implicit in the present” (99). While *Three Days* dramatizes how the visual logic of motion picture photography formalizes a “groove of history” within which African Americans are entombed, Ellison’s “ontographic” Polaroids give form to an alternative temporality consistent with what Ellison, after Bergson, privileges as “‘real’ or *actual* time or duration” (*Invisible Man* 443; “An Extravagance of Laughter” 621).

Ellison’s embrace of the rhopographic composition in general and the still life in particular is indicative of his personal attempts to work through the same paradox that preoccupies his characters: how to use a visual technology that formalizes static time to reveal the dynamism of becoming and the durational nature of time. As Bryson notes, rhopography is “The enemy [of] a mode of seeing which thinks it knows in advance what is worth looking at and what is not.” Because rhopographic images recapture the surprise of seeing things for the first time, writes Bryson, “[s]ight is taken back to a vernal stage before it learned how to scotomise the visual

field, how to screen out the unimportant and not *see*, but scan” (65). In a sense, Bryson is characterizing rhopographic images as signifiers of subjectivity’s precondition and invitations to return to a Deleuze-Guattarian “plane of immanence” out of which actualized “planes of organization” emerge. Or, to quote Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man*, rhopography can remind us of “the chaos which lives within the pattern of [our] certainties” (580-581).

Ellison longed for a history that serves life and action. But what he confronted daily was an historical imaginary structured like a motion picture: sequential, linear, and deterministic. As Bergson knew, a historiography whose progress affirms destiny instead of possibility maintains the illusion of a mechanistic universe. Ellison’s Bergsonian “cinematographic” metaphor for progressive history is particularly apt because photography, cinematography, and linear historiography all formalize an atomized and spatialized view of time; as such, each is underwritten by, and in turn underwrites, the Newtonian construct of time as extended space, a container or “groove” in which a sequence of Kantian “nows” form an ever-extending line.

Like Bergson, commentators on photography and cinema have tied these media forms to a reductive view of history that subsumes its chaotic, non-linear, molecular dynamism. For example, Eduardo Cadava writes, “photography names a process that, seizing and tearing an image from its context, works to immobilize the flow of history” (xx). This quasi-Bergsonian observation about photography and history is inseparable from the well-rehearsed connection between photography and death. “Subjects of photography, seized by the camera, we are mortified,” continues Cadava—“that is, objectified, ‘thingified,’ imaged,” a situation that “allows us to speak of our death *before* our death” as “[t]he image already announces our absence” (8).³ Elena Gualtieri paraphrases the Kracauerian antecedent of this observation and unpacks its temporal implications when she writes that photography is “the technological realization of a certain conception of history,” which “rests on a linear model of temporality which marks the past off as a separate dimension, as the object of historical knowledge rather than as an integrated part of lived experience” (155).

This deathly logic of photography and history extends to the cinema. As Garrett Stewart writes in *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis*, “Whereas photography engraves the death it resembles, cinema defers the death whose escape it simulates. The isolated photo or photogram is the still work of death; cinema is death always still at work” (xi). Stewart’s principal argument in this book is that the repressed photogram which disappears in the projected cinematic apparition returns in the form of the still shot and the freeze frame—quotations of the sequential still images of which the motion picture is comprised. The return of the repressed still image within the projected apparition marks the return of a death that cannot be escaped, only deferred by way of a cinematic simulation of motion. Aside from foregrounding the moments in *Three Days* when cinematic memories temporarily revert to still(ed) images, this Bergsonian description of cinema as sequential photography whose projection enacts a *simulation* of duration is echoed by Ellison’s remark in “The Golden Age, Time Past”: “Ours is the tempo of the motion picture, not that of the still camera, *and we waste experience as we wasted*

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the forest” (239; emphasis added). Suffice it to say that for Ellison, as well as Bergson, the difference between photography and cinema is a one of degree rather than kind: the death associated with each medium, characterized here by Ellison as “waste,” is inextricable from their roles as technologies that territorialize time and formalize linear models of history that depend upon time so figured.

Ellison’s ekphrastic references to photography and cinematography in *Three Days* are central to his exploration of history vis à vis temporality, out of which emerges Ellison’s deeper (and downright Deleuzian) theorization of the connection between coercive racial and temporal constructs. In the novel, Ellison portrays structural racism and spatialized time as interdependent molarities standing in interaction. Rather than depict the effects of this interaction upon racialized subjects as deterministic, Ellison demonstrates how race can be destabilized by troubling the historico-temporal construct with which it is linked at a molecular level, or “on the lower frequencies” (*Invisible Man* 581).

Prologue and Book I: Stills and Stiffs

The text of *Three Days* begins, appropriately enough, with an example of what Garrett Stewart calls cinema’s “photo synthesis.” The Prologue gets underway with the arrival of Reverend Alonzo Hickman and his African American congregation in Washington, D.C. where they have come to warn Senator Sunraider of a plot to assassinate him, and concludes with the description of a photograph depicting the preacher and his parishioners praying at the Lincoln Memorial after being turned away by Sunraider’s handlers. This photograph, taken by an amateur high school photographer and “flashed over the wires following the shooting” (9), exemplifies a way of (not) seeing—an objectifying photographic gaze reproduced by photographs like this. Evidence of further reproduction and internalization of this gaze immediately follows as Senator Sunraider’s secretary, “a young Mississippian,” views Hickman as the subject of—or rather an object within—a photographic composition (6). As the omniscient narrator looking through the secretary’s eyes observes, Hickman is “framed by the doorway, as the others arranged themselves beyond him in the hall” after occluding the “large abstract paintings which hung along the paneled wall” of the Senator’s office (6). Hickman’s corporeal visibility, brought into bold relief against the original and unique (as opposed to mechanically reproduced) paintings behind him, is reduced within the secretary’s vision to an object in the foreground of a “framed” photographic composition consisting of “Southern Negroes of a type she had heard of all her life” (6). Immediately after photographically “thingifying” him and classifying him as a reproducible “type,” not unlike one of an infinite number of photographs that can be made from the same negative, the secretary denies that the Senator could know Hickman since “the only colored he knows is the boy who shines shoes at his golf club” (6). Ellison concludes the Prologue by drawing a connection between the secretary’s objectification of Hickman, who raised the boy who became the Senator, and the photographic gaze that enables it. This connection takes the form of an observation made by the high-school student who snapped the picture of Hickman and his congregation, who observes “that he had seen them as a ‘good composition.... I thought their faces

would make a fine scale of grays between the whiteness of the marble and the blackness of the shadows” (9).

If the Prologue inheres in the photograph, Book I puts the still image into motion like a photogram dissolving into a projected motion picture via critical flicker fusion. This “photo synthetic” process turns reflexive in narrative cinema by way of the still shot and the freeze frame, which visually quote the still photographs of which motion pictures are made. Ellison simulates this self-reflexive cinematic gesture at the start of Book I when McIntyre, recalling the attempted assassination of Sunraider on the Senate floor by a black gunman, is struck by the seemingly inexplicable “photographic image of the elegant magnesium-bodied sports car which ignited and burned during the recent running of the Le Mans Grand Prix” that popped into his mind when the shooting started (13). I say *seemingly* inexplicable because this “photographic image” is in fact McIntyre’s repressed memory of Lee Willie Minifees setting fire to his Cadillac on Sunraider’s lawn, a scene described later in the novel via flashback and which I examine below. Immediately after recalling his recollection of this image McIntyre notes, “Then things seemed to reel out of phase” (13). The word “reel” here, as well as the symbolism of a sequence of “shots” raining down from the balcony onto the stage below, evokes the technology of motion picture projection. Because McIntyre unconsciously views history as both a narrative of progress and a motion picture, he associates the assassination attempt on the Senator with a mechanical glitch that interrupts the illusion of seamless cinematic motion. Rather than totally disintegrate into photograms and thereby give the lie to his illusory view of history, however, McIntyre keeps the movie playing in his mind by having the stilled image dissolve once more into cinematic motion. The photographic image—in this case the repressed memory of Minifees’s burning Cadillac—is subordinated once more to a cinematic simulation of death’s deferral after becoming temporarily insistent in McIntyre’s recollection of the event.⁴

The dialectic Stewart describes between photography or the photographic gaze and cinema continues in the aforementioned “Cadillac Flambe” episode, which begins with McIntyre expecting a photographic shoot but getting instead a “*tableau vivant*,” which he characterizes as “the most unexpected picture of the year,” leaving him “wish[ing] for a cinema camera to synchronize with my recorder!” (39). Here, McIntyre associates Minifees, a black man who has parked his Cadillac on Sunraider’s lawn in preparation for a ritualistic sacrifice-by-fire, with still images (photographs, *tableaux*, etc.), and he wishes (or *says* he wishes) he had another form of mechanical reproduction to accompany his tape recorder. However, as his displaced memory of the image of the burning Grand Prix racecar illustrates, McIntyre’s modus operandi is to deny African Americans agency by denying them even the simulated motion that the cine camera would provide. Minifees’s voice comes through loud and clear on “different wavelengths” thanks to McIntyre’s tape recorder (48), but his actions become frozen into a still shot within McIntyre’s memory: “in the foreground at the bottom of the slope,” he recalls,

a rough semicircle of outraged faces; in the midforeground, up the gentle rise of the lawn, the white convertible shooting into the springtime air a

radiance of intense blue flame, like that of a welder's torch or a huge fowl being flambéed in choice cognac; then on the rise above, distorted by heat and flame, the dark-skinned, white-suited driver: standing with his gleaming face expressive of high excitement as he watched the effect of his deed. (39)

Minifees's actions traumatize McIntyre, who relegates the jazzman to the lower, sonic frequencies of his narrative and the frozen realm of the photogram. And while this memory may symbolically return as the image of the burning racecar that irrupts into his cinematic memory of the assassination attempt on Senator Sunraider, McIntyre himself never makes this connection between the stilled image of Minifees and the simulated deferral of Sunraider's death.

McIntyre's "stills," which arrest the narrative as much as they arrest motion, go hand in hand with his saturation of Book I with exposition, which inhibits the progress of the narrative that contains him. Take, for example, the entirety of Chapter 8, which consists almost entirely of expository recollections, except for a single question McIntyre fails to ask Hickman and Hickman answers anyway with comic subversion. At first, this stilling – or stiling – of the narrative and its temporal progression seems curious. After all, Ellison's revisions to *Invisible Man* revolved around maintaining narrative inertia and his own reading on time and narrative specifically cites expository reflections like McIntyre's as ineffective. Why, on the heels of *Invisible Man*'s success and in light of these observations, would Ellison develop a character and a plot line that so completely contradicts the conventions governing the effective use of time and narrative in Book I? The answer is that McIntyre's failures as a narrator—echoed later in the novel by his admitted failures as a novelist—are the subject, not a shortcoming, of Book I. That is, McIntyre's time-arresting narrative indirectly critiques the gaze that entombs black persons within a coercive historico-temporal construct, the progress of which is enacted through the stasis of minoritarian subjects. Unconsciously, McIntyre associates blackness with stasis and, at the same time, imagines history as a progressive line that, like time, is followed rather than made—a channel in which events and persons either *take place* or plunge from its groove.

Integral to this critique is the fact that McIntyre sees history, be it personal or national, as a form of narrative cinema. Just as the projected image turns back on itself through the still shot and the freeze frame, so too does McIntyre's reverie self-reflexively disintegrate into sequential still images. The yarn McIntyre weaves about his youthful love affair with a black woman named Laura Johnson whom he impregnated and planned to marry, if but to prove his liberality to himself, best illustrates this interplay between cinematic memory and photographic vision. Beginning, "I tried to shake it, but a stream of images now pursued me like the scene from a movie which I had seen as a child" (79), McIntyre's recollection of his personal past is explicitly likened to a motion picture. Within this cinematic narrative, McIntyre's memory of going to Laura's parents' apartment to "do the honorable thing" is populated with still photographic images, both real and imagined. Laura's mother, for example, is "[a] short, large-breasted, matronly dark

woman whom I'd seen only in photographs" (104), and when confronted with the task of speaking to Laura's mother, McIntyre fixates instead on "the opposite wall" where "an upright piano stood with a row of framed photographs arranged on top, one of them of Laura in white cap and gown, flanked by her smiling parents" (105). An ironic inversion of Barthes's experience of "finding" his deceased mother in a stack of old photographs in *Camera Lucida*, this scene dramatizes McIntyre's confrontation with the living black mother he secretly wishes he could lose. Because he is uncomfortable with the presence of Laura's mother, McIntyre fixates on photographs of her and/or likens her to a photograph in a failed attempt to imagine her absence. He is eventually relieved of the dilemma her presence poses by the woman herself, who returns with shotgun in hand to hasten McIntyre's departure. When she tells McIntyre, "All your troubles with your black woman are over!" she might as well be describing his aborted relationship to herself instead of his terminated affair with her pregnant daughter.⁵

This extended memory of McIntyre's is also exemplary of Garrett Stewart's observations about still shots in narrative cinema. McIntyre views his own past as a movie, but the repressed photographs upon which this simulated motion depends return in these memories in the form of photographs, including the linear sequence that sits atop the piano of the Johnson family parlor. Just as the sequential photographs of the film strip shimmer to the surface of the projected cinematic illusion by way of the freeze frame and the still shot, so too do black subjects return as photographic objects within a narrative of illusory progress comprised of the very still photographs it suppresses via simulated motion. Perhaps this is why, within this cinematic memory, McIntyre remembers walking past a movie marquee announcing a film called "The Lost World Returns" (115). What is "returning" here is McIntyre's unconscious association between his perception of personal progress and his escape from blackness. Just like the cinema in which motion is simulated by synthesizing sequential photographs that return as still visual quotations, so too does McIntyre's memory of a past he feels he has transcended return in the form of sequential photographs. If the "motion" of the motion picture relies on the stasis of the photographs that comprise the film strip, then McIntyre's sense of "progress" relies on the perceived stasis of African Americans. He, in turn, imagines himself as the white subject of a whitewashed narrative of progress that Ellison likens to a movie.

The dialectical relationship between photographic caesurae and cinematic projection examined here returns to the forefront when McIntyre accompanies the police to Jessie Rockmore's house. Part museum, part mansion, Rockmore's brightly lit parlor becomes the staging ground for McIntyre's reanimation of still images from the distant past—a heap of broken images right out of Eliot's "The Wasteland" that Rockmore, a long-time salvage man and entrepreneur, shored up against his ruins. McIntyre recollects the event as part *mise en scene*, part silent film. "My eyes become partially adjusted to the blaze of light," he remembers, "and the wall before me seems to flicker like an early silent movie, its brightly colored lithographs creating a feeling of vertigo in which I fall back into a swirl of images of earlier times athrob somehow with the pain of neglected memory" (142). These

images, which spring into motion unexpectedly in McIntyre's mind, ought to remind the reporter of his own neglected memories, for they expose the "photo synthetic" logic of his own repressed past. Only here, still images of African-, Anglo-, and Native American historical figures are transformed into photograms that dissolve into McIntyre's "movie" of history—an unexpected and unsettling experience for McIntyre, who is confronted with the virtual past caught up in the actual present. In short, if his recollection of his personal history relies upon the stilling of non-white Americans in an attempt to entomb them in the past and thereby signify his movement into the future, his reanimation of these historical figures brings the stilled past back into motion to reveal the nonlinear, durational nature of temporality as well as the fallacy of McIntyre's differentially defined progress. "I was looking straight ahead with squinted eyes," McIntyre recalls, "when suddenly President Lincoln's funeral cortege sprang from the glaring wall before me. Flag-draped and crepe-shrouded, it floated past with a creaking of camion and leather, the clink of chains. The lithographs had come sharply alive" (142). Besides images of Robert E. Lee and John Brown, which gallop and march by, respectively, pictures of black horse jockeys and a line of "dark" and "gaudily dressed couples strutting a cakewalk" run and walk across McIntyre's mind's eye (142-43). Then "Black Hawk and Tecumseh, Sitting Bull and Stumickosucks, Chief Joseph and Oceola, Crazy Horse and Little Hand" join President Harding and boxer Jack Johnson in the impromptu motionful projection (144-45). Eventually, McIntyre notes, "[o]bjects in the room seemed to flow, turning in a slow, tumbling motion of time" (146). No longer perceived by McIntyre as linear but "swirl[ing]" and "turning in a slow tumbling motion," time turns back upon itself at Jessie Rockmore's, giving the lie to his own feeble attempts to objectify and engrave African Americans as a bulwark against the ruins of his white liberal identity. Or should I say that the durational nature of time is revealed by the objects and images throbbing with vitality in Rockmore's parlor.

Book II: Atemporality and Rhopography

Whereas Book I begins with a prolegomenous photograph that disappears into a synthesized cinematic apparition, Book II begins with a cinematic projection that threatens to "reel out of phase" and disintegrate into the sequential images that comprise it. Immediately prior to the attempt on his life, the Senator imagines himself as a cinematic apparition being projected before his audience. He recalls he image of the Great Seal apparently "hurtling down toward him with the transparent unsubstantiality of a cinematic image" as it "flashed and flickered," his audience "in the tense attitude of viewers bemused by some puzzling action unfolding on a distant screen," and their faces "shimmer[ing]" in the crowd (235, 236, 236, 237). Once the bullets start to fly, however, the ekphrastic references to motion picture projection give way to a montage of Sunraider's experiences, including his stint as a filmmaker. It is implied but never stated that making movies was what made it possible for Bliss to become Sunraider, or for the young black preacher to become the white, race-baiting Senator. Critical to my analysis is the way this opening montage exemplifies Garrett Stewart's comments about "cinema defer[ring] the death whose escape it simulates" (xi). Sunraider seeks to defer the photogrammatic freeze frame that will

“engrave” his death. Thus he ceases to embody the projected image “reel[ing] out of phase,” and imagines himself a cine camera once the shooting begins, “his eyes...recording details of the wildly tossing scene with the impassive and precise inclusiveness of a motion-picture camera that was toppling slowly from its tripod” (13, 245). If he can “*ROLL THE CAMERA!*” as he recalls himself saying (247), then he can defer his own death (or simulate its deferral, anyway).

There is a circular logic to Sunraider’s shift from cinematic projection to motion picture camera above. On the one hand, his life is flashing before his eyes in the form of a cinematic flashback. Within this flashback, he remembers “casting” his “teasing brown” girl (266)—the mother of his assassin, his son—as the subject of his cinematic gaze, and shooting films he likens to assassinations with his cohorts. What the reader witnesses, when it all comes full circle, is Sunraider’s production of himself—or *image* of himself—through the medium of motion pictures. He is chronicling in filmic fashion the manufacturing of the apparition he imagines himself to be when the shooting starts (and, of course, the shooting itself is likened to the projection of that image, only atomized into individual “shots” instead of a synthesized whole). Tying everything together is the fact that Sunraider is producing his own whiteness, another apparition that Ellison symbolically sutures to the cinema throughout Book II, just as he associates blackness with still photography in Book I. Book II even formally echoes Sunraider’s efforts in that, unlike Book I which is broken into discreet chapters, Book II is an unbroken but convoluted whole. The reader must rely upon contextual clues to determine what period of the subject’s life is being recalled at any given time: the boy Bliss, the young adult “Mr. Movie Man,” or the adult Senator Sunraider. Unlike McIntyre, who relies upon photographic caesurae in a failed attempt to preserve an historical narrative that is likened to a motion picture, Sunraider uses the cine camera itself, an extension of his atemporal vision, in an equally failed attempt to deny the imagined loss of an identity he can only maintain in illusory form—an illusion that depends upon his perpetual deferral of a hereditary blackness from which he can never escape.

The megalographic image Sunraider constructs of himself, an image that mimics the language and imagery of motion picture projection in the opening sequence of Book II, is inextricable from two moments that, taken together, precipitate his tragic fate. The first of these moments is a picnic that he, while still a young man, shares with Lavatrice, a young African American woman whom he subsequently impregnates with his future assassin. The second moment occurs earlier in his life but is remembered later in the narrative. I refer specifically to the moment when, during a Juneteenth celebration camp meeting, young Bliss is pulled from a white coffin from which he is about to theatrically rise as the Holy Spirit by a white woman claiming to be his mother. Because the significance of the latter moment relies upon the symbolism of and atemporal structure initiated by the former, I will focus first upon Sunraider’s career as a filmmaker before returning to his early life as a preacher in the black church and his deferred entry into white subjectivity.

In the first of these two moments, Ellison juxtaposes the megalographic image of Sunraider’s future with a rhopographic image from his past. In this scene, the

future Senator, referred to as “Mr. Movie-man” by Lavatrice, leaves his camera behind, experiences a “suspension of time” (267), and focuses on the minute details of the picnic she has prepared for him as though it were a still life: “I sat, watching with my chin resting upon my knees as her hands came and went, removing sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper from the basket, placing them on the cloth.” He continues, “There were boiled eggs wrapped in twists of paper like favors for a children’s party; and tomatoes, and a chocolate cake and a thermos of iced tea with mint leaves and lemon slices floating in it” (268-9).⁶ This is a significant shift within Sunraider’s retrospective, megalographic rendering of his rise from Bliss-ful ignorance to U.S. Senator. It is also a pivotal moment for this character, who is no longer Bliss, but is not yet Sunraider; who is about to cast the die that will lead to his downfall, but has not yet acted on his impulses. It is a pause—a still shot within the movie of his mind—that temporarily shatters the megalographic illusion with rhopographic imagery, and thereby reveals the degree to which the rhopographic and the megalographic are, as Norman Bryson observes, “intertwined” (61). Sunraider’s self-creation as a megalographic subject inside of historical time is revealed to be the antithesis of, as well as differentially defined by, a rhopographic moment that belies the constructed illusion of this temporal construction.

Things don’t stay still for very long, however, and soon “Mr. Movie-man,” along with his associates Donelson and Karp, is hustling the African American citizens of Lavatrice’s Oklahoma hometown as a flim-flam filmmaker. As he recalls these days from his hospital bed, Sunraider describes Donelson’s disjointed film sequences, which he repudiates as “nothing more than a jumble of scenes, as though the rambling impressions of an idiot’s day had been photographed” (279). What follows is a long meditation on temporality and the simulated motion of cinematic images:

With Donelson it was gelly, gelly, gelatine—all day long and all images ran to chaos, as though Sherman’s Army had traumatized his sense of order forever. Once there was a sequence of a man whitewashing the walls of the slaughterhouse which stood at the edge of town near the river, and this followed by a flock of birds strung out skimming over a stretch of field; then came shots of the courthouse clock at those moments when the enormous hands leaped across the gaps of time to take new positions but ever the same on the bird-fouled face, then a reversed flight of birds, and this followed by the clock hands whirling in swift reversal. (279)

Sunraider complains that Donelson shot these sequences simply for “the joy of denying the reality of all that which he turned his lenses upon” (280), and proclaims that whereas “Donelson ached to reverse time, I yearned to master it, or so I told myself” (279). The irony of these observations is that the future Senator’s filmic creations are equally atemporal, as are his recollections of the past itself, hence the convoluted shape of his narrative in Book II. Rather than master time, the man who would become Sunraider insures that he will become the tragic subject of the same historico-temporal construct that McIntyre unconsciously reproduces.

The atemporality of “Mr. Movie-man’s” motion pictures is explored in Ellison’s computer sequence “Hickman in Georgia & Oklahoma,” material which most likely would have eventually become Book III of the novel, where a Choctaw man named Love New describes with disdain the filmmakers’ practices, especially those of the man he refers to as the “black-white one” (i.e., Bliss/Sunraider). Love New describes for Hickman, Bliss’s foster father, how the man once known as Bliss spliced together bits of film for the black community to view. As Love New’s comments illustrate, the future Congressman’s creations are no better at Donelson’s at creating narrative coherence or mastering time. If anything, they accomplish the opposite, disarticulating images of African Americans from dynamic constructions of temporality and the narratives that underwrite them. This becomes clear when Bliss, whom Love New calls “Prophet” after the sermon he spontaneously preached in town, decides to “[u]n off some of the reels he and his crew hadn’t yet edited” for the townspeople he’d just been exploiting (794). Love New describes the resulting experience of “watching folks watching themselves floating down streets in a dream-like slow motion, then streaking around houses and buildings like hounds with cans tied to their tails” (794). Rather than contribute to any duration-simulating narrative, the townspeople are shown instead “inflated into images as wide as the Courthouse or Capitol, then walking forwards, running backwards, and dancing in circles. First in slow motion and again at the speed of a whirlwind” (794).

Aside from echoing Donelson’s “chaotic” films, Sunraider’s atemporal vision, which irrupts into his own quasi-cinematic recollection of events, anticipates Todd McGowan’s recent observations about atemporal cinema. Suggesting that Freud’s notion of the death drive rather than the pleasure principle (desire) enables a new psychoanalytic reading of the cinema, McGowan argues that cinematic time contains a gap “in which an absence repeats itself, and this repetition corresponds to that of the death drive”—a repetition accentuated by filmmakers through the editing process and duplicated through the projection of the completed film (xi). Such films “introduce spectators to an alternative way of experiencing existence in time—or, more exactly, a way of experiencing existence outside of our usual conception of time.” “Time in these films doesn’t bring about a different future but instead an incessant repetition,” argues McGowan—a repetition that reveals “the circular logic of what psychoanalysis calls the drive, in which narrative is oriented around a foundational moment of traumatic loss” (9-10).

The traumatic loss that gets repeated again and again in Book II is the second of the two moments introduced above, namely Bliss’s perpetually deferred entry into white subjectivity following his interpellation as the (possible) son of the white woman who briefly takes possession of him at the Juneteenth camp meeting. The following analysis not only explains this loss, but also illustrates why Sunraider’s cinematic recollections of it take atemporal form. Of particular importance in the following paragraphs are the extended analogies Ellison draws between still photography and/or sequential photograms (film qua film), the body, atemporality, objectivity, and blackness on the one hand, and moving pictures, the spirit, narrative, subjectivity, and whiteness on the other.

The labyrinthine and atemporal presentation of Sunraider’s recollection from

his hospital bed of the loss that still traumatizes him begins with an extended sequence in which “Daddy” Hickman takes young Bliss to see a movie. In the middle of this reverie, Sunraider recalls his younger self, Bliss, learning about Sammy Leatherman’s movie projector. Describing the apparatus to the incredulous Bliss, a boy nicknamed Body states that the people “in the machine” are “like a gang of ghosts, man” (288). Body proceeds to observe that there are no black people in these films—the “ghosts” about which he speaks are all apparitions of white actors—a fact that later informs Bliss/Sunraider’s attempts to turn his black subjects into “ghosts” by shooting them with his cine camera in a way that denies them any coherent temporal and/or narrative context. Interestingly, the movie that Bliss and Hickman watch together is clearly narrative-driven—a linear, historical romance that hints at the megalographic imperatives of such texts, and the antithesis of the atemporal “chaos” of Donelson’s sequences (279). This long, layered memory ends with the recollection of Bliss convincing himself that the actress he sees on the screen is the mother he never knew—a mother he thought was dead, “*A ghost...*” (339)—who earlier (temporally speaking) interrupted his staged resurrection as the Holy Spirit during Hickman’s sermon at the camp meeting.

There’s an undeniable parallel between Bliss’s recollection of himself trapped in the white coffin from which he theatrically rises during the sermons he preaches with Hickman—a light-tight box inside of which everything pink or white turns black—and the motion picture camera he later turns onto others (331). However, this can also be read as a meditation on the technologies through which Bliss expresses his dilemma. Inside the box, like the negatives inside Hickman’s Kodak, he is still and black (read: he’s still black); but motion, narrative, and cinematic projection are all associated with whiteness. Hence Sunraider’s representation of himself in the opening sequence of Book II as the projected white subject of a narrative film of his own creation. Lights, camera, and action enable him to deny—or rather defer—his blackness, but it continually returns in the form of still images that irrupt into the projected apparition. When the white woman ejects (or projects) Bliss from the box, she brings him simultaneously into motion and into whiteness, however fleetingly. Immediately after identifying his would-be mother as “*A ghost,*” he recalls “Then he was looking at the familiar faces, seeing their bodies frozen in odd postures like Body and the others when they played a game of statue” (339). As Body remarked earlier, “ghost” is another name for the projected apparition, which is equated in both instances with the white body; the stilled figures, by contrast, are the black bodies from which he now distinguishes himself/against which he defines himself. Extending the flesh/spirit metaphor articulated above, Mrs. Proctor, one of the parishioners, ironically likens the attempt to snatch Bliss from the box to an attempt “to interrupt the *Resurrection of the spirit from the flesh!*” (360).

All of the pieces introduced above converge in the Senator’s recollection of his younger self, Bliss, being led away from the camp meeting after it is broken up by the white woman claiming to be his mother. Observe how the cinematic representation of Bliss’s subsequent flight in the arms of Sister Georgia briefly freezes into a still image in the following passage:

He had been in the coffin, ready to rise up and all of a sudden there she was, screaming. Now it was like a picture he was looking at in a book or in a dream—even as he watched the tear-sparkling tent falling rapidly away. And in the up and down swaying of the sister's movement he could no longer tell one member from another; he couldn't even see Daddy Hickman. *She was really one of them*, passed through his mind, then the road was dipping swiftly down a hill in the dark and he was being taken where he could no longer see the peak shape of the tent rising white above the yellow light. (367)

Bliss is trapped between blackness and whiteness; between the still image and the motion picture; stasis and movement, his liminal status symbolically duplicated by his position between the would-be white mother he left behind and Sister Georgia's house in the woods to which he has not yet arrived. In the description above, his movement away from the white tent and the white woman freezes into a still image—a picture from a book or a dream—and he conflates his white would-be mother with the black women who helped raise him, hence his thought, "*She was really one of them.*" He denies the whiteness of the woman who tries to claim him by freezing her image photographically, while simultaneously cloaking her racial difference under a cover of gender affinity. The temporary inversion of the established link between racial identity and ekphrastic imagery continues as Bliss thinks, "*We are like ghosts on this road*" as he reflects upon his white suit and Sister Georgia's white dress (368). This inversion, like his symbolic collapsing of whiteness into blackness above, is a symptom of Bliss's now-vexed racial identity.

Extending the symbolism of this confusion, Bliss's flight is punctuated by another still life containing photographic portraits. After Sister Georgia set him down and hugged him, recalls the dying Senator, he saw "beyond her head two tinted pictures of old folks frozen in attitudes of dreamy and remote dignity looked down from where they hung high on the wall in oval frames, seeming to float behind curved glass," within which "he could see the reflection of his shadowed face showing above her bending shoulders and against the side of her darkened head" (369).

Here, it seems that Bliss is identifying himself with the portraits, the reflections of which contain his own image—his own "shadowed face." At this point, he seems to have chosen blackness/stillness over whiteness/motion, but we already know that he will eventually decide otherwise. In this way, Bliss's experience of confronting still images of his own would-be black ancestors serves as a bookend for McIntyre's experience at Laura's parents' home in Book I.

Bliss/Sunraider's transition from black to white and thus from the still image to the motion picture takes symbolic form within the Senator's memory as he recalls chasing down a moving streetcar attached to which is a photograph of the actress he mistook earlier for his mother (387). This moving picture, literally, leads him to the motion picture it advertises when the streetcar stops in front of the movie theatre at which the film is playing—a film he watches for the second time, reliving the traumatic memory of his aborted entry into and simultaneous ejection from a white

identity she represents. From this memory of loss (or lack), the Senator transitions immediately into a recollection of his filmmaking days/practices, which coincide with his passing for white. But there is always some residue, some “mystery” that follows him, as he says, and the white identity he pursues is, like the black identity from which he tries to escape, perpetually deferred:

...It was all a matter of time; just a little time. I shall think too of the camera and the swath it cut through the country of my travels, and how after the agony I had merely stepped into a different dimension of time. Between the frames in blackness I left and in time discovered that it was no mere matter of place which made the difference, but time. And not chronology either; only time. Because I was no older and although I discovered early that in different places I became a different me....

And later whenever instead of taking in a scene the camera seemed to focus forth my own point of view I felt murderous, felt that justifiable murder was being committed and my images a blasting of the world. I felt sometimes that a duplicity was being commissioned, an ambushade trained upon those who thought they knew themselves and me. And yet I felt that I was myself a dupe because there was always the question aroused by my ability to see into events and the awareness of the joke implicit in being me. (393)

In an attempt to identify as white instead of black, Bliss metaphorically moves from the blackness of the spaces between the still photographs into the (simulated) motion of the sequential frames (note that passing, here, which Ellison explicitly equates with “self-denial” (Ralph Ellison Papers I:140, folder 6), is equated with a strip of film passing through a movie projector, hence Bliss’s self-reflexive reference to himself as a photogrammatic “dupe”). Yet it is the very black subjects he attempts to differentially define himself against via his “murderous” camera work that blast his satisfaction by reminding him of his status as the butt of the same racial “joke.” The simulated motion of the cinema may subsume and render invisible the spaces between the sequential still images on the film strip, but the strip of film, its photograms, and now the black gaps that separate them, continually shimmer to the surface, always reminding Bliss/Sunraider of that which cannot be suppressed: the heritage he shares with “Daddy” Hickman, likened here to a filmic presence that irrupts into the cinematic illusion. As Ellison remarked in his working notes, “Bliss is fascinated by moments of blackness between cinematic frames, and his life is hidden here much as his activities before becoming a politician are hidden. ‘Look for me between the frames, in the dark...’” (Ralph Ellison Papers I:139, folder 4).⁷

To return, then, to the assassination attempt that initiates both books of the novel, Sunraider’s attempt to avoid the “freeze frame” of death is simultaneously a simulated attempt to defer his blackness, equated throughout the novel with the still photograph, which stands in for death itself. To be photographed, as Barthes knew, is to be marked for death. But to Adam Sunraider, to return to blackness is to fade to black. Keeping the camera rolling means keeping the movie going, and keeping the

projector running means maintaining his white image. The disintegration of this image into its constituent “shots,” represented by the bullets that rain down upon him from his black son’s murderous gun, is the return of the repressed in more ways than one.

While McIntyre’s photographic vision most obviously connects photography, racialism, and coercive linear temporality to one another, Sunraider’s failed attempt to use motion pictures to destroy time, or “master it” as he phrases it, shows the degree to which his efforts to construct a Deleuze-Guattarian “body without organs” and thereby slip the yoke of the habitual patterns of lived actualities are foreclosed (279). As Tamsin Lorraine points out, constructing a “body without organs” is a process fundamentally about time and representation. Thought-forms like art and literature, she writes, can be used to create “plateaus of intensity where something new could happen” by interrupting ingrained patterns of thought and behavior so that virtualities immanent to the present hitherto relegated to “the lower frequencies” can become actualized (98). Tuning in to the virtual coiled within the actual, notes Lorraine, often means “resonating the dynamic flow of time with cultural representations of the already actualized real in a way that can bring new possibilities to the fore. Such possibilities have always been there,” she writes, “but were excluded by forms of thought and perception that spatialize time and emphasize representable forms of the past at the expense of dynamic tendencies implicit in the present that in tandem with the actual propel reality forward” (98-99).

The rhopographic still life, as Bryson describes it, meets the criteria of a thought-form that, while depicting an actualized reality in which nothing is happening, creates a plateau of intensity “where something new could happen,” in no small part by resisting the spatialization of time. This resistance inheres in rhopography’s refusal to privilege the human subject over the portrayed object and, just as importantly, the medium’s ability to formalize immanent time. Whereas megalography affirms the transcendent (read: spatialized, static) time of history, rhopography promotes recognition of the multiplicity of temporalities constitutive of each moment. Rhopographic images are not “outside” of time; rather, they reveal that time has no “outside” or “inside.” In lieu of any social or historical context there exists only the durational difference between viewing subject and represented object, a difference that continuously unfolds in irreversible time. Because rhopographic images do not objectify subjects so much as portray objects in ways that “induce intensities” immanent to the present (Grosz 159), rhopography, I argue, is the visual logic of duration.

Sunraider’s modal shift from rhopography to megalography, then, inscribes a temporal transition from immanence to transcendence, from dynamic to static, and thus also from becoming to being. Not surprisingly, as he makes this transition the habitual patterns of a racist society reterritorialize themselves through his thoughts, his actions, and their effects. Rather than revel in the creativity of irreversible time or duration as it first presents itself to him, the man who would become Senator Sunraider works first to obliterate time as a cinematographer before plunging into the static temporality of history as a U.S. Congressman. To become an historical subject of Sunraider’s stature during the early 1950s, the temporal setting of the

novel, one had to affirm the status quo of racial segregation. Part and parcel of this affirmation was the visualization of black people as static objects against which the progress of history's white subjects was measured and through which it was enacted—a necessity the Senator is only too willing to oblige, and which, as Russ Castronovo notes, “American democratic culture was adept at reproducing” (152). However, Ellison flips the script in Book II of *Three Days* by portraying the white subjects like Senator Sunraider “inside” of historical time as figures equally as tragic as the minoritarian subjects excised from history or entombed within it.

The parallel Ellison draws between Sunraider's plunge from duration into the static time of history and his reinforcement of a nationally inflected racist ideology is informed by Ellison's reading and annotation of Northrup Frye's 1967 *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, one of the most heavily annotated books in Ellison's personal library. In this collection of lectures, Frye compares what he calls the “order-figure,” who “experiences time as the rhythm of his actions,” to the “tragic rebel,” who “has committed himself primarily to fortune, and in fortune what happens depends on resolution, decision, and will,” instead of a on a natural course of events to be followed” (89; Ellison's emphasis). What makes the rebel-figure “tragic,” writes Frye, is that his planned rebellion is not unlike a fall from durational grace. “[A]s soon as the rebel-figure plans his rebellion,” he writes, “he has a sense of having broken through the continuity of time. He no longer has any sense of the present moment: he is conscious only of the ‘gap of time’ that Leontes [from *The Winter's Tale*] falls into when he becomes jealous” (89; Ellison's emphasis). In the margin next to this underlined passage, Ellison has written, “Bliss.” Bliss, like the tragic rebel described by Frye, subjectively plunges out of time's continuity or duration when he adopts the persona of a racist policymaker “inside” the “groove of history” while keeping his identity hidden in the illusory “spaces” between the sequential moments of static, spatialized time.

Ellison's Polaroid Photographs: Beyond Ontography

When McIntyre bursts through the door of the recently deceased Jessie Rockmore's house in Book I, he lunges headlong into “a blaze of light and brilliant color” to find himself surrounded by objects in “a ragtag museum” (139). Rockmore, part salvage man, part curator, obtained the lithographs, books, fine china, musical instruments, furniture, and various objets d'art from old homes that were being torn down, often passing for white in order to obtain the belongings from their well-to-do possessors. But to McIntyre, these “vague objects and artifacts appeared to have been wrenched from their place, time, and function” (140). Especially confounding to the reporter is the proximity of Rockmore's collection to the U.S. Capitol, “*the center of our national source of order*” (140). McIntyre sees the assemblage of objects as “calculated chaos,” but assures himself that “it was *their* chaos, the Negroes and the police, not mine” (141). But when the images around him spring to life and he feels his own conscience being pricked by the vitality of inanimate objects, McIntyre asks, “How did one begin to think about such a place with its collection of *things*?” (144).



Fig. 1. Four fishes, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Just like in Chapter Thirteen of *Invisible Man* when the novel's unnamed protagonist stumbles upon the belongings of an elderly couple being evicted from their Harlem home, McIntyre's feeling of being confronted by a "collection of things" reveals the degree to which he is unable to process the temporal chaos that lives within the pattern of his historical certainties. To McIntyre, the heterogeneous durations and virtual temporalities represented by the objects in Rockmore's home violate his sense of majoritarian order and the history that underwrites it, hence his unconscious association of government power with whiteness and temporal order. What eludes McIntyre's conscious thought should not escape ours, however: McIntyre's dedication to identity—in this case national identity and the whiteness with which it is equated—obscures the difference that lurks behind every identity. Rockmore's "museum" is where this difference proliferates.

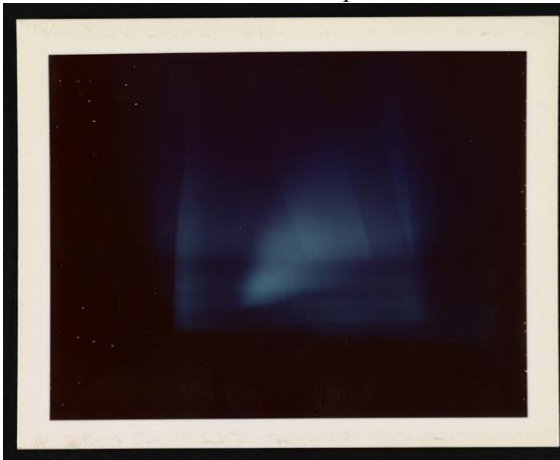


Fig. 2. Abstract, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Reviewing Ralph Ellison’s Polaroid archive can make one feel, at first, like McIntyre plunging into Rockmore’s parlor, for what one encounters is a collection consisting of hundreds of images of *things*. Of the 1261 Polaroid photographs in the Ralph Ellison collection housed in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, all of which were taken between 1966 and Ellison’s death in 1994, fewer than 150 depict human subjects. The dearth of people in Ellison’s Polaroid compositions becomes more glaring when one considers that nearly half of the peopled Polaroids—71 to be exact—are of Ellison during those rare occasions when the camera was handed over to his wife Fanny (or rent from his hands) to document family gatherings, functions in which Ellison participated, etc. The rest were taken by Ellison himself. Unlike his early work in portraiture and street photography in which human subjects dominate, these Polaroids predominantly feature still life and abstract compositions, with occasional unpeopled landscapes and snapshots of inanimate objects (see Figs. 1-3). And then there’s the fact that the more than eleven hundred object-oriented Polaroid photographs Ellison produced are, from a photo-materialist standpoint, *things* in and of themselves. How does one begin to think about such a collection of *things*?



Fig. 3. Charlottesville, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Complicating the viewer’s efforts to interpret this archive is the fact that instant pictures of inanimate objects don’t really fit the mold of the types of photographs typically analyzed by photography’s dominant theorists. They are nothing like the image of Barthes’s deceased mother that launches his ontological reverie in *Camera Lucida*. Nor are they “appropriative” in the sense used by Susan Sontag in *On Photography* (4). They aren’t the kinds of objects destined for exchange described by Elizabeth Edwards or the sort of “attraction” described by Peter Buse. Perhaps the Polaroid is, as Buse suggests (with tongue firmly planted in cheek), too banal to take

seriously, never mind the Polaroid still life. Yet no one can account for the very things I find curious about Ellison's photographs. Why, I ask, would an accomplished photographer like Ellison, who was well versed in medium format and 35mm apparatuses, use Polaroid Land cameras to shoot still life photographs? Why, for that matter, would anyone prefer this medium for this genre?

These inquiries about the Polaroid image inhere within a broader question about photography and materiality: does the photograph dematerialize its subject (even if that subject is an object), or does it double that materiality in the form of the photograph itself? In "Photographs as Objects of Memory," Elizabeth Edwards claims "that the relationship between photograph and memory and the way in which it obtains its privileged position as a conduit of memory is refracted through the photograph's materiality" (331). Extending this observation, I would suggest that the Polaroid amplifies (or distils) this relationship, calling attention to the materiality of the photograph in ways specific to the process. After all, the developing chemicals of post-1972 SX-70 Polaroids are sandwiched within the prints. If, as Barthes notes, the image and the object are "laminated" together in the photograph (6), then the Polaroid photograph literally contains, between these two layers, the very agent of this merger. The instantaneousness of the Polaroid is therefore inseparable from its materiality, which it doubles.

The surplus materiality of the Polaroid photograph, integral to the medium itself, is also integral to my reading of the Polaroid still life in general and Ralph Ellison's rhopographic Polaroids in particular. Specifically, the materiality of the photograph, doubled by the Polaroid and tripled by the Polaroid still life, is inseparable from rhopography's troubling of time and its relationship to narrative. Norman Bryson argues that still life composition is antithetical to narrative by observing that narratives are for subjects, not objects. The still life, he writes, is "the genre at the furthest remove from narrative" (9) as it "assaults the centrality, value and prestige of the human subject" (60).⁸ If photography "thingifies" the subject, then photographs of things can be visual quotations of photography's objectifying potential. And if, as I have argued, the Polaroid process itself creates a surfeit of materiality, then this objectification is doubly quoted by each Polaroid still life.

When taken out of the context of a discussion of photography's role in *Three Days*, Ellison's Polaroids appear to conform to Ian Bogost's definition of "photographic ontology," or the photography of being that "involves the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind" (38). Yet Ellison's exposé of photography's role in reifying molar constructions of racial being as opposed to molecular processes of becoming-other (McIntyre fails at becoming-black; Sunraider fails to see how being white is just an emergent, molar form of a molecular becoming-white) suggests that Ellison's turn to object-oriented photography is part of a broader exploration of becoming vis à vis being; a remedy for rather than an accessory to the objectifying and spatializing gaze of his characters, engraved by the media through which their views of the world are reproduced.

If, as I suggested earlier, Ellison's portrayals of amassed objects in his fiction challenge his characters' linear/progressive views of time and history, then we

should read Ellison's collection of object-oriented Polaroids as a declaration of the multiplicity of temporalities inherent in duration. To Ellison, objects, not just subjects, are alive with vitality—a Bergsonian notion adopted by Deleuze that subtends posthumanism and object-oriented ontology alike. This vitality, which confounds both the Invisible Man and McIntyre, is inseparable from the heterogeneity of time and the process of becoming. In short, Ellison's proto-posthumanist Polaroids are the photographic equivalents of the elderly couple's belongings heaped on the curb in *Invisible Man* and the artifacts assembled at Jessie Rockmore's in *Three Days*. They force the viewer to abandon the temporality that subtends progressive history and experience instead the intensities of durational difference that emerge between him- or herself and the viewed objects—a difference that multiplies with each image and unfolds in irreversible time. They also collectively articulate an antidote to what Laura Wexler describes as “the subject/object dichotomies produced by a white power of looking” reinscribed by both McIntyre and Sunraider in *Three Days* (90).



Fig. 4. Dead woodpecker, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Fig. 5. Photo-montage, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

One can see in Ellison's Polaroid photographs these theoretical concepts at work. A burlesque of the nature photography genre, an image of a dead woodpecker [Fig. 4] both self-reflexively dramatizes the "mortifying" gaze of the camera and equates the Polaroid object of the dead bird with the dead bird itself, all the while reminding the viewer that the literal translation of "still life" in many languages is "dead nature." Such collapsing of photographic subject and photo-object continues in Ellison's photo-montage, which contains images of Fanny that have been clipped—decontextualized—from larger photographs that once contained them [Fig. 5]. Here, the human subject is not only rendered as an object, but also put into another context. Literally served upon a plate in a flattened composition, the subject of these images become an object objectively objectified; a meta-commentary not only on photo-materiality, but also on photography and death.



Fig. 6. Flower arrangement #1, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Fig. 7. Flower arrangement #2, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

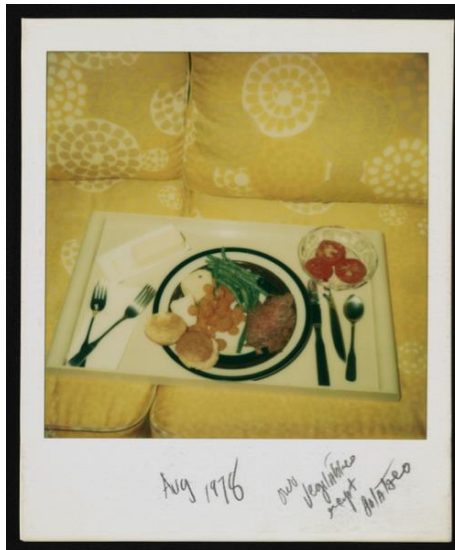


Fig. 8. Still life, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

If the aforementioned images dramatize the perils of turning subjects into objects—perils realized by McIntyre in Book I of *Three Days*—then Ellison’s still life and abstract Polaroid photographs represent antidotes to the mortifying gaze of the camera lens. The countless flower arrangements in the collection, for which Figs. 6 and 7 stand in, as well as images of prepared meals like the one shown in Fig. 8, are the purest forms of rhopography. One can see in these images analogues of “Mr.

Movie-man's" experience of time suspended as he gazes upon the picnic prepared for him by Lavatrice—a moment that, as he recalls it from memory, prompts him to “Leave the moment unbroken in its becoming” (267). Compare this Bergsonian self-admonition to his younger self of the same moment, who tells Lavatrice that the spot they've picked for their picnic is “Just the place for a time like this” (267), a conflation of space and time antithetical to Bergsonianism. The suspension of time unbroken, integral to rhopography, is, as Sunraider's deathbed realization suggests, the antidote to the spatialization of time (while lapsing into a coma and perhaps into death, one of Sunraider's final doubting thoughts is, “*Was time only space?*” (393)). And if, as I have argued, the reterritorialization of asymmetrical power relations and racial formations inheres in time configured as extended space, then Ellison's hundreds of object-oriented Polaroids could be viewed as points of departure in lines of flight from such assemblages of power and resistance, intensifying the multiplicity of temporal virtualities overwritten by the “groove of history” and the notion of static time that subtends it.

Notes

This essay is excerpted from a book manuscript-in-progress that examines how Ellison's investigations of and preoccupations with photography, panoramas, cinematography, and music theory—what I call technologies of temporality—are inseparable from his ongoing efforts to trouble entrenched constructions of linear time. Neither the book manuscript nor this essay would have been possible without the assistance and guidance of Maricia Battle and Eric Frazier at the Library of Congress, who led me through the worlds of Ellison's photographs and books, respectively. I am also grateful for the encouragement of my cohorts in the Ralph Ellison Society—especially Adam Bradley, John F. Callahan, Marc C. Conner, Lena Hill, Michael Hill, Lucas Morel, Alan Nadel, and Timothy Parrish—whose contributions to Ellison studies have inspired and informed my own.

¹ “Rhopography,” according to Norman Bryson (following Charles Sterling), is derived from the Latin word for “trivial objects, small wares, trifles”: *rhōpos* (61).

² In *The Nick of Time*, Elizabeth Grosz summarizes Bergson thusly: “The future is that over which the past and present have no control: the future is that openness of becoming that enables divergence from what exists. This means that, rather than the past's exerting a deterministic force over the future, the future is that which overwrites or restructures the virtual that is the past: the past is the condition of every future; the future that emerges is only one of the lines of virtuality from the past. The past is the condition for infinite futures, and duration is that flow that connects the future to the past that gave it impetus” (184).

Inasmuch as my exploration of Ellison's use of ekphrasis as a means to navigate and negotiate minoritarian subjectivity is concerned, I am preceded in this approach by Lena Hill, whose excellent essay “The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*: Ellison's Portrait of Blackness” examines how Ellison turns to and in the process reclaims visual forms while documenting his characters' attempts to “escape a legacy of

visual derogation” they reify (791). Hill’s demonstration of Ellison’s use of ekphrasis to articulate social critiques tied to scopic regimes demonstrates the richness and future potential of this approach.

³ This is the “anterior future” of the photograph that so horrifies Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*: “By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist),” writes Barthes, “the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence” (96).

⁴ McIntyre remains preoccupied by still images throughout Book I, which becomes clear at the opening chapter’s end where McIntyre measures his failure to stop the assassin against his lack of success as a journalist—a lack that is itself measured by the disappointing fact that he “possess[es] not one solitary autographed photograph—those emblems of a certain journalistic success—from a president, cabinet member, or leader of Congress” (16).

⁵ A similar gesture occurs in Chapter 10 as the memory McIntyre continues to recall pauses a moment on “[a] photograph collection of black prizefighters in pugilistic poses” hung on a the wall of a bar in Harlem (113). Like in Laura’s family’s apartment, McIntyre retreats from the anxieties caused by black presence by escaping into still photographs. Clearly, McIntyre’s shortcomings as a narrator are indicative not only of his failures as a novelist, but his failures as a person who claims to be liberal minded and anti-racist.

⁶ Observe how, in this description, Sunraider describes his head resting upon his knees like a camera resting upon the legs of a tripod.

⁷ Extending the dual analogy Ellison draws between blackness and still photography on the one hand and whiteness and motion picture projection on the other are the two coffins/boxes in the two books of the novel: one into which Rockmore, a black man, enters but never leaves, having been reduced to a frozen “stiff,” and another from which Bliss continually arises as a (holy) spirit after entering as flesh and blood. If each box/coffin stands in for a photographic/cinematic apparatus, and I think Ellison gives us enough hints to encourage such a reading, then we have in these juxtaposed scenes two echoes of the theme already established: the stilling of African Americans via photography and/or the gaze it reproduces, and the simulated deferral of blackness via cinematic projection.

⁸ Peter Schwenger challenges this concept by noting that “[a] certain stream of twentieth-century writing...deals with the ways we read objects” (142). Whereas for Bryson the still life is characterized by a “wholesale eviction of the Event” integral to narrative (*Looking* 61), Schwenger argues that for many modern authors the “Event” is not necessarily the hub upon which narrative must turn, and he illustrates this point with more object-centered narratives like Nicholson Baker’s novel *The Mezzanine*.

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Four fishes, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Fig. 2. Abstract, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the

Library of Congress.

Fig. 3. Charlottesville, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Fig. 4. Dead woodpecker, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Fig. 5. Photo-montage, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Fig. 6. Flower arrangement #1, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Fig. 7. Flower arrangement #2, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Fig. 8. Still life, Polaroid photograph from Ralph Ellison Collection, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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