

Nicole LINDENBERG

“WHAT IF MOVIE IS BLISS’S OWN LIFE?”:
THE SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE OF THE MOVIE IN RALPH
ELLISON’S UNFINISHED SECOND NOVEL *THREE DAYS
BEFORE THE SHOOTING...*

Abstract: This article analyzes the episode “Motion Picture” in Ralph Ellison’s unfinished novel *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, which presents the transformation of the protagonist Bliss into the race-baiting ‘white’ Senator Adam Sunraider. In order to understand the significance of the episode it has to be read in the context of Ellison’s nonfiction writing, his numerous unpublished notes on Bliss as Mr. Movie man and the episode itself. Moreover, in his notes, Ellison explicitly interrelates the micro-level of his protagonist’s trajectory with the macro-level of American history, creating an even broader context for the story. In the process of changing from a prospective Reverend to a politician, the hero is influenced decisively by the cinema, a phase in his life that has been largely overlooked in the novel’s reception. This article attempts to close this gap by focusing on the protagonist’s metamorphosis in the cultural field. In addition, it explores the driving force behind this transformation that ensures Bliss’s success both in the field of cultural production and in the political field.

The immense power that the illusionary art of the movie exerts upon the black community can be read as a soft, non-physical power or, what with Pierre Bourdieu we may call symbolic violence. The article highlights that Bliss exploits the community by using the symbolic violence of the movie as well as his own charismatic violence.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison, Second Novel, *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, Notes, Movie, Pierre Bourdieu, Symbolic Violence

© 2018 Nicole Lindenberg (lecturer at Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany) lindenberg@uni-muenster.de

Николь ЛИНДЕНБЕРГ

«ЧТО ЕСЛИ КИНО И ЕСТЬ ЖИЗНЬ БЛИССА?»
СИМВОЛИЧЕСКОЕ НАСИЛИЕ КИНО ВО ВТОРОМ
НЕОКОНЧЕННОМ РОМАНЕ РАЛЬФА ЭЛЛИСОНА
«ЗА ТРИ ДНЯ ДО РАССТРЕЛА»

Аннотация: В статье анализируется эпизод «Кинофильм» из неоконченного романа Ральфа Эллисона «За три дня до расстрела», где изображено превращение Блисса, главного героя, в «белого» сенатора-расиста Адама Санрейдера. Чтобы понять значимость этого фрагмента, его следует интерпретировать в контексте нефикциональных текстов Эллисона, его многочисленных неопубликованных заметок о Блиссе как киномане и самом этом фрагменте. Кроме того, в заметках Эллисона прослеживается отчетливая связь между микроуровнем эволюции его героя и макроуровнем американской истории, что еще больше расширяет контекст повествования. Герой, который из подающего надежды священника превращается в политика, находится под решающим влиянием кинематографа, – черта этого этапа его жизни, которую критики обычно упускают и виду. Данная статья представляет собой попытку восполнить этот пробел и строится вокруг культурной метаморфозы героя. Кроме того, анализируется ключевой фактор этого превращения, обеспечивающий Блиссу успех как в культурном, так и в политическом поле. Огромное воздействие, которое эфемерное искусство кино оказывает на негритянское сообщество, можно толковать как мягкую, нефизическую силу или, если воспользоваться термином Пьера Бурдьё, символическое насилие. В статье прослеживается, как Блисс подчиняет себе местное общество, используя для символического насилия как кино, так и собственную харизму.

Ключевые слова: Ральф Эллисон, второй роман, «За три дня до расстрела», заметки, кино, Пьер Бурдьё, символическое насилие

© 2018 Николь Линденберг (преподаватель, Вестфальский университет имени Вильгельма, Мюнстер, Германия) lindenbergn@uni-muenster.de

“one of my themes is the reinvention and the other is the metamorphosis of the individual soul with thus then goes the theme of willful forgetfulness and determined remembering”¹

In the introduction to his essay collection *Shadow and Act* (1964), Ellison reminisces about his fatherless coming of age in the Territory, i.e. “the Oklahoma of the years between World War I and the Great Depression” [Ellison 2003: 50] and the related search for substitutes. This special place, time and situation in the U.S. led to a very special type of role model, which Ellison and the other self-declared “Renaissance men” [Ellison 2003: 50] found above all in jazz musicians, “the eloquence of some Negro preacher,” [Ellison 2003: 53] and movie stars. “Looking back through the shadows upon this absurd activity,” Ellison reflects,

I realize now that we were projecting archetypes, re-creating folk figures, legendary heroes, monsters even, most of which violated all ideas of social hierarchy and order and all accepted conceptions of the hero handed down by cultural, religious and racist tradition. But we, remember, were under the intense spell of the early movies, the silents as well as the talkies, and in our community, life was not so tightly structured as it would have been in the traditional South—or even in the deceptively ‘free’ Harlem. [Ellison 2003: 53]

This summary is a major element of Ellison’s introduction to what is often called his ‘real autobiography’ and uncovers a distinct parallel between Ellison’s fiction and nonfiction writing. Generally, in the drafts and notes for his second novel, the motion picture plays a crucial role. The orphan Bliss, who was raised by the black minister, Alonzo Zuber Hickman, and who will later rise to become the powerful Senator Adam Sunraider, transforms first into Mr. Movie man. As a movie maker he travels to Oklahoma, where he exploits an all-black community by shooting a movie and begets a further orphan, named Severen. Thus, it is in the Territory and in the field of cultural production where Bliss changes into the race-baiting ‘white’ Senator Adam Sunraider.

¹ Ralph Ellison Archive, Library of Congress, ms. box I:140, folder 1, n.p. (hereafter box and folder information only).

According to his notes, Ellison believed that no single perspective on one person could ever reveal the truth. Consequently, he meant to present three different perspectives of this transformative episode:

MOTION PICTURE

Told about, reported by Cliofus and Love
and by Bliss

I was trying to get in much of everything
the travel, the dream, the flim-flam, the mystery of my identity

[ms. box I:140, folder 1]

In the scholarly edition of Ellison's *Three Days Before the Shooting...* (2010), there are three versions of the episode "MOTION PICTURE": In Part I, Bliss reminisces about his affair as Mr. Movie man with Lavatrice, the heroine of the movie, during his Night talk with Hickman in the hospital after the shooting. Part II uncovers the two reports that Hickman hears when he travels to Oklahoma after receiving an alarming letter from Janey, who writes him after her former foster son, Severen, came back to learn about his father. Hickman listens to Love New and Cliofus, who are both, as Ellison underlines in his notes, historians.² And, as Hickman realizes, he has to put together the two accounts to understand what happened [cf. Ellison 2010: 926].

This article will focus on the third report (Hickman and Love New), "Motion Picture," and I argue that in order to understand its significance it has to be read in the context of Ellison's nonfiction writing, his numerous notes on Mr. Movie man as well as the episode itself. As we can already see by the protagonist's name, used by most Ellison scholars (Bliss/Sunraider instead of Bliss/Mr. Movie man/Sunraider), this important phase in the life of the hero, who in the process of changing from a prospective Reverend to a politician is influenced decisively by the cinema, has been largely overlooked in the novel's reception.³ This article attempts to close this gap by putting its focus on Mr. Movie man, i.e. Bliss's metamorphosis in the cultural field. In addition, I will explore the driving force behind the protagonist's transformation that ensures his success both in the field of cultural production as well as in the political field.

² Already in 1955, Ellison "[s]ends to [Albert] Murray 'a few riffs from Cliofus,' an early draft excerpt from his novel-in-progress" [Callahan, Bradley 2010: x].

³ Of course, there are Ellison scholars who point to the importance of that state in their articles. See for instance Eric J. Sundquist's seminal essay [Sundquist 2016].

Ellison's interest in movies is documented prominently in his nonfiction. In "The Shadow and the Act," Ellison writes that "[t]o appreciate fully the significance of [Faulkner's] *Intruder in the Dust* in the history of Hollywood we must go back to the film that is regarded as the archetype of the modern American motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*." [Ellison 2003: 303]. Ellison points out that this archetype not only consolidated the stereotype of the Black man as the "bestial rapist and grinning, eye-rolling clown" but also emphasizes the strong interrelation between picture and reality, or in other words, the shadow and the act [cf. Ellison 2003: 303-4]. Ellison explains further that "[t]he society made the customers all actors in costume." He concludes that "motion pictures have been one of the strongest instruments for justifying some white Americans' anti-Negro attitudes and practices." [Ellison 2003: 304] The interrelation between American history and the history of film is also addressed in Ellison's fiction, namely in his drafts for his unfinished second novel, which are labelled "Mr. Movie man" or "Motion Picture."

In one of his notes Ellison questions the traditional narrative of American historiography:

First there was Indians, then white folks, then niggers...

No—first there was the country and then there were men. This here country was wide and rolling in places and hilly in places, and lace with rivers in some other places and cool and warm and hot and cold.

It was like a new world, even when I come. Wasn't nothing fixed and wasn't nothing settled and we had the chance to make it liked we wanted it. But first there was Indians and then white folks and Negroes. And that's how the trouble started. [ms. box I:141, folder 6]

This is a poetic summary of the gift, the chance and the 'innocence' of the land, connected to the entire drama, the failure, and the guilt. Further on, Ellison combines the historical drama with the social upheavals of his day: "Camera crew. Negroes paying to perform in a movie. Attempt to play a role. Comic-tragic outcome of incident." He completes the note with the following handwritten sentence about the power of make-believe the movies exert on blacks: "Trick was promise to make Negroes white and have them act white roles for which they pay doubly" [ms. box I:141, folder 6]. Ellison's note reveals his allegorical intention of the "Motion Picture" episode, namely, to emphasize the fundamental issues in American history, which, from the very beginning

threatened the democratic experiment. This is all the more fitting when we keep in mind, as Ellison points out, that history is all about representation, just as is cinematography.

In his 1956 Note Book, Ellison summarizes the plot and its function of the Mr. Movie man episode as follows:

Blisses' purpose (immediate) is to get money to carry him further west. Secondly and psychologically, it is to manipulate possibility and identities of the townspeople and to take revenge upon his own life. And to play! He is the artist as child in this. // So the script, scenario, plot—must 1) tie in with the larger plot, 2) must present the large writ small and in a variation, 3) it must provide townspeople opportunity to lose old identities for something less good and, 4) it must lead to chaos and to birth of Severen. [ms. box I:141, folder 4; qtd. in: Ellison 2010: 975].

Indeed, the entire Mr. Movie man scenario ultimately amounts to the “birth of Severen.” Shortly after Severen’s birth, however, the mother commits suicide and the boy is raised by Janey, until Bliss’ lawyer takes the boy with him to raise him in the ‘white world’. At the age of 26, Severen returns to Oklahoma to question Janey, Love New, and Clifus about his father. This makes Janey so nervous that she contacts Hickman, who in turn travels to Oklahoma to follow the traces of Severen. Hickman, too, talks to Janey, Love New, and Clifus and learns what happened twenty-six years as well as “nine or ten months” ago. [Ellison 2010: 774] In the following, I focus on the report of Love New, who was present when Mr. Movie man arrived with his two companions Donelson and Karp.

According to Love New, “[o]ne day there were three men who drove into town in an automobile [...] and they all looked white. Later we learned that one was a Rebel, one was a Jew, and one was black.” [Ellison 2010: 774-75] The latter is of course Severen’s father, Bliss, in his role as Mr. Movie man. Love New identifies him “as the leader and the shrewdest among them” and adds that “[h]e was as white as them too, even though he said he was black.” [Ellison 2010: 775] They brought with them what Love New describes as “[t]hat lying camera, [...] [t]hat three-legged thing with a single eye which was his owner’s snare and the source of all his illusions.” [Ellison 2010: 772] Hence, Love New seems fully aware of the fact that Bliss’s plan was all about lying and illusion. The connection between the camera and Bliss’s con game is drawn repeatedly in Ellison’s notes, for example, when he inserts the following quote by Ingmar Bergman:

And even today I remind myself with childish excitement that I am really a conjurer, since cinematography is based on deception of the human eye. I have worked it out that if I see a film which has a running time of an hour, I sit through twenty-seven minutes of complete darkness—the blankness between the frames. When I show a film I am guilty of deceit. I use an apparatus which is constructed to take advantage of certain human weakness, an apparatus with which I can sway my audience in a highly emotional manner—make them laugh, scream with fright, smile, believe in fairy stories, become indignant, feel shocked, charmed, deeply moved or perhaps yawn with boredom. Thus I am either an impostor or, when the audience is willing to be taken in, a conjurer. I perform conjuring tricks with apparatus so expensive and so wonderful that any entertainer in history would have given anything to have it. Ingmar Bergman. [ms. box I: 141, folder 5]

Bergman's statement is based on the fact that the early film consists of 24 single pictures in one minute and in between there is always a black blank. Therefore, we have 27 seconds of complete darkness in one minute. There is no 'moving' picture but a deception, and this optic deception is the basis of film. With the help of movement and speed one can pretend that something that is not there is there. Film as a deception of the human eye is used by Ellison to show the fascination of Hollywood as a world of illusion. According to Love New, Mr. Movie man turns the whole town into a world of illusion: right after the three men from the East arrived in the little town, they asked for directions to the movie theater, which Ellison,—probably in reference to Hollywood's most famous Boulevard—named "Sunset," announcing on posters their plan to make a movie [cf. Ellison 2010: 776]. Everyone in town immediately became excited about the movie and nearly all members of the community wanted to play a part in it. Love New remembers not only that from early on the townspeople started to act crazy in front of the camera but also that "when [the goggle eyes] saw how fascinated folks were by what they were doing in front of that one-eyed bastard and how pleased they were in doing it they started ordering them around in a pretty round way. In fact, I've seen men killed just for using the tone of voice they were using." [Ellison 2010: 780]

The episode brings to the fore the immense power that the illusionary art of the movie exerts upon the community. It is a soft, non-physical power or, what with Pierre Bourdieu we may call symbolic violence.⁴ It is the more

⁴ In *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as "a form of power which is exercised on bodies, directly, and as if by magic, without any physical

effective, because it is misrecognized by those who come under its potent spell. In this case, the symbolic violence of the movies is not conceived as a tool of domination, but, to the contrary, as a magic instrument offering a space of recognition commonly denied to blacks. So alluring is the chance of not only watching, but playing a part in the movie that people even succumb to corruption. Symbolic violence is also exerted upon them in the form of charisma utilized by the three con men, especially by their accepted leader, in order to gain full power over the small community.

As another note reveals, Ellison draws a parallel between acting in a movie and playing roles in American democracy: “Bliss realizes through his ‘movie’ career that all Americans are ‘actors’ and that the most powerful of American actors are our Presidents.” [ms. box I:138, folder 5] The connection Ellison establishes between the fields of culture and politics foreshadows Bliss’s further development in the political field and uncovers the allegorical nature of the entire episode, or even Ellison’s entire project as being intertwined with the American democratic experiment. Ellison obviously discusses not only movie actors and a con game in the cultural field. Rather, by representing the political system in the form of a film set, he poses the question whether the fundamental ideas of democracy have insurmountable limits. In opposition to the ideal of democracy with its basic assumption that all people are equal, the actors in the field of politics partake in too much power. Ellison addresses this problem in another note close to the above, which spells out the limits of the democratic system more explicitly:

Sunraider is potentiality, a symbol of possibility.

His manipulation of the movies plays upon the townpeoples – sense of mystery, their own and that of their section their state and their country.

He symbolizes ‘the promise’ of the ideal democracy which cannot be kept.

A symbol of the mystery at work beneath the order imposed by racism. [ms. box I:138, folder 5]

Again, Ellison clearly interrelates the macro-level of American history with the micro-level of his protagonist’s trajectory. A perfect example in Love New’s report is the moment when the community starts to discuss the movie. Only a few protagonists actually question the entire endeavor. Interestingly, two of the sceptics are the outsider Love New, and Editor, who represents

constraint” [Bourdieu 2000:169]. In *Masculine Domination*, he defines it as a “gentle and often invisible violence” [Bourdieu 2001:35].

the only newspaper of the town and, thus, the media in general. It is precisely the editor, as a representative of the media, who asks about the content of the movie, and he is silenced in turn by means of symbolic violence. The “self-promoter” Jonas Ironwine insists that the movie would be a great chance to promote the town and the actors: “what’s important is that they’re making a movie right here, in our part of town, with *our* people doing the acting.” [Ellison 2010: 781] Editor tries to remind Ironwine, however, that especially after *The Birth of a Nation* the important question to ask is “but acting what roles?” [Ellison 2010: 781] Thereupon Ironwine gets mad and threatens him with a boycott of his paper. While Editor is not at all intimidated by this threat, the townspeople in their excitement of being in a movie simply “forget [...] about Editor’s question. So things kept building.” [Ellison 2010: 781] The fact that *The Birth of a Nation* is mentioned in Ellison’s essay and in his drafts for his second novel underlines again how important it is to read Ellison’s fiction and nonfiction together and furthermore indicates that the episode reveals not only the weaknesses of the community in Ellison’s fictional novel but the limits of a democratic system.

Love New’s report also discloses how Mr. Movie man was able to further increase his power in his role as Prophet Eddy Shaw or Mr. Eddy Shaw Prophet. One Sunday morning, Mr. Movie man suddenly lay on the front steps of the community church and ultimately managed to take over and dominate the sermon. Furthermore, he points out that Bliss obviously internalized the State Negroes’ “*style*,” “*movement*,” and “*sound*” [Ellison 2010: 790]. Yet, simultaneously, Love New remembers that “by now Prophet looks even whiter than he did on the streets with that camera.” In taking over the church service, Mr. Movie man draws on his experience as a child preacher in Hickman’s community. Turning himself into a Prophet to extend his power by exerting symbolic violence on the congregation, he successfully attempts to trigger the roots of hope black people had when they came into the Territory. In reality, however, as Love New explains, the townspeople got disappointed and realized that life in the Territory was not so different from what it was in the South. The great expectations with which they arrived in Oklahoma had vanished, but deep down, according to Love New, some hope was remaining. With his performance in the church, Mr. Movie man obviously managed to tie in with and capitalize on this hope again.

The next day, he completed his powerful plan by showing samples of some shootings they had taken so far in the Sunset, and Love New explains why the State Negroes, even though they looked like ghosts on the screen, got even more crazy during and after the show: “[T]hey seemed to

confuse those shadows on the screen with reality. It was as though seeing themselves ballooned on the screen finally convinced them they were really living in a new state, in a real town, and amongst other real people.” Love New explicates to Hickman why all human beings have difficulties to really know their own self and that this difficulty derives from the divide between body and spirit. Therefore, he says, human beings “depend upon others to help them define who they are. This is true for all tribes and that leaves them uneasy. And for State folks who are black this is especially urgent, because they think one thing of themselves while their white brothers insist that they’re exactly the opposite.” Love New concludes that the magic of the motion picture worked through a combination of enlightening through a change of perspective and “a sense of security” [Ellison 2010: 794]: “seeing themselves move let them know who they were even though they’d been reduced to overblown shadows” [Ellison 2010: 794]. Love New points to the basis of this illusion when he underlines that people “liked it even though those of our color came out looking like ghosts. I understand it had something to do with the film, which was made with white-skin folks in mind and white folks only” [Ellison 2010: 794]. This remark brings to light the only one who will actually profit from the movie. However, since Prophet managed to turn reality into a movie, the people did not at all see this, but, to the contrary, started to do everything they could to help finance the movie. Love New summarizes: “And with that the sly men from the East had it made.” [Ellison 2010: 795]

In another note, Ellison points to Bliss’s original reasons to start with the con game of turning reality into a movie:

Bliss wants time to be fluid so that there is no possibility of not finding his mother. He would transform life into a motion picture in which he is always moving and always playing parts, or roles.

And I found that in the movies the she he they those stars underwent death and resurrection and extended hope as constantly as in your sermons and in mine on mondaytuesdaywendesdaythursdayfridaysatday and Sun’s day, the next time when the hero dies he is never dead, you taught me and I taught them and when the precious one is lost it’s never forever, you taught me, and when the found is lost ½--when the found is lost –Lord, Lord, why didst Thou, Lord? [ms. box I:141, folder 4]

What Ellison summarizes in the first three lines of this note is exactly what Bliss does with the community. He transcends the possibilities of the

cinema. One goes into a theater house to distance oneself from reality. Bliss, however, turns reality into cinema. We see the fascination of movement and the trickster as a movie-man who turns an entire town into a movie setting and the townspeople into actors.

Interestingly, in the same note, Ellison combines cinematography and religion, just as Mr. Movie man as Prophet, had literally done in the church. Bliss uses to his advantage, what according to Hickman is of course a sin, as the latter explains to Bliss when he takes the boy for the first time into a movie house. Movies oftentimes not only portray false images of reality but they also provide a platform for satisfying desires and acknowledging anxieties, and thus, as it were, open an avenue to the unconscious of the individual and society.

The screen serves as a projection surface produced technically by the projector, but in a metaphorical sense created by the desires of the viewers. As the viewers enter the world of illusion thereby escaping from reality, they, according to Hickman, commit a sin. However, since the sin comes in the form of entertainment, the fascination of the production and the reception of the moving picture is imparted to the actors. The excitement to participate in this surrogate world easily carries over to the actors. They are captivated to such a degree that they forget to question the roles allocated to them and they fail to realize that it is through the enticing promises of the movie that they are kept in the state of oppression, that the normative order of society is perpetuated in the setting. This, again, is the symbolic violence of the movie.

Therefore, it is quite fitting when Love New describes the effect on the people having to pay (doubly) to participate in the movie: "Pretty soon folks were struggling to see who'd raise the most money. Friendships and families were broken, pawnshops emptied of dresses, military uniforms, swords, and badges—which they hoped to use as costumes. Maids and cooks, chauffeurs and butlers got fired for sneaking out the best evening clothes of the white States folks they worked for to wear in front of that camera." [Ellison 2010: 795] In his notes, Ellison further emphasizes the attraction role-playing has for the townspeople. It consists not only in assuming important parts in American history and rising socially in American society, but also, and very importantly, in seizing power:

The movie-making section presents Bliss's exploitation of the townspeople's fascination with role-playing, and he senses, vaguely, that they are exercising symbolically their freedom to play upon American possibility. And this despite the political and social circumscription of their lives by racial

prejudice. They grasp the opportunity for projecting themselves as historical personages, as participants in the drama of American history, as heroes in actions that were unsuccessful. Participation in this movie without a plot allows them to project themselves in numerous fanciful roles. They make of their camera-caught images work of art. They strut, they satirize, put-down higher up and raise up those who are at the bottom of the pile. They dress themselves beyond their social class by taking over the regalia of those socially above them. They even hold an illegal ball in the blue room of the state capitol building. And in Clifofus' version of the incident they even enact their comments on the moving picture as a form in which or through which aggressive personalities seize power. Thus Miss Brilliantine takes over the role of the leading lady, dethrones the hero, and in turn is dethroned by the lean hound. [ms. box I:140, folder 2]

As Ellison explains in the same note, engaging in movie-making has great consequences for Bliss as well. He comes to understand that movies and politics are alike in shaping identities and that it is possible to “create a political identity out of racial prejudice” which will be based on “social power”:

The point to stress has to do with what Bliss learns from this scam, and this has to do with the relationship between the movies and politics, and the American's uncertainty as to his identity as an area exploited by the movies and politics alike. ...He ties this in with his seduction of Severen's mother, which gives him a sense of creative potency. He realizes that he doesn't have to know who his parents were, and that he can create a political identity out of racial prejudice, and that this will not be questioned because it is centered not in biology and class, but in social power. [ms. box I:140, folder 2]⁵

In the following passage, Ellison draws the parallel between the micro-level of the hero's individual experience and the macro-level of the history of the state of Oklahoma:

⁵ “The movie-making is a test in preparing for politics. Bliss wishes to see if he has the drive to play upon the hopes of people in a way similar to the manipulations exercised by politicians. He is a provider of circuses and a trickster. Thus he will use racism not because he is a racist, but because in race is the source of political power in the U.S.A. The movies improvise acceptable American myths which shore up the social scheme wherein Negroes are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. – He tests himself with Severen's mother to see if he can do what thousands of white southerners have done.” [ms. box I:140, folder 1]

The action of the motion picture sequence must imitate the action of the settling of the state and the act of social creation which this implies.

But the main thing here is the consciousness of the hero.

They have been not only humiliated after the war of the states, but have been hungry and Rine [=Bliss aka Mr. Movie man aka Prophet] comes preaching the new identity, both in church and in the movie, or rather with the movie as agency. He is thus a 'savior' a cultural hero—although he hates them and is amused by their belief in these two almost religious motives. Thus it is inevitable that he takes the girl and betrays her for thus does he consummate his role of savior-betrayer. And thus is become Severen's role to kill him [...] [ms. box I:140, folder 1]

As these notes reveal, integral to Bliss's character is a deep ambivalence at whose core there is a lack of veracity. According to Love New, truth can neither be found in the movies nor in the narrative of American history:

Hickman, since I made peace with this town and came here to live I've sat through a thousand movies just waiting for simple justice to be shown, not done. Because I have no hope for that, but just shown in the moving shadows. Just unfolded in the dark places where no man has to look his neighbor in the eye. All these years I've been waiting for a little of the truth to be told. But no, even in the places of play, of make-believe, it's all been lies, compromise, and equivocation.

“And what do they say, how do they tell it? Hell, the red man was a thief and a savage without proper rights to his own country. The North was weak, hypocritical, and pompous, the gray boys, the Rebs, all heroes, and the black man childlike and a coward. And even we of the People are expected to accept this version of history and despise ourselves and our ancestors! [Ellison 2010: 815]

Love New portrays himself and other Natives as outsiders who are independent and thus able to see through the lies. “But there are State folks of my complexion like that, people who swallow the lie whole because they know no other way. Or who can only counter the State Whites 'Aye' with a State blacks' 'Nay'; lie for lie, black blindness for white blindness.” [Ellison 2010: 816] Comparing Native with white American mechanisms of interaction, Love New observes that “all big enclosures must contain cougars and snakes and coyotes and buzzards. But in your enclosure they wear masks and costumes. Many are not what they pretend—By their acts ye shall know them, Yao! But

a heap of times they hide their actions with words and disguise their stink with the powerful perfume of money.” [Ellison 2010: 816]

In another note, Ellison refers again explicitly to his own biography when he connects the lies Love New addresses to the feeling of guilt, which, according to him, is part of the national consciousness vis-à-vis the victims of American history:

One thing that history has taught me is that wrongs done by a people against a people are never forgotten. For one thing it develops guilt in the wrongdoer which he can never forget nor quite quit rationalizing; for another, it is always remembered and seldom forgiven by the victim. Or, should the victim be completely liquidated or banished it will be remembered by those who find themselves in the role of agents of the victims; as, for instance, Negroes find themselves in a similar role, of victims, as the Indians.

I am still outraged by what was done to the Indians, although despite my blood ties with them I am culturally of Western Civilization. The outrages, forgotten by most of us (we, hardly less than the bolshivicks, cannot afford to be historically honest) must nevertheless be fully acknowledged and atoned. But of course this will never happen and in the end we shall be humbled in the dust. Lincoln, incidently, took part in the Black Hawk War, during which black hawk led his people back across the treaty boundary to plant corn, for which his party was attacked

Lincoln saw slavery during his trips to New Orleans and saw scalped white men during the Black Hawk War. This period was also marked by the removal of the Florida and Georgia Indians to Oklahoma and points West. My point is that guilt was part of the national consciousness, indeed, a dual guilt arising out of the treatment of Negroes and Indians. [ms. box I:140, folder 1]

Ellison’s critique of the American way of grappling with the nation’s past is based then on the psychological concept of collective repression. It creates lies in American historiography and guilt in national consciousness. “It is most American to put the past behind one. The irony is that the past doesn’t go away.” [ms. box I:140, folder 1]

Most interestingly, in parenthesis, Ellison adds the following sentence: “(This society is not likely to become free of racism, thus it is necessary for Negroes to free themselves by becoming their idea of what a free people should be.)” [ms. box I:140, folder 1] In another note, Ellison presents the two main protagonists of his novel as representing different ideas about how freedom can be gained:

Hickman's idea: That having tried to raise Bliss as a God-fearing Negro the boy would grow up and use his gifts and color as a true agent of democracy.

Sunraider's idea: That he will shock, antagonize and outrage Negroes into political maturity.

N.B.: The white makeup, blond wigs, stripped trousers, tailcoats and top hats—which were used in church and on other ceremonial occasions—turn up in the movie scene. [ms. box I:140, folder 2]

This note indicates that there was perhaps a part of Sunraider that wanted to fulfill Hickman's hope in a certain way. However, the more Bliss acted the con man by tricking and exploiting the community, the more he turned into one. So, ultimately, the cultural field of movie-making, Bliss's stage as Mr. Movie man, becomes the training ground for his metamorphosis into the race-baiting Senator Adam Sunraider. In Love New's report we can see how Bliss exploits the community by using the symbolic violence of the movie as well as his own charismatic violence. Movie-making allows Bliss to systematically and constantly blur the borders between past and present and fiction and reality. In another report to Hickman about Bliss, namely a letter from another observer, Millsap, the latter asks: "Therefore I had to ask myself where illusion ended and reality began, and what would happen if he ever stopped acting and decided to limit himself to a single role?" [Ellison 2010: 705]. The reader already knows the answer to this question: playing the role of a Confederate officer in a movie (as is revealed in Millsap's report) or his role as Mr. Movie man, manipulating the community, anticipates Bliss's final part, when in contrast to "his endless con games" he "operated in an actual job" [Ellison 2010: 705] of the publicly respected and politically powerful U.S. senator. In his last role, Sunraider gains full recognition and prestige, or, in Bourdieu's terminology, symbolic capital. It provides him with yet another variety of symbolic violence, namely the power of definition, which enhances the power of constructing reality and finally, by extension, history. Endowed with this full-fledged power he successfully contributes to the stability of domination.

REFERENCES

[Bourdieu 2001] – Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*, transl. Richard Nice. Oxford: Polity, 2001.

[Bourdieu 2000] – Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations*, transl. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2000.

[Callahan, Bradley 2010] – Callahan, John, Bradley, Adam. “General Introduction.” In Ellison, Ralph. *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, eds. John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley. New York: Random House, 2010: XV-XXIX.

[Ellison 2003] – Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison (1995)*, ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Modern Library, 2003.

[Ellison 2010] – Ellison, Ralph. *Three Days Before the Shooting...: The Unfinished Second Novel*, ed. by John Callahan and Adam Bradley. New York: Random House, 2010.

[Sundquist 2016] – Sundquist, Eric. “Ralph Ellison in His Labyrinth.” In *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Marc Connor and Lucas Morel. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016: 117-41.