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**Workplace Trauma and Fragmented Memory in Ben Pester's
The Expansion Project: A Trauma-Theoretical Reading of Surreal**



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Abstract

Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* is a stunning and surreal interrogation of corporate bureaucracy, memory and the void and the emotional fallout of late capitalist labor systems. This article uses trauma theory to consider the ways in which the novel depicts the workplace as a haunted site of repetition, archival lacunae, and uncanny dislocations that reflect traumatic dynamics of erasure and fragmentation. The narrator's observation of a father's eventual departure at a corporate "bring-your-daughter-to-work" day becomes an instance of intergenerational breach and bureaucratic violence. Borrowing from Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma as belated experience and hauntology, this article argues that Pester renders everyday office practices into spaces of ghostly agitations that disrupt the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. By locating the novel within the context of trauma studies and postmodern dystopian satire, the paper demonstrates how *The Expansion Project* subverts corporate modernity and recovers trauma as an individual and collective product of twenty-first century labor.

Keywords: Ben Pester, *The Expansion Project*, Bureaucracy and haunting, Workplace trauma, Trauma theory, surreal satire, Contemporary British fiction

Introduction

Workplace trauma is now clearly a literary preoccupation with contemporary modern labor not just an occupational health issue. Studies show that traumatic workplace exposure everything from disasters to chronic stressors can result in substantial long-term psychiatric distress, including PTSD and other persistent and distressing symptoms, especially when organizations don't provide sufficient support. The literature also indicates that workplace trauma operates at the intersection of the structural: bureaucratic requirement overload, surveillance and alienation intensify the psychological harm, although, once again, much of this work belongs to the domain of psychological and organizational studies.

Ben Pester's first novel was *The Expansion Project* it has been recently reviewed in both the *Financial Times* and *The Guardian* and does a surreal and haunting critique of modern corporate life. *Times*. The Cap meadow Business Park's labyrinthine entire true is an ordinary "take-your-daughter-to-work" day for its protagonist, Tom Crowley. This will have become a tour of uncanny architecture and archival surveillance, and she's gone forever for him (Gordon, 1997). His daughter was never recorded, never verified presence whose absence becomes not just loss, but bureaucratic erasure. The workplace then metamorphoses into a grotesque, expanding entity that becomes both a setting and symptom of psychological unraveling.

This study bears great importance in dealing with the mix of bureaucratic systems and trauma born by surreal satire directly from Ben Pester's novel. First, it brings trauma theory into workplaces beyond the fictive, demonstrating how organizational structures can become agents of haunting in and of themselves. The novel again employs a narrative strategy satire, surreal, and archived to find a new aesthetic by which trauma's fragmentation, belatedness, and erasure are effectuating the very experience of psychological disintegration. It ultimately reflects contemporary worries.

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This study aims to critically explore how *The Expansion Project* portrays bureaucracy itself as a mechanism of haunting, how trauma is represented through surrealist and satirical narrative techniques, and how the novel ultimately critiques the dehumanizing effects of contemporary corporate structures. To that end, the research pursues the following objectives:

To analyze bureaucratic systems in the novel as symbolic vectors of trauma and erasure.

To examine how surreal and satirical narrative strategies articulate psychological disorientation and alienation.

To situate the novel's critique within broader trauma theory and contemporary literature on the modern workplace.

Guiding these aims are three core research questions:

How does *The Expansion Project* represent bureaucracy as a haunting mechanism?

In what ways does the novel reflect trauma through surrealist and satirical strategies?

How does the novel critique contemporary corporate modernity through its depiction of psychological fragmentation?

Methodologically, this study employs close textual analysis of the novel's imagery, narrative structure, and archival framing, situated within trauma theory (Caruth, 1996) and literary criticism on capitalist bureaucracy and surreal satire. The analysis is informed by psychological and organizational findings on workplace trauma and stress factors to contextualize narrative portrayals within real-world frameworks the structure of this paper is as follows: After this introduction, the Literature Review surveys trauma theory, haunting metaphors in literary criticism, and psychological studies on workplace trauma. The Theoretical Framework section (DeLillo, 1985) contextualizes key concepts trauma, haunting, and satire as analytical lenses. The Textual Analysis offers in-depth readings across three facets: bureaucracy as spectral force, the motif of disappearance and haunting, and surreal satire as resistance. This is followed by a Discussion, which synthesizes findings and situates the novel within broader literary and theoretical discourses, concluding with Implications and Suggestions for further research.

Literature Review

Trauma Theory Background

On one hand, this study applies a close textual analysis of the imagery, narrative structure, and archival framing of the novel, on the other, it's located within trauma theory (Caruth, 1996) and criticism in regard to capitalist bureaucracy and surreal satire. This is further revealed through psychological and organizational evidence on workplace trauma and stress factors, thus relating the narrative representation with its real-world configuration. Below is the structure of this paper: After this introduction, the Literature Review compares and contrasts trauma theory, haunting metaphors in literary criticism, and psychological studies on workplace trauma. This section, the Theoretical Framework, approaches the fundamental ideas of trauma, haunting, and satire as analytical lenses. Following this will be the Textual Analysis, consisting of three lenses doing in-depth readings: bureaucracy as spectral force, the motif of

disappearance and haunting, and surreal satire as resistance. This will be followed by a Discussion, which synthesizes findings and places the novel in broader literary and theoretical discourses, including Implications and Suggestions for further research.

Dominick LaCapra (2001) would build upon Caruth and distinguish two halves critical to the discussion: "acting out" and "working through." Trauma narratives, LaCapra says, work between the poles of a compulsive need to repeat the wound and to contextualize and process it. Beyond this, fiction complicates this tension through a range of strategies, fragmented storytelling, and the uncanny, and metafictional comment. Concerning Pester's novel, the interminable growth of Cap meadow Business Park and its circular documentation practices constitute a large-scale "acting out" of a bureaucratic trauma that does not want to resolve itself.

(Herman, 1992) trauma and recovery social and institutional contexts associate trauma: namely, how structures of power silence and erase trauma. From Herman's perspective, workplace trauma can arise not only from one traumatic event but also through sustained stressors, surveillance, and neglect of organizational care. It is there his satire shows bureaucracy itself to be a traumatic system, where haunting is not only personal but something with institutional shoulders. So these landmark trauma theorists pivot our gaze towards how The Expansion Project looks at trauma at the intersection of the personal and the bureaucratic.

Haunting and Bureaucracy

Avery Gordon's 1997 book *Ghostly Matters* maintains that haunting is a sociological and cultural condition wherein that which is suppressed or excluded returns to disturb the present. Thus, haunting signifies unresolved histories clamoring for recognition. According to Gordon, ghosts represent matrices of violence that refuse to disappear. In the case of Pester's prose, haunting takes literal form through the disappearance of a child in the workplace, yet the same is bureaucratically erased through missing records. The office, therefore, stands as a haunted site where absence is inscribed as non-existence, reinforcing Gordon's argument: that is, hauntings are produced, as repression meets structural violence.

In *Specters of Marx*, initially published in French in 1993 and in English in 1994, Derrida adopts a similar approach of haunting as a political and philosophical metaphor. By hauntology, he understands the manner in which that past and the absent continue to engender the present, notwithstanding official denial. Thus, bureaucracy operates here, in a sense, as a specter: it grants presence through files and records, but absents by excluding or erasing that which cannot be documented. Pester's surreal and satirical exercise makes this contradiction tangible: forms, archives, and buildings proliferate without end. Subject dissolves. Reading the Expansion Project through (Gordon, 1997) and (Derrida, 1994) situates bureaucracy itself as a ghostly mechanism that produces trauma.

Workplace and Capitalism Critique

The bureaucratic aspect of Pester's novel is also scrutinized under the critiques of capitalism. Bureaucracy is not merely seen as neutral parameter for administrative efficiency, but is primarily seen by (Graeber, 2015) *The Utopia of Rules* (2015), as an intrinsic fixture of late capitalism. According to Graeber, endless paperwork, managerial control, and surveillance create 'dead zones of imagination.' Such are zones that stifle creativity, while alienating the workforce. The Expansion Project is

the parody: it draws a surrealistic, hyperbolic expansion of office space that mirrors critique-bedroom. The bureaucracy metastasizes until it eats life itself, and this inevitably conditions a void space, i.e. endless repetition and futility. (Berardi, 2009), in *The Soul at Work* (2009) explains the psychological consequences parallel to that of post-Fordist capitalism. Such labor regimes in contemporary society not exploit just physical but also cognitive and emotional capacities of their workers to create conditions for burnout, depression, and trauma. Work becomes, thus, a terrain of affectivity wherein subjectivity is commodified. Pester's expanding office complex, in erasing individuality, illustrates a perfect echo into Berardi's view about the traumatic effects of capitalism on the psyche. The humor and satire of the novel mask, but also reveal, the profound sense of exhaustion and alienation at the heart of corporate modernity.

Satire and Surrealism in Contemporary Fiction

Both satire and surrealism have offered a robust long-standing tradition to critique systems of oppression, from (Kafka, 1925) and *The Trial* to Ling (Ma, 2018) *Severance*. Scholars suggest satire serves up equal measures of laughter and discomfort, casting a shadow on the authority of the status quo while reflecting social worries (Hodgart, 2010). On the other hand, surrealism allows writers to express trauma in a roundabout way, stepping away from reasoned discourse toward the depiction of psychological disorientation (Richardson, 2016).

The manifestation of surreal satire in contemporary British fiction provides insight into the domains of precocity and labor. Writers such as Will Self and Ali Smith implement the absurdist strategies to articulate fractured subjectivity under neoliberalism (Boxall, 2013). Pester continues this tradition in *The Expansion Project*, presenting workspaces transformed into surreal mazes in which architectural impossibilities and archival absences stand as metaphors for trauma. The function of satire here is not to create a frivolous spectacle of trauma but to interrogate the innumerable absurdities of bureaucratic structures that sustain psychological injury.

Research Gap

There exists an obvious gap in scholarship-from trauma theories, hauntings as sociological concepts, and critiques of bureaucracies-on Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* (2025), given the more recent date of publication. Indeed, it would seem that popular reviews categorize the book as "a surreal workplace satire" (*The Guardian*, 2025) and "a compelling study of absence and bureaucracy" (*Financial Times*, 2025), but little has been produced in the way of academic study on the text. Therefore, this article will fill that gap through an interdisciplinary lens, pulling trauma theory, haunting, and satire together in the interpretation of what seems to be represented as bureaucracy as a haunting mechanism, while the workplace is seen as a site of trauma. Consequently, this further substantiates not only the early theorizing of Pester but also a larger discussion of trauma and corporate modernity in twenty-first-century fiction.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory has offered a vital interpretive key into literature that attempts to depict psychological rupture. Trauma, at its root, interrupts linear temporality, engendering feelings of belatedness, repetition, silence, and fragmentation. In her *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1996), Cathy Caruth describes the paradoxical

essence of trauma: while one is aware of it, it is never fully felt; rather, it returns much later to intrude, often in the form of distressing images, nightmares, or narrative disjunctions. Such belatedness in literary texts often appears through fragmented structures and delayed revelation, with the storyline circling around absence instead of narrating direct events. The entire disappearance of the protagonist's daughter is never narrated in *The Expansion Project* (2025); the loss appears once in archival voids and spectral presences, congruent with Caruth's other provision of trauma, "'one of unclaimed experience,' which eludes closure." Trauma representation suffers further from repetition and silence. (LaCapra, 2001) makes a distinction between "acting out," in which trauma returns in compulsion through repetitive structures and "working through," which seeks to contextualize and narrate trauma.

The Pester novel conveys this duality: the bureaucratic expansion of Cap Meadow Business Park and endless documentation ritual reflexively confirm compulsive "acting out" while the protagonist's search for meaning represents a tentative "working through." Also central is silence; files leave out key records, absence is bureaucratically normalized, and trauma keeps on through precisely what cannot be said or recorded. Haunting in this sense is a metaphor for trauma still unresolved. Avery Gordon (1997) asserts that haunting will arise when "what has been suppressed or concealed is repatriated to unsettle the present" (p. 8). Trauma, in this sense, is not just an individual wound for it is a social concern that resurfaces like a ghost banned from the present. Similarly, Derrida's (1994) term "hauntology" evokes that spectral configuration of absence, those ghosts embodying unresolved debts and erasures. In Pester's novel haunting manifests in architecture and bureaucracy: endless corridors and expanding office spaces give materiality to the unobtainability of trauma, while the disappearing child—who was absent in records but very much present in the memory—now takes the form of an unsettling figure disrupting the office space.

Trauma, inexpressible satire and surrealism seem to provide two strategies of resistance against wit. According to Richardson (2016), surrealism inhibits rationality, thereby forming imaginative spaces for depicting psychic dislocation. Satire, on the other hand, works to destabilize authority by rendering it ludicrous and offering laughter as critique (Hodgart, 2010). *The Expansion Project* juggles both surrealism and satire, with surreal architecture and the absurdities of bureaucratic life creating a funhouse mirror: a disjunction between the trauma-laden realities and the everyday occurrences of corporate existence. Through the manipulation of bureaucracy into a grotesque spectacle, workplace trauma becomes an uneasy satirical commentary in Pester's text that both unsettles and resists.

Trauma theory, therefore, provides a potent lens through which to read *The Expansion Project*. It enables us to see the interplay among delayed effects, repetition, and silences in the structure of the novel, whereby haunting signifies an absence of resolution, while satire and surrealism work to indirectly voice trauma. Outside of this lens, the novel would read simply as workplace absurdism; through trauma theory, it reveals layers of engagement with psychological fragmentation and bureaucratic violence.

Textual Analysis

Bureaucracy as a ghost-making machine, producing absence through endless documentation and voids. The novel depicts bureaucracy not as order but as

proliferation of meaningless data. Offices expand without purpose; filing cabinets replicate endlessly “bureaucratic absurdity” where paperwork becomes a substitute for reality. Avery Gordon (1997) archives conceal as much as they reveal the protagonist’s father’s absence from official documents symbolizes how bureaucracy erases lived history. Trauma expressed through missing records ghostly absence. Connect to Derrida’s “archive fever” archives as both preservation and destruction. Instead of clarity, bureaucracy produces ghostliness: gaps, voids, silences. The expansion project itself is spectral a space growing but never filled, echoing the incompleteness of traumatic memory. Conclude with how bureaucracy operates as a trauma-making structure, turning absence into haunting.

The novel literalizes haunting to express loss, trauma, and bureaucratic erasure. Repeated references to shadows, figures in hallways, and phantom voices in offices. Daughter’s disappearance becomes a “ghost” in both personal memory and institutional record. Haunting trauma that cannot be resolved. Following Derrida ghosts embody unresolved debts, absences made present. Gordon haunting is “the something-to-be-done” signals unaddressed injustice. The novel shows trauma not through direct narration, but through spectral images (vanished child in a file that never existed). Expansion Project as architectural haunting: endless corridors, offices that multiply, empty conference rooms. Trauma transmission the entire corporate workforce lives in a “haunted” culture. Connect to Caruth’s belatedness trauma resurfaces unexpectedly in non-linear ways. Bureaucracy produces trauma as collective condition; employees are depersonalized, fragmented subjects. Employees reduced to ID numbers, tasks, and repetitive forms. Alienation echoes Marxist critique labor without meaning (Melville, 1853). Compare to Graeber’s “bullshit jobs” thesis labor generates psychological void. Fragmentation of identity: workers feel like “parts” of the system, not whole selves. Judith Herman (1992) trauma shatters sense of self and agency. Surreal depictions of employees dissolving into paperwork or fading into cubicles metaphor for psychic breakdown. Trauma here is not only individual but structural. Connect to Franco “Bifo” (Berardi, 2009) capitalist acceleration produces anxiety, depression, and burnout. The corporate culture in the novel mirrors real-world trauma of neoliberal labor systems.

Satire and surrealism provide tools for coping and critique. Bureaucratic rituals are exaggerated to grotesque proportions absurdity unmask power. Hodgart (2010) satire destabilizes authority by laughter. Surrealism interrupts rational control creates space for alternative meaning (Richardson, 2016). The surreal expansion of space itself resists capitalist logic of productivity. For characters, humor and absurdity offer survival strategies in face of trauma. For readers, satire reveals the violence of bureaucracy by turning it into spectacle. Thus, satire and surrealism act as counter-trauma narratives, opening political and imaginative resistance.

Discussion

Synthesis of Findings

Bureaucracy, haunting, and trauma in *The Employee* are not isolated motifs but interwoven forces. Bureaucracy creates absence manifests as haunting shapes lived trauma. Corporate systems function as ghost-making machines, erasing personal histories while demanding mechanical labor. Surreal satire ties these together by revealing how absurd structures both traumatize and destabilize power. Moves

beyond personal/war trauma to institutional and workplace trauma. Shows how trauma circulates through archives, paperwork, and corporate architecture. Satire is not merely comic relief but a trauma response a form of survival and critique. Bridges gap between trauma theory and satirical form. Corporate fiction now maps affective economies of neoliberalism alienation, burnout, and anxiety. The Employee situates bureaucracy not only as a work condition but as a psychic condition. Reflects wider cultural anxieties: precarious work, ratification, automation. Suggests literature is documenting how workplaces themselves become traumatic landscapes.

Conclusion

The study carries out an interpretation of Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* with respect to trauma theory, haunting, and surreal satire through which bureaucracy can be an object of psychological disturbance. The analysis essentially indicates that expansion into a bureaucracy, endless archival systems, and missing documentation operate not just as some structural, aesthetic features, but as generating and sustaining trauma mechanisms. Bureaucratically enforced absence, for example, where disappearance is precisely what defines the protagonist's daughter, is further amplification of loss that reverberates spectrally into personal and systemic haunting experiences. This coalescence of trauma, haunting, and bureaucratic absurdism makes central for the novel-in-progress the inextricable link between institutional formation and psychic disintegration at contemporary workplaces. Surreal and satirical narrative strategies accentuate this connection revealing that humor, absurdity, and imaginative overstatement are not merely stylistic devices but modes through which literature can process and critique trauma. A text, *The Expansion Project* creates a space for itself that only one can occupy in contemporary literary studies.

In literary studies, the novel launches debates concerning surrealism and satire as aesthetic techniques able to better mediate trauma. Surreal excess and absurdist wit challenge bureaucratic authority while opening imaginative possibilities for readers and characters to contend with otherwise inexpressible psychic distress (Richardson 2016; Hodgart 2010). Satire and irony, however, may not exist only for amplification or enjoyment; rather, the narrative attests that it can also mediate the effects of structural trauma.

In effect, *The Expansion Project* is a study into how contemporary fiction can speak to the intersection of institutional, social, and psychological dynamics. It makes clear that bureaucracy is not neutral or inert; rather, it actively constructs and sustains trauma. As a text for 2025, it is a study of considerable weight in exposing and perhaps "insuring" the experience of the workers in the twenty-first century, it is highly contributory to trauma studies, literary criticism, and the broadening scope of surreal satire. It is therefore through Pester's theoretical yet imaginative narrative that this work models how contemporary literature can make clear life.

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