Ralph Ellison's 'Bluesisms': Expressionistic and Surrealistic Imagery in *Invisible Man*'s Blues Motifs

Claudia ALONSO RECARTE

Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Email: claudiarecarte@yahoo.es

ABSTRACT

Ralph Ellison's epic novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), has often been analysed for its use of jazz and blues rhythms and motifs in the development of the leading character, speech intonations and narrative riffs. This article attempts to provide some insight into how Ellison relied on expressionistic and surrealistic imagery for the elaboration of these motifs in the novel's Prologue. Stepping away from the critics' frequent associations between Ellison's narrative and the art of the blues painter Romare Bearden, this paper seeks to establish the influence he received from expressionists and surrealists for the evocation of the iconography and spaces in the novel. With an expressionistically-characterized Louis Armstrong as the point of departure, the Prologue spatially transcends into a dream world around which expressionistic forms and colors and surrealistic psychic automatism revolve. Through this experimental enterprise, Ellison not only sought to depict visuals consistent with the inner chaos of the character's mind, but also to provide a model for black literature which, unrestricted by the social realism of the Negro protest novel of the 1940s, employed earlier revolutionary European aesthetics and the use of the mythical method for inspiration.

Key words: jazz, blues, space, visuals, European influences, experimentation

La etapa azul de Ralph Ellison: Imágenes expresionistas y surrealistas en los Motivos de Blue de *Invisible Man*

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es, mediante un análisis del prólogo de la novela *El hombre invisible* (1952), demostrar cómo Ralph Ellison trasladó las tendencias visuales del expresionismo y surrealismo europeo a la práctica narrativa. Con frecuencia la experimentación de Ellison con motivos visuales ha sido asociada a la pintura de su contemporáneo, Romare Bearden. Sin embargo, este artículo se centra en su articulación espacial e iconográfica del jazz siguiendo los parámetros vanguardistas eurocéntricos, hacia los cuales demostró tener gran interés a lo largo de su vida. Con un Louis Armstrong expresionista como epicentro del prólogo, Ellison explora un paisaje onírico cargado de colores y formas expresionistas, mientras hace uso del automatismo psíquico propio del surrealismo. Desafiando así los límites entre lo auditivo y lo visual, Ellison propone, mediante el jazz y el blues, un nuevo modelo experimental para la novelística afro-americana de su época.

Palabras clave: jazz, blues, espacio, visualidades, influencias europeas, experimentación.

SUMMARY: 1.Introduction. 2. Beyond the influence of Bearden. 3. Expressionism and surrealism in *Invisible Man´s Prologue.* 4. Conclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

When considering Ralph Ellison's illustrious novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), critics have often attested to the writer's mesmerizing capacity for the elaboration of images through an exquisite and refined effect of the 'eye.' The nameless narrator's memoir is replete with striking impressions that, drawing upon the entropic dynamics that govern time and space, seem overwhelmingly bewildering for one man to bear. Paradoxically we stand before a character whose 'invisibility' renders him unreal under the impeding glare of modern civilization. This paper focuses on Ellison's use of expressionistic and surrealistic techniques of the visual arts when conforming to certain blues motifs and/or blues idiomatic iconographies. Ellison's exploitation of existential transcendence through blues rituals and his use of jazz riffs and an improvisatory language is a territory that has been explored from different perspectives, yet still remains untouched in many of its features. In this case we find ourselves dealing with two opposing artistic media (music and visual arts) spawning at a literary level.

> My basic sense of artistic form is musical... My instinctive approach to writing is through sound... [Hearing and seeing] must operate together. What is the old phrase –"the planned dislocation of the senses"? That *is* the condition of fiction, I think. Here is where sound becomes sight and sight becomes sound. (1995 b.: 802)

Music (both classical and jazz) as well as linguistic intonations of black vernacular are materialized in the rhythmic structure of the different sequences of the novel. From the speech intonation of certain characters such as Peter Wheatstraw and the threatening sustained notes of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* motif during the protagonist's electric shock treatment, to the drum-like pounding of Ras the Exhorter's hunt of the character in the Harlem jungle, the novel swirls around different tempos, each of which evokes a different mode of 'seeing' the surrounding space. Although many sections of the book would deserve mention for the author's unique manipulation of visuals and music, for the sake of conciseness, we shall limit our analysis to the celebrated Prologue of the novel, where perhaps all of these elements are most explicitly put into practice.

Ellison's novel marked a newly experimental terrain for black narrative at a time when the formal explorations of the Harlem Renaissance had practically faded from the literary panorama. The 1940s had been a distinct period for social realism in

African American letters. Richard Wright's 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" had indicated the necessity of leftist viewpoints for the novels of the decade, reminiscent of the proletarian novel of the 1930s.[1] In spite of Ellison's early pseudo-communist affiliations and inside the context of a growing political awareness in black fiction, *Invisible Man* embraced an experimental style that little had to do with either the tone or the morality of social realism. Ellison's manipulation of European approaches to visual art is a direct reflection of his belief in a uniquely American assimilation of struggling identities. While protest novels regarded the race issue through irreconcilable dichotomies, Ellison struggled to prove that the specific rituals and practices of black culture echo the aesthetic principles of traditional Western art, and that this is precisely what makes American identity unique. The constant flux of traditions and influences is the principle upon which the nation has been built. Thus, Ellison's view is more democratic: he believes that writers should not reduce the race problem to manicheism, but rather that they should acknowledge the fact that complexity and ambiguity remain the core of America's spirit. This standpoint inevitably led to a conglomeration of artistic influences, one that was unrestrained by race. Hence Ellison's recalling of writers such as Twain, Dostoyevsky, Melville and Hemingway in his own fiction, and hence his glance towards European painting for the elaboration of visual techniques.

2. BEYOND THE INFLUENCE OF BEARDEN

Ellison was no stranger to the visual arts. During his years as a music student at the Tuskegee Institute, he had not only become interested in literature, but had also come in contact with the aesthetics of visual art through his close readings of *Vanity Fair* and through the instruction of Eva Hamlin. Young Ellison took up sculpting, and upon his leaving to New York City in the summer of 1936 he aimed to continue developing his potential. Hamlin had thought that perhaps the sculptor Augusta Savage could instruct him during this period. Unfortunately for Ellison, Savage was too busy with the supervision of the Works Progress Administration to assist as such, although she did allow Ellison to make use of her studio for his work. Shortly after, he met the African American artist Richmond Barthé, who soon became his new sculpture and drawing instructor. However, the friendship between the two men

---

[1] First published in *New Challenge*, the manifesto demanded that blacks depict the "social, political, economic and emotional implications" (1937: 203) resulting from the trauma of slavery and segregation. Marxism was to be the starting point from which the writer would thereon gain perspective and elaborate themes of interest for the race. "Blueprint" stood as the symbolic commencement of the Negro protest novel, where naturalism and determinism under a realistically raw stylization became the norm. Wright wrote his most widely acknowledged works during this time: *Native Son* (1940), published only one year after Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which also adopted a critical stance of America from a sociological perspective, and *Black Boy* (1945).

faded in the months that followed, along with Ellison's interest in becoming a sculptor. He maintained curiosity in the process by which visibility can create form out of chaos through aesthetic deformity, an awareness that is clearly palpable in the novel. Ellison occasionally mentions Goya and Picasso throughout his essays. The latter's work represented, in Ellison's opinion, one of the most successful attempts to transcend the universal condition of man through a depiction of the particular. Picasso's use of symbols of Spanish art such as "the guitar, the bull, daggers, women, shawls, veils, mirrors" allowed for the whole of Spanish culture to "resound in a simple rhythm, an image" (1995 b.: 213-214). Modernist use of the mythical method fascinated Ellison. The fact that via submersion in the mechanisms of the vernacular the artist could find a metaphor inclusive of the entirety of Western civilization was a discovery that Ellison made through Picasso and through his close readings of Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. It would take years for him to perfect this technique, but it is through the polishing of this experimental attitude that he finally gained a unique voice in the interpretation of the blues idiom:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (1995 b.: 129)

Understanding the blues as a tragicomic ritual was an ambitious position to undertake, for it positioned the music as a microcosm of universal aesthetic approach. According to Randall Craig (1998), tragicomedy has been a useful genre in Western literature from the work of Plato to the twentieth-century novel. Ellison recognized its potential to deal with the absurdity of existence, and appreciated a similar objective in the blues idiom, thus enmeshing the music into the tradition of Western art.

This tragicomic exploration of the blues idiom was also depicted by the African American painter Romare Bearden (1911-1988). Ellison dedicated two great non-fiction pieces to him, "The Art of Romare Bearden" (first published in 1968 in the catalogue *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projections*) and "Bearden" (first published in *Callaloo* in 1988), where he praised the artist's move towards a more ambitious representation of Negro life. Frequent attempts to relate Ellison's writing to Bearden's collages and photomontages have been made. Kimberly Lamm (2003), for example, argues that both models constitute a significant form by which black masculinity is deciphered under the codes of visibility and un-visibility in the canvas and in the narrative, respectively.

The close friendship between the two artists facilitates a belief in a parallel mode for representing the blues idiom in their work; however, it is unlikely that it was Bearden whom Ellison sought for experimentation in the visual blues elements of his novel. Ellison began writing *Invisible Man* in 1945. By that time Bearden had given up his paintings of the rural South and the Depression, influenced by the work

of Mexican muralists, and had turned to Abstract Expressionism. Calvin Tomkins writes that

> [Bearden's] paintings of the forties are rather austere in color and figurative, usually being related to literary or other Biblical themes... For Bearden, the Biblical allusion was not religious but humanistic –an attempt to reach beyond personal experience to universal archetypes that would be communicable to others. (1998: 231)

Similarly, Matthew S. Witkovsky writes that during the late forties and early fifties, Bearden thematically preferred "myths and legendary figures of universal, humanistic importance" (1989: 264). It would not be until the 1960s that Bearden would explore the possibilities of photomontages and until 1975 that he would present the "Of the Blues" series, a collection that depicted the music thematically. More than two decades had passed since the publication of *Invisible Man*.

The reason why I mention this is because despite frequent claims of authenticity in the links between the blues representations of Ellison and Bearden, the temporal distance between their works suggests rather that Ellison relied on other avant-garde painters for the imagery of his narratives. This is not to say that Ellison ignored the work of Bearden, for he had been familiar with his canvases since the thirties, but rather that both artists have a predisposition towards the same objective (aesthetic representation from the vernacular to the universal through archetypal forms) because of the modernist consciousness that now permeated the American intellectual scene. Ellison even claimed that although Bearden did teach him "something about the nature of painting," his influence had more to do with discipline and dedication:

> [The influence of one artist upon another] frequently takes on other forms than that of copying or trying to do what another artist or writer does in a precise manner. But sometimes, by working in his chosen form, a fellow artist can affirm one's own effort and give you the courage to struggle with the problems of your medium. So in that light, you might say that Bearden influenced me. (1995 c.: 369)

This is not to undermine comparative studies between the artist and the writer either, for they have reached substantial conclusions. But the interest of this study lies precisely in articulating the probable sources that Ellison, who demonstrated a keen interest in all forms of modernist art, pursued for the development of visuals in *Invisible Man*. In order to do so, Ellison went beyond Bearden to study the avant-garde trends that would influence them both. Issues such as visual irrationality versus an apparent realist logic, the absurd condition of existence, the distortion of the senses, and the chaotic laws that dominate time and space are frequently mentioned by the writer when speaking about the experimental stance of the novel.

These same issues had preoccupied European artists of the first half of the century. Ellison's own declarations concerning his sources are evidence of his refusal to be influenced solely by African American aesthetics. This was not a matter of racial denial; rather, Ellison believed that the interest in African arts that black artists acquired from the late thirties onwards was an imitation of the European modernists' concern with primitivism and African and Australian iconography and masks: "American Negro sculpture is, of course, simply American sculpture done by Negroes... When African sculpture is one influence, it comes to them through the Cubists, just as it did to most contemporary artists" (1995 b.: 297). The brilliance of the passage, which we will consider shortly, lies precisely on taking Eurocentric experimentalism and applying it to such a characteristically black form of expression as the blues idiom.

3. EXPRESSIONISM AND SURREALISM IN *INVISIBLE MAN*'S PROLOGUE

In the line of modernist approach to painting, the visual elements in *Invisible Man* twist the principles of Impressionism. Rather than witnessing the impressions that the character receives from the immediate surroundings (a form more in the line with the protest novel), the reader constantly drifts from the sensitive subject's expression of the essence of his environment to accounts of symbolism inherent to his subconscious. Upon commenting on the novel, Ellison stated:

> As the hero passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, his sense of certainty is lost and the style becomes expressionistic. Later on, during his fall from grace from the Brotherhood, it becomes somewhat surrealistic. The styles try to express both his state of consciousness and the state of society. (1995 b.: 220)

The changes in style, however, are not as abrupt and clear-cut as he proposes, for the sake of simplification. Because of their spatial nature, the dream sequences automatically provide the frame for Surrealism, yet the use of colors, shadows, and deformity in the content of those dreams often attest to the technique of Expressionism. In addition to this, Ellison wrote the Prologue once he had completed the entire draft of the novel, so as to foreshadow the final chaotic episode of the Harlem riot.

Indeed, the inner structure of the novel (narrated by the protagonist) proves to be circular, not linear. The use of prolepsis and analepsis, along with the character's frequent *deja-vu* sensations, mirror the circularity of his history, thus hinting that perhaps salvation is to be found in the roots of one's traditions. In our case, these roots are symbolized by the blues idiom, which will provide the character with the proper 'equipment for living.' Heavily influenced by the work of Kenneth Burke and

André Malraux, Ellison understood art as a means to marshall "the army of one's thoughts and images" (Burke 1973: 298). Art coherently organizes external chaos under a single vision which is wrought out by examples given through tradition. The blues is this 'equipment for living' that will pave the way from entropy to enlightenment in the novel. It is Ellison's way of reaching the universal through the particular.

The Invisible Man is, beyond anything else, a confused individual: "he is a man born into a tragic irrational situation who attempts to respond to it as though it were completely logical" (1995 b.: 344). As a narrator, he is reluctant to abandon the impressionistic visual style, a style governed by the reliability and predictability of the senses. Yet by the end of the novel he has realize that it is in the fissures of his consciousness, --that is, in the irrational and illogical spaces of his mind-- where the actual hints to the human condition lay.

The novel begins with the narrator's presentation of his condition. "I am an invisible man... simply because people refuse to see me" (1995 a.: 3),[2] he declares. From his womb-like, lighted hole in the outskirts of Harlem, the character ponders on his invisibility through writing. The recollection of the fatal mistakes and unfortunate experiences that have pushed him into the basement constitutes the novel itself. By answering to the "compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white" (14), he will finally gain a coherent perspective upon his past actions and will acknowledge the need to take responsibility over his life.

It is significant that already in the first paragraph, expressionistic visuals come into play. Attempting to sound ironic, the Invisible Man accuses the outside world of not seeing him. What he is actually revealing is that others see him in expressionistic terms: "It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination–indeed, everything and anything except me" (3). As an emotionally-bound sensual displacement, Expressionism reveals the beholder's belief on the essence of the beheld, which is deemed as the ultimate truth of the object. That is, the sensory subject only understands the object in relation to himself. The image is distorted according to the subject's will, for reality is a creation of his personal vision. It is not nothingness or transparency which the passer-by sees, but all the myths and stereotypes surrounding black masculinity as epitomized in the body of the Invisible Man. Hence the paradox that stands between the sociological 'high visibility' of blacks versus the 'invisibility' of the black individual's humanity. According to Ellison,

> "Invisibility"... springs from two basic facts of American life: from the racial conditioning which often makes the white American interpret cultural, physical, or psychological differences as signs from a great formlessness of Negro life wherein

---

[2] From now on all citations from *Invisible Man* will be indicated solely through page number

all values are in flux, and where those institutions and patterns of life which mould the white American's personality are missing or not so immediate in their effects. Except for its upper levels, where it tends to merge with the American whole, Negro life is a world psychologically apart. (1995 b.: 343)

If the black individual is to succumb to the tendency towards expressionistic visibility on the part of white America, he will be doomed to formlessness. According to the Invisible Man, "to be unaware of one's form is to live a death" (7), for it only pushes the individual deeper and deeper into chaotic forces.

Having established the deformities and distortions resulting from the outsiders' "inner eyes" (3), the Invisible Man proceeds by telling us about his obsession with Louis Armstrong's "Black and Blue," the only song that allows him to transcend the conventional ways of listening to music. Much has been written about Ellison's reading of Armstrong as the quintessential jazz hero. Despite the fact that during the short-lived bebop era of the late 1940s and early 1950s many modernist jazz fanatics practically made the trumpeter an emblem of involution[3], Ellison relied on Armstrong to set the jazz tone for his story. Many bop enthusiasts associated Armstrong's overt facial gestures, buffoonish smiles and dubious mannerisms with minstrelsy. Ellison, ever Armstrong's ambassador in spite of the controversy, took on the self-imposed mission of placing the trumpeter as the ultimate trickster: "Armstrong's clownish license and intoxicating powers are almost Elizabethan," he wrote in *Shadow and Act*, "he takes liberties with kings, queens and presidents; he emphasizes the physicality of his music with sweat, spittle and facial contortions" (1995 b.: 106).

Through detailed and exaggerated depictions of the musician's contortions, Ellison suggests in his essay that Armstrong's chosen manner of self-representation should be read in expressionistic terms. Armstrong's buffoonish mask and the pathos of his music reach the essence of the American spirit by giving those emotions a form in the physical world. As Theodore Adorno declared commenting on Schoenberg's compositions:

> Passions are no longer simulated, but rather genuine emotions of the unconscious – of shock, of trauma- are registered without disguise through the medium of music. These emotions attack the taboos of form because these taboos subject such emotions to their own censure, rationalizing them and transforming them into images. (1948: 273)

––––––––––

[3] In 1947, the beginning of the notorious battle between modernist bebop fans and the so-called 'moldy figs' (who defended New Orleans-based jazz aesthetics and other earlier forms of the music) was officially declared in print by Barry Ulanov. In his *Metronome* article, "Moldy Figs Vs. Moderns!", Ulanov humorously calls on jazz fans to "choose [their] own weapon" (23) with which to defend their musical tastes.

Similarly, Armstrong's facial gestures represent this uncensored form born out of his music. If Expressionism had made it a point to exploit the most deformed and distorted facial gesticulations so as to reflect the essence of nature emanating from the psychic forces within, Armstrong's smile can be read as the definitive expression of the basic American joke. This joke is somewhat tragic: the black individual must wear the mask of laughter so as to transcend the chaos that befalls on the nation's identity crisis. If Expressionism seeks naked essences, then America's essence is paradoxically a mask. It is a mask that does not "simulate passions," but one that expresses their authenticity, the ambivalence of tragedy and comedy. Robert G. O'Meally suggests that in Ellison's novel it is this authentic mask which enables the transcendence of experience through its successful use of invisibility: "taken as a clown or fool, Armstrong is invisible and thus ironically freer to experiment with his art" (2003: 124).

For this paper, Ellison's defence of Armstrong is significant because it is his music which is read in expressionistic terms during the Prologue. Expressionism seeks to amplify emotions in the physical world, and this is just what Armstrong's song accomplishes: "when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body," the Invisible Man says, "I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue'- all at the same time" (8). Moreover, by transcending into a physicality beyond sound waves, "Black and Blue" becomes the ultimate incentive for the creation of a new space. Already the title of the song suggests an interaction of colors. Black and blue allude to black skin and to the depressive state of mind of the blues, while simultaneously conjuring a bruised body. Under the effects of substance abuse and aided by invisibility, the narrator falls into a hallucinatory state of mind:

> Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat... And you slip into the breaks and look around. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis's music... So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. (8-9)

The inner eye of the narrator turns to a world positioned between the conscious and the subconscious, enabling the appearance of both surrealistic and expressionistic features. It was Richard Wagner, a precursor of Expressionism, who first articulated the possibility of spatial expansion through the audible perception of music. In 1890, he predicated an early form of emotional experimentation in sound in his essay "Beethoven," a form that would unite man's sense of sight and his sense of hearing:

> Besides the world that presents itself to sight... we are conscious of the existence of a second world, perceptible only through the ear, manifesting itself through sound; literally a sound world beside the light world... This must take place through happenings in the inner organism that our waking consciousness merely feels as vague sensations. But it is this inner life through which we are directly allied with the whole of nature, and thus are brought into a relation with the essence of things that eludes the forms of outer knowledge, time and space. (1870: 256)

"Black and Blue" has opened the gateway to the formless world of beneath. The outer impressions of Armstrong's piece are substituted by the Invisible Man's expression of the essence of the song and intertwined with symbols hidden in the deepest layers of his subconscious. Once the blues idiom has played its role as instigator, the song gradually fades away, leaving the character locked in a profundity where the laws of spatial and temporal logic are no longer applicable.

In this hallucinatory descent the character is buffeted about by the different tempos: "beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo" (9), he says. He enters a cave where he sees "an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco" (9). As he penetrates downwards, the tempo speeds up again, and the Invisible Man finds himself before a conglomeration of disembodied voices in what appears to be a ceremonious preaching.

Visibility is now lost: throughout the service there is no deictic reference to space or to the physical form of the speakers. The reader senses only what the narrator hears. Still, the evocation of colors becomes the leitmotif of the preacher's sermon "Blackness of Blackness." In the traditional blues idiomatic form of call and response, the incongruent affectations of blackness are articulated: "In the beginning... there was blackness," yet "the sun... was bloody red"; "black is bloody" yet "black ain't... red"; "black will make you" and "black will un-make you" (9-10). This contrast of pure colors is characteristic of Expressionism. According to August Macke, the divergence of chromaticity is indispensable for the resulting form of each of the colors: "Any force expresses itself through form... The relations that numerous forms bear to one another enable us to recognize the individual form. Blue first becomes visible against red" (1912: 95). Impressionistic nebulosity is substituted by chromatic intensity, revealing the disquieting contrasts of the psychic forces. This intensity exposes the true essence of the visible and enables a sense of atmospheric thickness in the otherwise formless delusion of the Invisible Man. By recalling techniques such as the heavy brushstrokes in Emil Nolde's "Tropical Sun" (1914) in red, green, black and white or the aggressive red and black pigmentation in George Grosz's "To Oskar Panizza" (1918), for example, the reader may appreciate the forms created out of violent colors.

It is significant that despite the fact that Armstrong allows the narrator to listen in space, few definite terms of its description are given. It is a space made up entirely of violent, raw voices, a space of which we only know that a descent is taking place. Thus the reader, guided by Ellison's use of colors, tempos, volumes, voice tones,

and timbres united in polyrhythms of sounds and silences, is left to fill in those spatial voids through his imagination. According to the late jazz drummer Max Roach, rhythm was the medium through which a spatial and colorful perception of music could be reached:

> My approach to rhythms… is the use of space, of silence. It's not that there's necessarily nothing going on. There's always a pulse there. But there are times when there's nothing but the pulse... Some of the horns, like Lester and Bird, had a built-in rhythm section. They didn't need a drum or a bass player. When they played, you felt the pulse. So that allowed the drummer to do colors. It freed us. With these people, it was always there: the silence, the meter. The pulse was there, in the silence. Bearden's paintings are like that. (Quoted in Price 2006: 29)

Though Roach was specifically referring to the art of Bearden, the same promptness can be interpreted in Ellison's Prologue. Pulse, color and space interact and nurture each other. But because of the roaming chaos permeating the Invisible Man's mind, the outcome is one of the exaggerated distortion characteristic of the brutalizing expressionistic vision. According to Daniel Albright, "Expressionism is more than a discipline of essences; it is also a discipline of violence... Expressionist art tries to cut deep; it is intimate with mutilation" (2004: 260). Since, in the novel, the voices at the sermon lack a bodily form, we can but imagine a mass of practically indistinguishable, contorted faces, entrapped in the open mouths of screams in the bloodthirsty rage of blackness and redness. It is a depiction of chaos in its explosive form, similar to the one depicted in "To Oskar Panizza," where the distortion and deformity of the masses obliterate any possible glimpse of the surface beneath their feet. Grosz had aimed to reflect the modern dehumanization and animalization of Western man, a hellish procession towards violence and death. A similar effect is attempted by Ellison. The Invisible Man, thrown inside the vortex of these colors, tempos and timbres, can only be shuttled violently around the brutal sounds and rhythms; he is but a puppet battered by the vehement, amorphous assembly.

At the same time, the crowd and the preacher represent metonymic extensions of the Invisible Man. If, according to surrealist principles, the oneiric sphere reveals the multiplicity of the self, the subject may appear personified through different elements or motifs simultaneously. Further on in the novel, the protagonist is torn between the need to define his individuality and his job as an orator for the Brotherhood. Through the latter, his speech must necessarily be reduced to articulating the problems of the race, thus dismissing the personal issues of the self. The key factor here is the dehumanization of leadership. Philip Brian Harper argues that

> The concept of leading one's people itself embodies a paradox in that leadership implies an individual subjectivity that, in its very force, stands in opposition to the community meant to be led out of which the leader, too, is supposedly –and, in the Invisible Man's case inescapably- a member. (1989: 687)

As an orator, the Invisible Man seems to lose his identity, for in the end, he is unable to cope or even remotely to understand the psychological implications of being both a member and the representational figure of the race. During the Prologue, before the hallucination, the Invisible Man states that he once met a girl who had a disturbing recurring nightmare: "She lay in the center of a large dark room and felt her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass" (7). In the Invisible Man's hallucination the same process is in action: the disembodied voices, the preacher and the upsurge of several tempos are expansions of his inner self. However, only his subconscious is prepared to identify them as such. Rationality impedes the character from understanding that he is both orator and mob, that the overlapping tempos and shrieking sounds manifest an inner dissonance that longs for a single, melodic line.

The Invisible Man cannot fit into the mass, and he is thrown out by a voice with a "trombone timbre" (10). "Git out of here, you fool! Is you ready to commit treason?" (10), it screams at him. The plaint is yet another indicator of the Invisible Man's own discourse as an orator. As an active member of the Brotherhood, all procedures and steps must be carried out in the name of the race. The crowd is deemed purely as instrumental, as a way to materialize benefits for the whole community. When the Invisible Man is convicted by the Brotherhood committee for his doubting stance between individual and collective action, Brother Jack straightforwardly articulates the paradox of leadership: "Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them" (473). The Invisible Man realizes that all along the politics of his speech were never intended to aid or soothe a single person's anguish, or his own, for that matter, but only to strengthen the community as an absorbing, opaque identity. To act according to the individual's needs leads to an acknowledgement of the crowd's inner division and therefore to an opening of fissures in the multitude's potential as an instrument of power. The trombone-like voice has a name for people who are biased by individualist visions: traitors. And yet because the voice is an extension of the Invisible Man's self, we realize that he is guilty of thinking of himself as such.

Furthermore, the timbre of the hallucinated voice is reminiscent of the jazz instrument that produces different onomatopoeic effects. The trombone is significant in Ellison's writing. In his second and unfinished novel, *Juneteenth*, one of the leading characters, Reverend Hickman, is described as sounding like "God's trombone" (1999: 3). Ellison was a great admirer of Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton, a member of the Duke Ellington band. According to Horace A. Porter, "'Tricky Sam' Nanton is known for perfecting the growl style of trombone playing, the use of a plunger-style mute to duplicate and mock the sounds of the human voice" (2001: 36). The voice that throws the Invisible Man out of the sermon resembles an attacking growl, a distinct scream inside the entropy of shouts.

The Invisible Man then turns to the singer of spirituals, where the tempo takes a slower pace. In a blues-like style of moans and groans, she tells the narrator her tragic story. Once more "expressionistic purisms" are conjured. She both loves and

hates her master, the father of her children (10), who it is implied has raped her, and she moans painfully and laughs at the same time (11). The Invisible Man's reply to her is noteworthy for our consideration of Surrealism:

> "I too have become acquainted with ambivalence," I said, "That's why I'm here."
> "What's that?"
> "Nothing, a word that doesn't explain it." (10)

Does it not? If, as the surrealists proposed, the subconscious is made of battling yet compatible forces that render the individual a multiple being whose rationality and primitivism have only been covered, not extinguished by civilization, then even in that compatibility there must be some form of logic. André Breton stated that

> Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. (1930: 123)

There is an obscure logic beneath the rationale that dominates man, one that enables an understanding of the human condition in terms that rationale had established as contradictory. Through this inner logic, ambivalence turns out to be the perfect term by which to describe the actual processes of the mind, where everyday elements that reason had established as irreconcilable suddenly find a coherent, unifying ground. Common psychic processes are thus destroyed, and are replaced by apparently random associations of elements, images and experiences. The images reached through the psychic automatism are stripped off their previous meaning, and by association with and against the other images or elements with which it has now been placed, they gain a new (and more accurate) symbolic interpretation. In the same sense that the old woman can love and hate her children's white father, different tempos can exist in the hallucination, preacher and mob can be the constituents of the protagonist's role as a leader, who can be both loyal and a traitor, and the space evoked by the music can be formless. All of these apparent contradictions, instigated by "Black and Blue," signify the character's condition of 'high visibility' and 'invisibility.' It is as if somewhere in the back of his mind he is aware of this, and must learn to decipher these metaphors of voices, colors, and sounds to acknowledge the need for personal responsibility.

The old woman continues with her thoughts. She yearns for freedom and yet she does not know what freedom is. "I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head" (11), she concludes. The Invisible Man is baffled; he cannot make sense out of anything she says.

Finally, a remark is given on what he sees: "She sat with her face in her hands, moaning softly; her leather-brown face was filled with sadness" (11). An indication

of a menacing laughter, "upstairs" (10) is the only spatial incentive given. The woman's facial close-up of a textured sadness is thus blended with the notion of laughter. Let us remember that it was Ellison who insisted on a tragicomic conception of the blues (also rooted in ambivalence) that will permit the existential transcendence of the individual. In this scene, however, the tragicomic dimension of the blues is distorted. The laughter the Invisible Man hears is anything but comic; he is afraid of it and cannot shut his senses from it. His mind is reflecting the aspects that make up the blues, which he can only approach intuitively due to his background as a Southerner. However, he is unable to actually place them together because in the end, he does not know how to deal with ambivalence. When he tries to reason about all these visions he is interrupted by the disquieting sound:

> "A mistake was made somewhere," I said, "I'm confused." And I wished to say other things, but the laughter upstairs became too loud and moan-like for me and I tried to break out of it, but I couldn't. (11)

The laughter becomes grotesque and disturbing, and the old woman orders him to leave. The expressionistic deformation of what is perceived practically reaches climactic violence: one of the old woman's sons appears "out of nowhere" (11), grips his "windpipe" (12) and almost suffocates him.

Generally, expressionists preferred objects in motion to the quietness of stagnant elements, as a reflection of the ceaseless restlessness of the inner psychic emotions. The Invisible Man runs through the darkness, stalked by the heavy sounds of a human hunt: "The trumpet was blaring and the rhythm was too hectic. A tom-tom beating like heart-thuds began drowning the trumpet, filling my ears" (12). Unable to stop because of the rhythmic footsteps behind him, he tries to cross a road, only to be struck by a "speeding machine" that "scrapes the skin" (12) from his leg. These are the final images of the hallucination, through which we return to the intensity of red and black. The protagonist slips back to Louis Armstrong's voice rasping on the words "What did I do, to be so black and blue."

Considering all the elements that have energetically converged in the hallucination in a vortex of sight and sound, the incongruent narrative becomes a distorting mirror of the Invisible Man's 'inner eye.' This characteristically surrealist 'inner eye' contemplates what is within the subject's imagination and his visionary spirit. As I have indicated earlier, the images and sounds are metonymical extensions of the character which bear no relation through rationality. Only by diving beneath the surface of rationality can the antagonistic constituents cope with each other. According to Breton, the perfect image to be evoked through psychic automatism will be "the one that is arbitrary to the highest degree, the one that takes the longest time to translate into practical language" (1924: 47). These "arbitrary" images become ontologically joined by the Invisible Man's subconscious.

Salvador Dalí's work perhaps illustrates psychic automatism best. Horace A. Porter (2001) has hinted at the close relationship between Dalí's paintings and the

final scenes of *Invisible Man*, yet the parallelisms are palpable already at the beginning of the novel. Images with no apparent relation between them are placed side by side in Dalí's canvases. If these juxtapositions are inconsistent with the order of nature, the viewer must search for the source of their resemblance somewhere else: inside the artist's mind. The resulting bizarre harmony between the apparent nonsensical objects can only find consistency inside the sphere of the subconscious, not in nature. Let us consider for example Dalí's "The Great Masturbator" (1929), a painting that includes all of the artist's obsessions. From Dalí's head, face down, different images emanate. His eyes are closed, indicating that he is asleep and that therefore all of the images converge in his obsessive dream over sexuality. The small lion's head above the chin possibly indicates an inner ferocity for physical desire. The lion's phallic tongue reaches beneath the woman's breast. In keeping persistence with the angle towards the upper right corner of the canvas, the woman is lustily sniffing a man's genitals. The fixation with sexuality is furthermore intertwined with Dalí's obsessive compulsion with the passing of time. A grasshopper rests where his mouth should be. Ants crawl over the large insect's thorax. The grasshopper is one of Dalí's childhood fears, and the ants are a recurrent symbol of death in the painter's work. Also, the broken hook piercing the top of Dalí's head may indicate the struggle to break with the past. Beneath the hook stands a man (Dalí) in a desert of loneliness, and beneath the great head stands the same man, now embracing a woman (most likely Dalí's wife and muse, Gala) in the sands of Port Lligat. In his study of the painting, Marc J. LaFountain observes how "the symbolic function of excrement, coprophagia, or masturbation, for instance, was an irrationality that intended to both assume and parody the dialectics of the soluble, communicating vessels of the conscious and unconscious mind(s)" (1997: 52). The key issue here is that such dialectics are assumed, and that they constitute the same inner logic that Breton predicated. The junction of past fears, present tranquilities and obsessions, and future inevitabilities articulate the enigmatic realm of the mind, where the laws of time become meaningless. The Invisible Man realizes that the combination of his invisibility and Armstrong's blues releases time from the restraints of linearity, allowing history to jump back and forth between different stages: "Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead" (8).

Everything is absurdly possible in the painting in the same way that the dislocation of the senses and the disparate images and sounds bear a cohesive meaning in the subconscious of the Invisible Man. With the aid of the reefer the song induces a "more than real" world of overlapping times and experiences that somehow manage to refer back to the blues idiom, to the black individual's 'equipment for living': the call and response pattern of the sermon, the blending of the private and the public spheres, the southern background of the woman and her children, and the same woman's voice, a symbiosis of spirituals and flamenco. Each of these blues-based essences is reminiscent of the Invisible Man's past: the sermon,

as should be clear by now, symbolically alludes to his short-lived job as an orator, dwelling in the paradox of leadership between being a member (private sphere) and a spokesman (public sphere). He is a Southerner and thus cultivated from the same land out of which the blues was born. And finally, spirituals and flamenco are musical idioms which, in Ellison's view, draw on similar techniques to the ones applied in the blues. In an essay entitled "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia," Ellison praised the gifted singer of spirituals for her refined ability to conjure all the characteristic forms of black musical expression. Like the blues, Mahalia Jackson's voice "utilizes half-notes, glissandi, blue notes, humming and moaning" (1995 b.: 252), and "shares a common rhythmic and harmonic base with jazz" (1995 b.: 253). Ellison likewise paid his respects to Spanish music in an essay called "Flamenco," in which he established its common grounds with the blues:

> Flamenco... allows a maximum of individual expression, and a democratic rivalry such as is typical of a jam session; for, like the blues and jazz, it is an art of improvisation, and like them it can be quite graphic. Even one who doesn't understand the lyrics will note the uncanny ability of the singers presented here to produce pictorial effects with their voices. Great space, echoes, rolling slopes, the charging of bulls, and the prancing and galloping of horses flow in this sound much as animal cries, train whistles, and the loneliness of night sound through the blues. (1995 b.: 24)

It is only logical that the old woman's timbre, indicative of two arts that can only be related through their similarities to the blues, evokes a space (the "pictorial effect") consistent with the blues itself: the South.

The Invisible Man's obsessions, phobias and fears are fused and deformed, with Armstrong's "Black and Blue" standing as thematic motif. And yet, even after awakening from the hallucination, the Invisible Man is reluctant to accept the vision:

> At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act. Nevertheless, I know now that few really listen to this music... I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of my being –even though I could not answer "yes" to their promptings. I haven't smoked a reefer since, however; not because they're illegal, but because to *see* around corners is enough... But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action. (12-13)

Consciously accepting the vision would mean understanding the substance of his own identity, and therefore taking responsibility for it. He admits being "incapable" of action and unable to affirm his subconscious "promptings." He deceives himself by claiming that "hearing" around the "corners" of his mind will restrain his will. In actuality, the novel is itself an act of "hearing" around the "corners." One may shut one´s eyes so as to not see the man in the mirror, but one can never close one´s body from sound. "Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be

thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (13-14), the Invisible Man asks himself. Somehow he knows that he needs to acknowledge the relationship between sight and sound that has materialized in his hallucination, and that this can only be done by hearing and seeing his past once again, through his writing.

It is in this blues-dominated whirlpool of Expressionism and Surrealism that the Invisible Man begins his story. The hallucination, which is an act of analepsis for the narrator, is paradoxically a prolepsis for the reader, for it anticipates the chaotic events to follow. Ellison reinforces this complex convergence through the different tempos of the hallucination. "Tempo" is a musical expression used to indicate the desired velocity of a piece, but etymologically speaking, the Italian term means 'time.' Figuratively, the overlapping tempos in the character's head also refer to intersecting times. Past, present and future thus obsessively merge in the Invisible Man's mind, in the same way that they are amalgamated in Dalí's work.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed to depict Ellison's fusion of writing, music and the visual arts in fictional practice. Throughout his career he stressed, on numerous occasions, that his literary influences were not limited by the work of African American writers, that his legacy was a continuation of the tradition forged by Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and T.S. Eliot, among others. It is only natural that his interest in the visual arts would not be limited by the work of black artists. Despite the powerful blues idiomatic triumvirate formed by Bearden, Ellison and Albert Murray, the writer's expertise on European art proves to be the determining note for the development of the visual technique he employs in the novel. Such is the way through which the Invisible Man's 'eye' realizes the disquieting inevitability towards form and subsequently, towards action. From expressionistic perceptions to surrealistic spaces, transcendence of experience becomes possible. Robert E. Abrams argues that in the novel

> Dream-language... equivocates... In dream the psyche simultaneously says yes and no, by distorting a meaning without entirely erasing it, by permitting conflicting interpretations of the same symbol, or by inhabiting contradictory figures simultaneously. Rather than serving to define the self, the dream psyche multiplies it. (1978: 598)

But Abrams is missing the point that by using surrealistic imagery, Ellison was seeking to prove that the self can only be defined *as* multiple and *through* the multiple. Once again ambivalence is the basis for an integrative conception of the self. Furthermore, in order to transcend experience, the individual must necessarily know chaos for what it is. As Ellison himself indicates, "we cannot live, as someone has said, in the contemplation of chaos, but neither can we live without an awareness

of chaos" (1995 b.: 704). The Invisible Man's story is a journey towards an awareness of chaos. By the end of the narration he has learned that the world revolves around irrationality, against which logic is completely futile. In the Epilogue he retrieves from his hole, but he is "no less invisible" (581), for he has yet to redevelop his form now that he has acknowledged chaos as an inherent –and inevitable- part of himself. He has only overcome the first step, that of thought. The ambivalence of his identity will acquire visibility once he steps into action, the point at which he must prove to himself that he knows how to pragmatically manage chaos. He has comprehended the true meaning of Armstrong's music, the ambivalence of the tragicomic:

> With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, "Open the window and let the foul air out," while the other says, "It was good green corn before the harvest." Of course Louis was kidding, *he* wouldn't have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air's horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and his diversity, and I'll be up and around with mine. (581)

Perhaps the form that the Invisible Man will take will be the same as Armstrong's: the mask. It certainly is a form that is useful, for it will always allow him to exploit his awareness of what invisibility entails. What Ellison and Armstrong suggest as an ideal form is not invisibility, which is only the projection of the world's expressionistic glare, but a mask of invisibility, under which the individual is aware of his one true, multiple, ambivalent self.

REFERENCES

ABRAMS, Robert E. (1978). The ambiguities of dreaming in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. *American Literature* 49.4: 592-603.

ADORNO, Theodor (1948). from *Philosophy of Modern Music.* In Albright, Daniel, ed., 272-276.

ALBRIGHT, Daniel, ed. (2004). *Modernism and Music, an Anthology of Sources.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

BRETON, André (1924). First manifesto of Surrealism. In Lewer, Debbie, ed., 36-49.

——. (1930). Second manifesto of Surrealism. In Seaver, Richard and Helen R. Lane, eds., 117-194.

BURKE, Kenneth (1973). *The Philosophy of Literary Form.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

CRAIG, Randall (1998). *The Tragicomic Novel.* Newark: University of Delaware Press.

ELLISON, Ralph (1995 a.). *Invisible Man.* New York: Vintage Books.

——. (1995 b.). *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison.* John F. Callahan, ed. New York: Random House Inc.

——. (1999). *Juneteenth.* New York: Vintage Books.

ELLISON, Ralph; Maryemma GRAHAM and Amritjit SINGH (1995 c.). *Conversations with Ralph Ellison.* Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.

HARRISON, Charles and Paul Wood, eds. (2003). *Art in Theory. 1900-2000.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

HARPER, Philip Brian (1989). ''To become one yet many'': psychic fragmentation and aesthetic synthesis in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man. Black Literature Forum* 23.4: 681-700.

LAFOUNTAIN, Marc J. (1997). *Dalí and Postmodernism: This is Not an Essence.* New York: State University of New York Press.

LAMM, Kimberly (2003). Visuality and black masculinity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Romare Bearden's photomontages. *Callaloo* 26.3: 813-835.

LEWER, Debbie, ed., and Richard SEAVER and Helen R. LANE, trans. (2006). *Post-Impressionism to World War II.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

LEWIS, David Levering, ed., (1994). *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader.* New York: Viking Penguin.

MACKE, August (1912). Masks. In Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood, eds., and Klaus Lankheit, trans., 95-96.

O'MEALLY, Robert G, ed. (1998). *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture.* New York: Columbia University Press.

——. (2003). Checking our balances: Ellison on Armstrong's humor. *boundary 2* 30.2: 115-136.

PORTER, Horace A. (2001). *Jazz Country. Ralph Ellison in America.* Iowa City: Iowa UP.

PRICE, Sally; Richard Price and Romare Bearden (2006). *Romare Bearden: The Caribbean Dimension.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

SEAVER, Richard and Helen R. Lane, eds. and trans. (1972). *Manifestoes of Surrealism.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

TOMKINS, Calvin (1998). Profiles: putting something over something else. In O'Meally, Robert G. ed., 224-242.

ULANOV, Barry (1947). ''Moldy figs vs. moderns!'' *Metronome* Nov. 1947: 15, 23.

WAGNER, Richard (1870). Beethoven. In Albright, Daniel, ed., 255-259.

WITKOVSKY, Matthew S. (1989). Experience vs. Theory: Romare Bearden and Abstract Expressionism. *Black American Literature Forum* 23.2: 257-282.

WRIGHT, Richard (1937). Blueprint for Negro Writing. In Lewis, David Levering, ed., 194-205.