(DE)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY – A CHRONOTOPIC ANALYSIS OF RALPH ELLISON'S "INVISIBLE MAN"[1]

***Abstract**: My paper aims at employing Bakhtinian terminology in order to ascertain the chronotopic patterns of functionality which govern social identity, memory and individual identity. Ellison recognizes the merits of a black tradition in confronting new American and global issues, by extracting and proliferating profound definitions perception. Black culture makes wide use of structural archetypes functioning inside a wider context of strategic symbology, representing various constructs of analytic worth. The author commandeers cryptic messaging, appearing almost intoxicated with the power of his own written word and duty towards creative instruments of mental debt and depth, bewildered by the overwhelming blessings of simple traditions that have stood the test of time and enabled their carriers to maintain a coherent sense of identity.*

***Keywords**: chronotope, identity, culture.*

Mikhail Bakhtin's systemic apparatus of emblematic devices comprises cognitive depths which function beyond arbitrary boundaries of simple cultural relevance. Therefore applying Bakhtinian mechanisms of comprehension to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a fully warranted undertaking encompassing both structure and a stern analysis of desirable and justified content. Bakhtin's conceptual framework can be held accountable for altering cultural realms outside its borders of encounter, supplementing external ideas, improving and completing them. All disseminated elements are interconnected, lacking in explicit manifestation, adhering to implicit introduction and dialogic confrontation. Bakhtin asserts that no work of literature can exist as a separate, independent entity. Any literary text is in a state of flux, maintaining communication with other literary voices or streams. The influence can reside in imitation, modular transformation or adaptation, or even rejection which is nothing more than a reversal of method. A text is always informed by other texts and at the same time it has the duty to inform its readership. The connection between two texts is by no means constrictive or parasitic in nature. Its symbiotic orientation capitalizes on interdisciplinary dialogue and voice structure, honouring social complexity and linguistic wealth: "The internal stratification of language is a prerequisite for the novel. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. The links and interrelations lead to the novel's heteroglossia and dialogization." (Bakhtin 1981, 263)

Identity formation, cultural memory and religion are paramount in the understanding of blacks and whites not as mere individuals but as complex, interconnected cultural entities. Bakhtin's approach is atemporal and universal, allowing us to not only see or understand Afro-American culture but also to expand its deeper meanings, adapt and improve our own culture, enable a positive cross-cultural contamination by upgrading our shared humanity and collective heritage.

Certain Bakthinian matters of interest such as power and control, materialism, (re)structured social and ethnic relations, dialogism, spatial and temporal paradigms

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provide the necessary competence to outline patterns of relevant functionality in *Invisible Man.* Ralph Ellison's displays a considerable amount of dialogic audacity as a method of integrating social strategies in his novel. His principles are governed by mental alacrity and argumentative observations which often foster resentment and playful overtones of deceptive chaos. Ellison and Bakhtin possess a dedicated, shared infrastructure, a common ground where their variations in discourse can become intertwined and intervene in the establishment of philosophical augmentations and consistent power structures. The boundaries between the two become nothing more than non-cohesive, penetrable conventions which allow transcendent voices to define the desires of randomly assigned trust and determination. Envisioning *Invisible Man* as a Bakhtinian novel one can't help but detect the ubiquitous Carnivalesque elements of perception which generate and govern the social environment. The Carnival entails a state of absolute liberation and subsequently a state of pseudo-anarchy, capricious libertinism and equality. It exists outside political, economic and social restrictions, suspending the status quo, living up to ideals of randomness and improvisation. It is a festival which celebrates the annihilation of individual hierarchies and the dismemberment of forged and unjust equilibriums. There is little room for political ambitions or extravagant portrayal of mediocre deeds. The Carnivaleque is a counter reaction to those abusive systems which strive to acquire our humanity with thirty pieces of our own silver.

Another essential Bakhtinian concept that is of great importance to *Invisible Man* is that of the chronotope. Time-space describes the dual matrix behind the emergence of Ellison's novel, understanding both history and the topos on which it occurs. Ralph Ellison bends time to his liking offering nonlinear and often simultaneous projections engaging the reader's attention and selective intelligence, inviting him to experience "a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. 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. And you slip into the breaks and look around". (Ellison, 1974, 11) This enigmatic passage distorts the accepted perception of time, offering a multilayered temporal construct which seeks to achieve transference of control while at the same time generating a climate of insecure reclusiveness and underprivileged substantiations of unclear history.

The chronotope's initial manifestation in *Invisible Man* is done through the use of the fictional present. We are informed with great equanimity and familiarity that the narrator dwells in a coal cellar which is designed as a cocoon of self-banishment, an in-between world, a self-imposed Purgatory from which he can be emerge a new man, ready to confront his previous oppressors and the flawed systems that had spawned them. Time here contracts fissuring the containment of common meanings, creating a brave new nexus of darkened topography and supporting a cronosphere of intimidating and deliberate variation. The chronotope is the fulfiller of tradition, an astute element/method which defines our sense of community and social history. According to Mikhail Bakhtin himself "The chronotope is where the knots of narrative are tied and untied [...]. Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins [...]. Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements - philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect - gravitate towards the chronotope and through it

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take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work" (Bakhtin, 1981: 250).

Time and space are inextricably intertwined with respect to the fundamental acknowledgement of unity inside the formulation of the narrative and their ultimate servitude towards the subject and his/her personal development. An author is virtually unable to bring into being any form of scenery or landscape without considering motion, transformation and temporal progression relating to that particular element. Certain still images though extremely captivating and enticing appear almost soulless, unfuelled, doomed by their lack of versatility and mobility, spaces deprived of any active intervention.

From an anthropological standpoint space regulates the proliferation of matter, its placement and displacement, it defines imagination, our senses, our orientation and most memory processes. In *Invisible Man* space is paradoxically associated with one's trials and tribulations, and indeed one's very race and ethnicity. Our protagonist's inferior social standing exposes him to a series of unfortunate events leading to the unlikely decision to seek shelter underground away from the aggression and veil of inequity of the world above. The river of black water he sees while underground is reminiscent of the River Styx, the gateway to the underworld, the land of the dead. His shelter may appear like a scourge, a form of punishment through isolation but this assumption is erroneous. This in-between space is his (re)source of ultimate freedom and analytic contemplation. Our protagonist must answer to no man or abstract entity. He is not part of the world of the living and he has not crossed into the realm of the dead, he is essentially off the grid. But this is by no means a stable situation. He is living on borrowed time in this spatial "dimension" and a return to the outside world is imminent. This must come to pass not to save his life as he is safe and secure just like in his mother's womb. What is at stake here is his sanity as no normal human being can function properly without human interaction. It is said that he who finds solace in solitude is either a god or a beast. His isolation can only be temporary and must be utilized as a medicine against external human aggression. But the cure has the potential to become more harmful than the disease itself if taken in large, unjustified doses. This method of therapy through isolation can also be encountered in the case of the world's most popular comic book character: Superman; whose origins can be traced back to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche's Übermensch. He often took refuge in his famous Fortress of Solitude to find himself, momentarily isolate himself from the world that can sometimes be too much for any one man or even a superman.

Ralph Ellison employs what Michel Foucault patented as heterotopic spaces. History and memory are only given a marginal role regarding these distinct entities. Heterotopic spaces exist outside the rules and norms that predicate the existence of normal topography. These areas of interest reflect reality in accordance with their own internalized doctrines and mechanics that supersede normal renditions of space. These spaces are intentionally created by the author in order to provide his character(s) with an escape from a seemingly impossible and grave situation. A heterotopia is a crisis generated realm that is rarely entered voluntarily. Once inside one of these spaces borders are expunged and the proprietor of this piece of odd real-estate is free to roam, explore and exploit the topos according to his necessities. All laws are suspended in these spaces and no malevolent force can raise claim to even partial jurisdiction. This beneficial turn of events is extremely empowering for the former victim of aggression who becomes the dominus of the terra incognita. Inside the spatial refuge time exists only as an abstract notion, flowing without consequence or residual relevance. It is

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powerless to trigger any effects that may shape the concrete, physical world thus causing a gridlock which may deprive it of influence in the wider context of historic relevance.

Despite his decision to create a realm inside his novel where time is more or less suspended Ralph Ellison recognizes the merits of temporal proliferation in the establishment and empowerment of literary fiction. All novels must bear the heavy burden of the period under which they are written, but the true test of a novelist and his work is the power to not only stand the test of time but also reshape it, gain the ability and nerve to re-justify the past and its gatekeepers while at the same time embracing their prophetic legacy to announce or even actuate events that have not yet come about. By employing a generative method which is strongly rooted in the first person narrative Ellison retraces modern Afro-American history beneath the watchful shelter of calculated anonymity. The protagonist is presented with a number of cultural and historical role-models/trans temporal archetypes which are intended to germinate choices reflecting the purpose of individuals and the contradictory temporal constructs for which they stand. History is severely allegorized, questioning and throwing into doubt archaic protocols of temporal perception towards the establishment of a pertinent conceptual model of competing narratives and cognitive resurgence. Linear chronology is for all intents and purposes placed under strict quarantine allowing multiple temporal instances to calibrate and re-examine conduits of temporal deployment and circulation. Time becomes a guinea pig of narrative experimentation, functioning as an enforcer of literary objectives, authorizing individuals to use whatever means necessary to reach their innate potential and emerge from their hole to fulfil their destiny. The novel is teeming with allusions relating to the past offering testament to Ellison's intention to reverse engineer formulas of development having to do with the main character's intellectual evolution. History in *Invisible Man* does not consist of a singular, well congealed autarchic entity. We are in fact dealing with multiple ramifications and competing illustrations of past ideologies which still influence the present: Marxist dialectics, white supremacy, Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism to name but a few. These convictions, which stem from multiple interpretations of temporal consequence underscore and address a desire to examine the very fabric of time while at the same time taking into consideration the fact that their dispersion and distribution is the result of pre-determined racial, ethnic and social vulnerabilities or susceptibilities. The conviction required to undertake such principles of life has more to do with fate or randomness than well-informed, independent personal choice. The people who embrace such ideologies are often prone to regression, a diachronic approach to life and current events, repetitive angsts and a constant search for conflict and enemies as they seek justification for their own unworthy, shady activities. Ralph Ellison firmly rejects these existential debilitators as they unjustly reduce the complexity of the American paradigm to several poorly understood words shouted from the mouths indoctrinated drones who seek to place limitation on the thoughts and deeds of the free.

Ralph Ellison commences his narrative with temporal interrogations mixed with conflicting elements of time personalization and structure control. The author resorts to elements of anticipatory and pre-determined negative temporality as he confides in his readership, piecing together what is to be expected throughout the novel. Invisibility affects the chronosphere on a perceptive, relative level of interpretation, generating an alternate dimension of awareness that commits to partial reconfigurations. Ellison constructs a relative temporal framework by skilfully relating to a past experience which seems to exhibit explanatory relevance via association and description

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of similar mechanisms of temporal non-conformity: “Once I saw a prizefighter boxing a yokel. The fighter was swift and amazingly scientific. His body was one violent flow of rapid rhythmic action.... But suddenly the yokel, rolling about in the gale of boxing gloves, struck one blow and knocked science, speed, and footwork as cold as a well-digger’s posterior.... The yokel had simply stepped inside of his opponent's sense of time” (Ellison, 1974: 11). Time can thus become a nullifier of individual dynamics, underscoring a self-implied factor of elusive randomness which can determine the outcome of any form of Homo sapiens endeavour. These alternatives to the habitual modes of temporal flow are bound to trigger adaptive mechanisms of coping, developing a state of superior awareness and a consolidated reactive pattern adequate for such unpredictable situations. The novel makes great use of the boomerang metaphor partaking in the investigation of temporal trajectories. Ellison is fully aware of the cyclical nature of history. He exposes various historical figures or events not for our entertainment or amusement; he does it so that he may provide us with viable learning experiences because those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes. Cyclicality is the harbinger of fate and Ellison familiarizes us with his personal brand of circularity when he brings to our attention Norton’s repetitive disbelief and the pseudo-Purgatory that is the Golden Day.

Ralph Ellison’s depictive chronotopic architecture fosters a unique substitutive meld based on the re-sequencing of marginally different factors of space, time and collected experience. His unique intersections enable and disseminate dialectical progression while at the same time discarding gregarious, racially reductive ideologies. His novel is one of deliberate contradictions commandeering creative instruments of mental debt and depth in order to secure a cohesive sense of identity, granting supportive methodology and dignity to the righteous voices of the forgotten carriers of tradition, the wardens of our enlightened collective future.

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