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Ralph Ellison Studies' Chrono-political Turn: A Review of Michael Germana's *Ralph Ellison, Temporal Technologist*

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Abstract: Since *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award in 1952, Ralph Ellison has indisputably become an American literary classic. Over the long years following the publication of this masterpiece, critical discourse on Ellison gradually congealed into a number of “established” conclusions: that he was an African American modernist whose narrative talent lay in his masterful transformation of black oral traditions and jazz rhythms; that he transcended the naturalistic protest novel, replacing political didacticism with aesthetic autonomy; and that *Invisible Man* is an existentialist allegory. These judgments constitute an invisible cage of interpretation—one that attributes the driving force of Ellison’s writing to internal literary traditions of inheritance and innovation, while failing to touch a more fundamental dimension: time. In 2018, Oxford University Press published Michael Germana’s *Ralph Ellison, Temporal Technologist*, a work whose theoretical force has opened a completely new door for Ellison studies, which had fallen into relative quiescence. The critical reception was swift, hailing it as “the essential starting point for the new Ellison studies” and noting that it “overturns a good many established critical positions” (quoted in Germana 2018, back cover blurb). Timothy Parrish further points out that Germana “provides a major re-evaluation of Ellison’s accomplishments” (quoted in Germana 2018, back cover blurb). This indicates that Ellison studies have moved beyond the stage dominated by single-text interpretations into a new stage characterized by a reconstruction of chrono-theory.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison; chrono-politics; philosophy of time; spatialized time; rhopographic photography

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题目: 拉尔夫·埃利森研究的时间政治学转向——评迈克尔·热尔马纳《拉尔夫·埃利森：时间技师》

摘要: 自 1952 年《无形人》一举夺得国家图书奖以来，拉尔夫·埃利森便无可争议地跻身美国文学经典之列。然而，围绕埃利森的批评话语却逐渐凝固成若干“定论”：他是一位非裔现代主义作家，其叙事天赋体现在对黑人口头传统与爵士节奏的精妙转化；他超越了自然主义抗议小说的窠臼，以美学自治取代了政治说教；他的《无形人》是存在主义的寓言。这些论断构成了一重无形的解释牢笼——它们将埃利森的创作驱动力归结为文学传统内部的继承与创新，而未能触及一个更为根本的维度：时间。2018 年，迈克尔·热尔马纳（Michael Germana）的《拉尔夫·埃利森：时间技师》（Ralph Ellison, Temporal Technologist）由牛津大学出版社推出，以其深刻的理论穿透力为埃利森研究打开了全新的大门。书评界迅速做出回应，将其誉为“新埃利森研究的必要起点”，认为这部著作“推翻了大量既定的批评立场”（转引自 Germana 2018, 封面推荐语）。蒂莫西·帕里什更是指出，热尔马纳“提供了对埃利森成就的一次重大重估”（转引自 Germana 2018, 封面推荐语）。这标志着埃利森研究进入了以时间性理论重构为特征的新阶段。

关键词: 拉尔夫·埃利森；时间政治学；时间哲学；空间化的时间；拓扑摄影

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1. Preamble

Before proceeding with the review, a detail often overlooked by readers deserves a moment of attention: the very title of Ralph Ellison, *Temporal Technologist* (Oxford University Press, 2018) is already a microcosm of Germana's theoretical self-awareness. He did not choose a conventional formulation such as “Ralph Ellison as a Temporal Technologist” or “The Temporal Technologist: Ralph Ellison”; instead, by juxtaposing the two nouns without any article—“Ralph Ellison, Temporal Technologist”—he performs a redefinition of Ellison's identity, rather than a mere classification. The subtlety of this form is precisely the herald of the book's overarching theoretical ambition.

Why does the title “Ralph Ellison, Temporal Technologist” carry no article? This, I believe, is a deliberate academic and rhetorical decision by Germana. It aims to elevate “Temporal Technologist” to Ellison’s essential identity, not a replaceable label, and to emphasize the organic unity between Ellison and his philosophy of time, rather than any instrumental borrowing. Germana thus declares, in a restrained yet forceful manner, the essence of the critical reappraisal he undertakes: not to place Ellison into some pre-existing box (“a” temporal technologist), but to rename him by his very essence—he is the temporal technologist. The title itself is an epitome of the book’s ambition: it is not looking for a new tag for Ellison, but redefining who Ellison is.

Once we grasp the deep logic of this titling, we are better prepared to enter Germana’s re-evaluation of Ellison criticism. What he does, in effect, is to liberate Ellison from a “fixed image” circumscribed by ready-made labels, restoring him as a thinking subject perpetually in the making through his prolonged battle with time. Below, we shall unfold the review across three progressively arranged dimensions: “Temporal Blindness,” “Genealogy of Time,” and “The Temporal Technologist.”

2. Temporal Blindness: From Existentialism to the Philosophy of Time

Germana first reveals the long-standing “temporal blindness” in Ellison criticism. For more than half a century, the central agenda of Ellison studies has revolved around several classic themes: the question of “modernist” affiliation—critics have tirelessly argued that *Invisible Man* fuses Joycean stream of consciousness, Eliotic fragments, and black oral traditions into a unique “jazz aesthetic”; the issue of transcending the “protest” novel—ever since Eldridge Cleaver’s fierce attack on Ellison, the question of whether Ellison was a standard-bearer for black liberation or a conservative courtier to the establishment has been endlessly debated; and the parallel reading of “existentialism”—concepts of the “absurd” and “freedom” from Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir have long been the primary lenses for interpreting the protagonist’s identity predicament.

Yet Germana keenly perceives that these critical discourses share a fundamental “temporal blindness.” Without exception, they attribute the driving force of Ellison’s narrative strategies to some spatial, formal, or ideological impetus, while overlooking the most central concern of his work—time itself. Germana’s foundational claim is: “Race, like history, is a matter of time” (Germana 2018, 19). Here “time” does not refer to the ordinary tick-tock of the clock, but to a Newtonian, spatialized, linear-progressive temporal configuration. It is precisely this conception of time that underpins the racist historical narrative, placing black people in the “lagging” position of linear history. Thus “race is a matter of time” means: the root of racial oppression lies not in skin color or biological difference, but in a certain naturalized temporal structure.

Ellison’s writing, however, provides an alternative resource for resisting this temporal configuration. In his texts, once temporality is deterritorialized—freed from the fixed, spatialized linear configuration—it is by no means the same as fate. Unlike static geography that “is fate,” deterritorialized time does not predetermine outcomes; it opens up possibility, becoming, and freedom. What Ellison criticizes is precisely the linear-

progressive view of history supported by spatialized time—a conception that is itself part of racist ideology. True history is not a linear “spiral of progress” but the continuous creation of lived temporality: it concerns “how time is experienced,” “how time flows,” and “how past, present, and future are related.” For Germana, this is precisely the “other history” that Ellison explores through jazz, blues, and Polaroid photography.

Ellison’s entire oeuvre—from his early short stories to *Invisible Man* (1952) and then to the unfinished *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*, on which he labored for forty years—constitutes a “philosophical” system concerning time and history. As Germana says in the Introduction, Ellison’s critique is “a matter of time.” His novels are not merely allegories of “invisibility” or “identity” but a prolonged battle against Newtonian “spatialized time.” Those narratives that reduce history to linear causal sequences and treat the future as a necessary extension of the past—whether the Brotherhood’s “progressive view of history” or the “fatalism” of a racist society—are precisely what Ellison spent his life trying to dismantle. Germana’s first theoretical breakthrough lies in refusing to treat Ellison as an existentialist writer, instead placing him within the intellectual lineage of Bergson and Nietzsche. This “philosophical genealogy” directly challenges the existentialist label that long hung over Ellison, pointing out that such a label severely narrows Ellison’s conception of time by reducing it to “subjective experience” while ignoring Bergson’s more radical ontology of “duration.”

3. The Genealogy of Time: Bergson, Nietzsche, and the Ghost of Deleuze

Germana’s fundamental contribution to Ellison studies is to systematically reveal the three sources of Ellison’s temporal philosophy: Henri Bergson’s “duration,” Friedrich Nietzsche’s “unhistorical action,” and a “prefiguration” of the work of Gilles Deleuze.

Bergson’s “duration” provides Ellison with the ontological weapon to combat Newtonian “spatialized time.” In Newtonian physics, time is understood as a reversible, homogeneous “container” independent of events—this is the “spatialized time” that Bergson criticizes, and the same time that Ellison wittily mocks in his notes as “using one kind of time to ignore another kind of time.” Bergson argues that true time is “duration”—an indivisible, continuously becoming, creative flow. At the beginning of *Invisible Man*, when the protagonist lies in his underground “hole” listening to Louis Armstrong’s record, he experiences multiple layers of time—the scream of a slave auction, the lament of a spiritual, the fury of a sermon—all flooding into his ears at the same instant. This is not subjective psychological time but Bergsonian “duration”: the past does not vanish but persists as a “virtual” force entangled in the present. In Chapter 1, Germana analyzes this phenomenon in detail, noting that by directing the reader to the intensities implicit in the present (the internal dynamism of what Bergson called duration), Ellison “affirms the openness of the future while critiquing all forms of determinism” (Germana 2018, 60).

Nietzsche’s “unhistorical action” provides Ellison with a program for resisting historical determinism. In “The Use and Abuse of History,” Nietzsche warns against the suffocation of life by “excess history”—when a people is crushed by the weight of history, it loses the capacity to act. The protagonist of *Invisible Man*

encounters precisely this predicament within the Brotherhood: history is reduced to an irresistible “spiral of progress,” and the individual becomes nothing but a cog in the machine. Germana points out that Ellison’s image of the “boomerang” is a brilliant translation of Nietzsche’s “eternal return”—history is not linear progress but the “return of difference” (Germana 2018, 70-72). When the protagonist says in the Epilogue, “I must come out, I must emerge” (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 581), he is performing Nietzsche’s “unhistorical action”: transforming himself from an object enslaved by historical determinism into a subject who actively creates the future.

Nietzsche’s “unhistorical action” and Germana’s argument about Ellison’s “prefiguration” of Deleuze together constitute the most theoretically penetrating claim of the book. Both point to a fundamental proposition: Ellison’s writing is not a passive borrowing of philosophy, but an active synthesis and literary transformation of the Nietzsche-Bergson-Deleuze lineage. “Unhistorical action” comes from Nietzsche’s early work “The Use and Abuse of History” (1873). Nietzsche proposes the paradoxical claim that if one is truly to act, one must be able to forget. Human beings “cannot forget, but always remain attached to the past,” and the weight of history incapacitates action. Nietzsche’s prescription is precisely “unhistorical action”: a capacity to break free from the slavery of history and create the future in the present. It demands that one temporarily suspend the constraints of history, not by forgetting the past, but by refusing to let the past determine present choices. Nietzsche declares, “History, insofar as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power.”

Germana advances a temporal claim: by synthesizing the ideas of Nietzsche and Bergson, Ellison prefigured the work of Deleuze. This claim is not a mere parallel reading but is grounded in a systematic tracing of Ellison’s philosophical genealogy. Germana argues that Ellison’s temporal philosophy consists of three resources: Bergson’s “duration,” Nietzsche’s “unhistorical action,” and a “prefiguration” of Deleuze’s work. The result is a theory that treats time as a “multiple dynamic process” rather than a “static container”—a theory that rejects all forms of linear causality and historical determinism.

Germana’s core argument focuses on the “boomerang” image in Ellison’s fiction. In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist is repeatedly “boomeranged” by history. In traditional linear historical narrative, such repetition is seen as a fatal cycle, a mark of historical determinism. But Ellison does the opposite: he turns “boomerang” from a noun into a verb, from a passive state of “being hit by history” into an active stance of “affirming return itself.” This is precisely Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s “eternal return” in *Difference and Repetition*—Deleuze reads the eternal return as the “return of difference” rather than the “return of the same.” Deleuze states, “It is not ‘what’ returns that matters, but return itself as an affirmation of creation.” Germana thus argues that Ellison already performed the same theoretical operation in *Invisible Man*: through the image of the “boomerang,” he transforms “return” from a forced cycle into an active, creative affirmation (the return of difference). The protagonist’s declaration, “I must come out, I must emerge,” is not a submission to historical determinism but a performance of unhistorical action.

Germana carefully distinguishes “prefiguration” from “influence.” He does not claim that Deleuze read Ellison, or that Ellison read Deleuze—indeed, he explicitly states that their paths are “parallel,” sharing the

same intellectual lineage but developing independently. He uses an apt metaphor: Ellison and Deleuze are “like two jazz musicians at the same jam session, trading phrases distilled from the same tradition”—though strangers to each other, they “joyfully trade twelves” (Germana 2018, 10-13). This is the profundity of Germana’s argument: it is not that Ellison “influenced” Deleuze, but that Ellison’s literary creation independently arrived at the position Deleuze would later systematically articulate in philosophy. Ellison is not a follower of Deleuze but a precursor to Deleuze. This claim fundamentally rewrites Ellison’s position in intellectual history: he is no longer merely an African American modernist or existentialist novelist, but a thinker deeply engaged with the most advanced philosophical debates of the twentieth century—a temporal technologist who “does philosophy” in literature.

Building on this philosophical genealogy, Germana also embeds a mini-dialogue with “utopia.” Ellison’s critique of linear historical narrative contains within it a rejection of false utopia. The Brotherhood’s promised “rainbow of America’s future”—a linear, attainable perfect society—is precisely the false utopia that Ellison rejects. Such utopia depends on “spatialized time,” treating the future as a necessary outcome of the past, thereby canceling the individual’s capacity for creative action in the present. What Ellison pursues is a radically different utopia: not a “destination” locked in by historical determinism, but an unpredictable, multiple space of possibility that emerges in each present “groove.” In the Epilogue of *Invisible Man*, the protagonist does not depict any grand social vision; instead, he surrenders himself to the divided yet unified two lines of Louis Armstrong’s music—“Open the window and let the foul air out” and “It was good green corn before the harvest” (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 581). The tension between these two lines is the epitome of the Ellisonian utopia: not the elimination of contradiction, but the creative affirmation of contradiction; not a one-way projection toward the future, but an opening to the multiple temporalities of the present. As Germana says in the Conclusion, Ellison’s work “affirms the possibility of action” that had been “foreclosed to him” (Germana 2018, 230).

4. The Temporal Technologist: Appropriating Visual and Sonic Technologies

Before entering the detailed analysis, it is necessary to understand the methodological tone of the entire book. In the Preface, Germana recalls his experience of consulting Ellison’s manuscript archive at the Library of Congress. He describes the belated encounter as a strange feeling, as if Ellison had been waiting prophetically, and in a “prefigurative manner” made any conclusion Germana reached about his work into an instant, antiphonal improvisation. Germana compares this feeling to the ghost of the grandfather in Ellison’s novel goading the protagonist, summoning an “antiphonal response,” much like the jazz “trading twelves” between Ellison and Albert Murray. This analogy establishes the book’s methodological keynote: Germana sees his own interpretation of Ellison as a kind of jazzman’s “improvisational dialogue,” not a one-way critical explanation. Such an opening is not only delightful but also adds a touch of mystery to the philosophy of time.

The Introduction opens with a note by Ellison: “Maybe it’s the same way with time.....when the give and take between its cogs and wheels and springs coax the hands of a watch into matching a set of numbers

printed on its face—and this in a long-dead tongue, remember—it’s said that such and such is the ‘time’—which serves to make things all neat and human in the face of the disinterested cycling of the seasons. But that’s just using one kind of time to ignore another kind of time.” Germana points out that this note compares the time-technology (the clock) with “the Fall,” suggesting that “time was born of transgression,” and asks: “in this country what exactly does ‘time’ and ‘history’ mean?” (Germana 2018, 1). This question runs throughout the book.

Besides the Preface, Introduction, and Conclusion, the book is divided into three parts, comprising five chapters. Part I: Overture contains only Chapter 1, titled “Time, History, and Becoming in Invisible Man.” Here Germana systematically expounds Ellison’s philosophical genealogy of time, liberating him from the existentialist label and demonstrating that his core ideas are Bergson’s “duration” and Nietzsche’s “unhistorical action,” as well as his prefiguration of Deleuze. (The core content of this chapter has already been discussed in Part II of this review, so it will not be repeated here.)

Part II: Vision includes Chapters 2 and 3, focusing on visual technologies such as the panorama, photography, and cinema. Chapter 2 is titled “Peristrepthic Visions: Henry Box Brown, Ralph Ellison, and the Panoramic Logic of Invisible Man.” Here Germana examines how Ellison appropriates the nineteenth-century panorama technology. He discovers a profound intertextuality between *Invisible Man* and the life of the abolitionist Henry Box Brown, who famously mailed himself in a wooden crate from Richmond to Philadelphia, escaping from slavery to freedom, and later created a moving panorama called the *Mirror of Slavery* (Germana 2018, 88-92). Germana coins the concept of “peristrepthic vision” to describe how Ellison appropriates the logic of the panorama—a medium that originally placed spectators on a linear track of time—and transforms it into a visual strategy that challenges the single official narrative. Through the protagonist’s shifts among multiple positions, Ellison reveals the instability of “history” itself (Germana 2018, 91-98).

Chapter 3 is titled “Rhopographic Photography and Atemporal Cinema: The Link Between Ralph Ellison’s Polaroids and *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*” and is one of the most original chapters in the book. Germana discovers that while working on his second novel, *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .* (1966-1994), Ellison took more than a thousand Polaroid photographs, the overwhelming majority of which are still lifes of flowers, meals, and everyday objects, with very few people. He calls this practice “rhopographic photography,” viewing it as an “anti-historical” photographic practice: it does not serve grand historical narratives, but instead focuses on the quotidian details ignored by history, creating an “atemporal cinema” that impresses multiple moments on a single flat surface (Germana 2018, 32, 125). Germana writes: “These Polaroids do not so much reflect a shift in Ellison’s photographic thinking as they are themselves the antidote with which Ellison thought through vision, time, and history in *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*” (Germana 2018, 125). Contrary to the “illusion of continuous motion” in cinema, rhopographic photography refuses narrativized, linear time, simultaneously presenting the vanished instant, the present existence, and future possibilities on a single plane. The reviewer translates “rhopographic photography” as “拓扑摄影” (tuòpū

shèyǐng) in Chinese, aiming to preserve the term's art-historical origin, its conscious aesthetic choice, and its unique spatiotemporal metaphor.

Part III: Sound includes Chapters 4 and 5, focusing on auditory technologies such as jazz, blues, and polyrhythms. Chapter 4 is titled “‘Modulate, Daddy, Modulate!’: Polyrhythms and Metric Modulation in the Fiction of Ralph Ellison.” Using the musical concepts of “polyrhythms” and “metric modulation,” Germana shows how rhythm in Ellison’s fiction goes beyond improvisation to constitute a systematic deconstruction of linear time. He systematically examines Ellison’s use of these rhythmic concepts from his early short stories to *Invisible Man*, arguing that Ellison as early as 1952 anticipated the core propositions of chaos theory—that complex systems are self-organizing and fundamentally unstable; that they reorganize through bifurcation and elaboration; and that order emerges from chaos in irreversible time (Germana 2018, 155).

Chapter 5 is titled “A Deep Pocket for the Truth of the Times: Ellison’s Other Groove of History.” It focuses on Ellison’s music criticism, analyzing his criticism of bebop and his praise for traditional jazz and the blues. Germana clearly states that Ellison’s primary criticism of bebop is that it “formalizes a discontinuous sense of time, and thereby affirms an historical view of the past structured by an analogous, sequentially static sense of time”; while the “pocket” of traditional jazz and the blues finds in “duration” an antidote to the “groove of history” (Germana 2018, 197). “Pocket” is not created out of thin air; it is built on the musicians’ long internalization of the blues tradition and swing vocabulary. In each performance, the musician “looks back” at this tradition, not mechanically repeating it, but breathing new life into the “pocket” of the moment. Past sounds continue to resonate in the present, forming a durational, unbroken temporal experience. The “pocket” that traditional jazz and the blues pursue aims to establish a creative, continuous groove; bebop, by contrast, deliberately pursues a discontinuous rhythmic feel, which in Ellison’s view precisely cuts off the “duration” that history requires.

5. Conclusion: Ellison in the Age of AI

Germana’s study reveals that Ellison’s classic status remains vital even in the age of AI. The reason his work constitutes a “new starting point for Ellison studies” is that it uncovers the extreme relevance of Ellison’s thought in the technological context of the twenty-first century. Germana shows how Ellison used the most advanced media technologies of his own time—from panoramas to cinematic montage, from Polaroids to recording technology—to carry out the most thoroughgoing critique of systemic racism. This profound insight into the relationship between “media” and “time” acquires new urgency today, when AI technology is reshaping our modes of cognition. As algorithms redefine what is “visible,” what is “true,” and what is “history,” Ellison’s questions—“Who controls time?” and “Who has the right to write history?”—become more pressing than ever. By repositioning Ellison as a “temporal technologist,” Germana not only reactivates the dormant philosophical dimension of Ellison’s texts but also provides a precious legacy for rethinking the relationship between “human” and “medium” as we approach the technological singularity. As we glide along the timelines generated by ChatGPT and lose ourselves in the “real-time” feeds of social media, Ellison’s

critique of “spatialized time” once again reveals its transcending vitality—he tells us that true freedom is not “keeping up with the times,” but having the capacity to “step outside the groove of history” and foretell the future in one’s own rhythm.

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