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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

This article examines Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* through the lens of trauma theory, arguing that the novel represents corporate bureaucracy as a haunting mechanism that produces psychological fragmentation, erasure, and alienation. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's concept of belated trauma, along with critical perspectives on bureaucracy, haunting, and surreal satire, the study explores how the novel transforms the modern workplace into a site of uncanny repetition, archival absence, and emotional disorientation. Through close textual analysis, the article shows that Pester uses surreal and satirical narrative strategies not merely for comic effect but to expose the dehumanizing structures of contemporary corporate life. The disappearance at the center of the narrative becomes both a personal trauma and a sign of bureaucratic violence, revealing how institutional systems erase lived experience. By linking workplace culture to trauma, haunting, and late-capitalist critique, this study positions *The Expansion Project* as an important literary intervention in discussions of modern labor, psychological distress, and contemporary British fiction.

Keywords: Bureaucracy and Haunting, Workplace Trauma, Surreal Satire, Contemporary British Fiction, *The Expansion Project*

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, ranging from disasters to chronic stressors, can result in substantial long-term psychiatric distress, including PTSD and other persistent symptoms, especially when organizations fail to provide sufficient support. The literature also indicates that workplace trauma operates at the intersection of structural factors: bureaucratic overload, surveillance, and alienation intensify psychological harm, though much of this work falls within the domain of psychological and organizational studies.

Ben Pester's first novel, *The Expansion Project*, has been recently reviewed in both *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian* as a surreal and haunting critique of modern corporate life. The labyrinthine structure of Capmeadow Business Park sets the stage for an ordinary 'take-your-daughter-to-work' day for its protagonist, Tom Crowley. Gordon (1997) argues that haunting occurs when suppressed or excluded elements return to disrupt the present, turning absence into a form of violence and dislocation within bureaucratic spaces. His daughter was never recorded or verified, her absence becoming not just loss, but bureaucratic erasure. The workplace then metamorphoses into a grotesque, expanding entity that becomes both a setting and a symptom of psychological unraveling.

This study is important because it addresses the intersection of bureaucratic systems and trauma, as depicted through the surreal satire in Ben Pester's novel. First, it brings trauma theory to workplaces beyond the fictive, demonstrating how organizational structures can become agents of haunting on their own. The novel employs a narrative strategy that blends satire, surrealism, and archival elements to create a new aesthetic through which trauma's fragmentation, belatedness, and erasure are experienced as psychological disintegration. It ultimately reflects contemporary concerns.

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This study aims to investigate how Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* portrays bureaucracy as a spectral force generating absence and haunting, uses surrealist and satirical techniques to externalize psychological disorientation and alienation, and critiques contemporary workplace trauma by linking corporate absurdity to late-capitalist labor and psychic disintegration.

This paper argues that Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* uses surreal satire and haunting as narrative strategies to expose bureaucracy as a traumatic mechanism that systematically produces psychological fragmentation, erasure, and alienation in contemporary corporate life.

Research Questions

1. How does *The Expansion Project* represent bureaucracy as a haunting mechanism?
2. In what ways does the novel reflect trauma through surrealist and satirical strategies?
3. How does the novel critique contemporary corporate modernity through its depiction of psychological fragmentation?

Literature Review

Since its recent publication, *The Expansion Project* by Ben Pester has not yet been extensively analyzed in academic discourse. However, its exploration of themes such as bureaucracy, trauma, and surrealism offers a promising avenue for literary criticism, particularly in relation to contemporary understandings of corporate life and psychological disintegration. This paper aims to fill this gap by integrating trauma theory, haunting, and surreal satire in the interpretation of the novel.

Guha (2025) argues that *The Expansion Project* critiques modern corporate life through surreal satire, where the boundaries between physical space and digital records collapse, leading to psychological disintegration. The review highlights how Pester's portrayal of bureaucratic systems as haunting mechanisms subverts corporate modernity, using fragmented narrative structures to expose the trauma of late-capitalist labor. Berwick (2025) claims that *The Expansion Project* renders the modern workplace as a surreal and monstrous environment in which corporate structures literally consume employees, portraying Capmeadow Business Park as an ever-expanding maze that blurs the boundaries between identity, time, and reality. The review emphasizes how the novel's eerie atmosphere and disorienting narrative, including digital surveillance and archival testimony, function as a potent metaphor for the psychological toll of meaningless labor in late-capitalist systems.

Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (1997) explores how haunting functions as a sociocultural phenomenon, where what has been suppressed or excluded returns to disrupt the present. In this context, haunting embodies unresolved histories demanding acknowledgment. Gordon argues that ghosts represent the enduring traces of violence that refuse to vanish. In Pester's novel, this concept of haunting materializes through the disappearance of a child within the workplace, a loss that is further compounded by the bureaucratic erasure of any record. The office, then, becomes a haunted space where absence is recorded as non-existence, echoing Gordon's assertion that hauntings emerge when repression intersects with structural violence. Similarly, in *Specters of Marx* (1993, English 1994), Derrida applies the

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metaphor of haunting to political and philosophical realms, defining hauntology as the way past events and absences continue to shape the present despite official attempts to deny them. Bureaucracy, in this sense, operates as a specter: it provides a semblance of presence through documentation but simultaneously denies existence by excluding what cannot be officially recorded. Pester's surreal and satirical portrayal underscores this contradiction, with proliferating forms, archives, and structures that create a continuous sense of absence. In reading *The Expansion Project* through the lenses of Gordon (1997) and Derrida (1994), bureaucracy is revealed as a ghostly apparatus that not only embodies trauma but perpetuates it.

The bureaucratic dimension of Pester's novel is examined through critiques of capitalism, with bureaucracy viewed not as a neutral tool for administrative efficiency but as an integral component of late capitalism. Graeber (2015), in *The Utopia of Rules*, argues that endless paperwork, managerial control, and surveillance foster what he calls "dead zones of imagination." These zones suppress creativity and alienate the workforce. In *The Expansion Project*, Pester exaggerates this concept through a surreal and hyperbolic expansion of office space, which mirrors Graeber's critique of bureaucratic absurdity. The bureaucracy grows uncontrollably, consuming life itself and creating a void marked by endless repetition and futility. Similarly, Berardi (2009), in *The Soul at Work*, describes the psychological toll of post-Fordist capitalism, where labor regimes not only exploit workers physically but also drain their cognitive and emotional capacities, leading to burnout, depression, and trauma. Work, in this context, becomes a realm of affectivity where individual subjectivity is commodified. Pester's portrayal of an ever-expanding office complex, which erases individuality, perfectly echoes Berardi's view of the traumatic psychological effects of capitalism. The humor and satire of the novel both mask and reveal the deep exhaustion and alienation at the core of corporate modernity.

Both satire and surrealism have long been established as powerful tools to critique systems of oppression, from Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) to Ma's *Severance* (2018). Scholars argue that satire blends humor and discomfort, casting doubt on the authority of the status quo while reflecting societal anxieties (Hodgart, 2010). In contrast, surrealism enables writers to express trauma indirectly, moving away from rational discourse toward portraying psychological disorientation (Richardson, 2016).

The use of surreal satire in contemporary British fiction sheds light on issues of precarity and labor. Writers like Will Self and Ali Smith employ absurdist strategies to depict fractured subjectivity under neoliberalism (Boxall, 2013). Pester continues this tradition in *The Expansion Project*, transforming workspaces into surreal mazes where architectural impossibilities and archival absences serve as metaphors for trauma. The role of satire is not to trivialize trauma but to critically engage with the absurdities of bureaucratic systems that perpetuate psychological harm.

Research Gap

There exists a notable gap in the scholarly analysis of Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* (2025), particularly in relation to trauma theories, hauntings as sociological constructs, and critiques of bureaucratic systems. While recent popular reviews have categorized the novel as "a surreal workplace satire" (*The Guardian*, 2025) and "a compelling study of absence and bureaucracy" (*Financial Times*, 2025), academic literature remains sparse. This lack of literary analysis is striking, especially given the novel's potential to engage with these theoretical frameworks. This article aims to fill that gap by applying an interdisciplinary approach, combining trauma theory, the concept of haunting, and satire to explore the novel's portrayal of bureaucracy as a mechanism of haunting, and the workplace as a site of trauma. In doing so, it extends

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Pester's early contributions and enriches the broader discourse on trauma and corporate modernity in contemporary fiction.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory offers a vital framework for understanding literature that depicts psychological rupture. Trauma interrupts linear time, generating feelings of belatedness, repetition, silence, and fragmentation. Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is paradoxical: it is both acknowledged and never fully felt, resurfacing later through images, nightmares, or narrative disjunctions. This belatedness often appears in fragmented structures and delayed revelations, where the narrative revolves around absence instead of recounting events. In *The Expansion Project* (2025), the disappearance of the protagonist's daughter is never fully narrated; instead, the loss is revealed through archival voids and spectral presences, aligning with Caruth's concept of trauma as "one of unclaimed experience, which eludes closure." Trauma is perpetuated through repetition and silence. LaCapra (2001) distinguishes between "acting out," where trauma compulsively returns in repetitive patterns, and "working through," an attempt to contextualize and narrate trauma. Pester's novel embodies both: the bureaucratic expansion of Capmeadow Business Park and endless documentation reflect compulsive "acting out," while the protagonist's search for meaning represents tentative "working through."

Silence is also crucial. Missing files and absent records underscore how trauma persists through what is not spoken or documented. Haunting, in this sense, serves as a metaphor for unresolved trauma. Gordon (1997) asserts that haunting occurs when "what has been suppressed or concealed is repatriated to unsettle the present". Trauma thus becomes a social issue, resurfacing like a ghost excluded from the present. Derrida's (1994) "hauntology" captures this spectral absence, where ghosts represent unresolved debts and erasures. In Pester's novel, haunting is embodied in the office's architecture: endless corridors and expanding office spaces materialize the elusiveness of trauma, while the missing child (absent from records but present in memory) disrupts the office space.

Both surrealism and satire serve as strategies to resist trauma's inexpressibility. Richardson (2016) argues that surrealism undermines rationality, creating imaginative spaces for depicting psychic dislocation. Satire destabilizes authority by rendering it absurd, offering humor as critique (Hodgart, 2010). *The Expansion Project* blends surrealism and satire, using surreal architecture and the absurdities of bureaucratic life to create a funhouse mirror effect, a disjunction between trauma-laden realities and the banality of corporate life. By manipulating bureaucracy into a grotesque spectacle, Pester critiques workplace trauma, unsettling readers while resisting conventional interpretations.

This study employs close textual analysis of the novel's imagery, narrative structure, and archival framing, situated within trauma theory and literary criticism on capitalist bureaucracy and surreal satire. Psychological and organizational research on workplace trauma is used to contextualize the novel's portrayal of trauma within real-world frameworks. The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, the Literature Review examines trauma theory, haunting metaphors in literary criticism, and psychological studies of workplace trauma. The Theoretical Framework section outlines key concepts (trauma, haunting, and satire) as analytical lenses. The Textual Analysis explores three aspects: bureaucracy as spectral force, the motif of disappearance and haunting, and surreal satire as resistance. The Discussion synthesizes the findings, situating the novel within broader literary and theoretical

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discourses, followed by Implications and Suggestions for further research.

Trauma theory thus provides a potent lens to analyze *The Expansion Project*. It reveals how the novel's structure (characterized by delayed effects, repetition, and silences) depicts trauma as unresolved absence, while surrealism and satire offer indirect means to voice this trauma. Without trauma theory, the novel might be seen as mere workplace absurdism; with trauma theory, it uncovers deeper layers of psychological fragmentation and bureaucratic violence.

Textual Analysis

Bureaucracy functions as a mechanism of absence, systematically producing voids through an endless proliferation of documentation and procedural loops. In *The Expansion Project*, bureaucracy is not depicted as a system of organization but rather as a chaotic, proliferating force that obscures meaning. The narrative critiques how the bureaucratic system perpetuates an overwhelming quantity of data, where offices expand without purpose, and filing cabinets multiply endlessly, mirroring the absurdity of systems that prioritize paperwork over human experience. Avery Gordon (1997) argues that archives, while ostensibly designed to preserve, often conceal as much as they reveal. The absence of the protagonist's father from official records is emblematic of how bureaucracy erases lived histories and personal narratives. Trauma emerges in the text not through explicit violence but through the subtle mechanisms of erasure, specifically the "ghostly absence" created by missing records. This absence links to Derrida's notion of "archive fever," where archives serve both to preserve and to annihilate the very histories they seek to document. Bureaucracy, in this sense, operates as a force that generates spectral presences, producing gaps, silences, and voids rather than clarity. As Pester articulates: "*This sight always depressed me a little bit, like surely we could have more light in the place? And I ought to have done something about it, but then, what if it was a cold day? Everyone would get cold. I hated to think of everyone either cold because I had moved their coats, or cross because I had moved their coats, or cross because they were late because they had to find their coats. Or if it rained! All of them soaked and it would be my fault. So the coats were there, swallowing the light, unwanted guests who would never come in*" (Pester, 2025:06). This imagery captures the paralytic effects of bureaucratic systems, where every decision is burdened by the potential for error, further entrenching the sense of absence and disorientation.

The novel literalizes the concept of haunting to explore the complex dynamics of loss, trauma, and bureaucratic erasure. Through recurring motifs of shadows, figures in hallways, and disembodied voices, the narrative externalizes the internalized specters of bureaucratic inefficiency. The disappearance of the daughter, both in personal memory and in official records, becomes a literal and figurative haunting. In this context, haunting is not merely a supernatural occurrence but a manifestation of unresolved trauma. Derrida (1994) posits in *Specters of Marx* that ghosts are the embodiment of "unresolved debts," repressed histories that persist in the present, demanding acknowledgment. In *The Expansion Project*, trauma is not communicated directly through narrative exposition but through the presence of these ghosts, such as the vanished child in a file that "never existed." This absence underscores the bureaucratic tendency to suppress personal histories, rendering them invisible within the system. The novel's architectural motif, including endless corridors, proliferating offices, and vacant conference rooms, acts as a spatial representation of this haunting. These physical spaces are both literally and metaphorically haunted by the spectral traces of those erased by bureaucratic procedures. Bureaucracy, therefore, becomes a

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structural agent of trauma, perpetuating a collective condition of alienation and depersonalization. As Pester writes: “*I can feel the eyes of the couple looking at me. I forced myself to see the funny side. To speak in the gentle parenting voice that seemed to be the only acceptable way now in public*” (Pester, 2025:16). This moment illustrates the internalized surveillance that operates within bureaucratic systems, where individuals are constantly aware of being watched and judged, further fragmenting their sense of self.

This fragmentation of identity echoes Marxist critiques of alienation, particularly in relation to labor under capitalism. In this context, *The Expansion Project* can be seen as a critique of the neoliberal labor system, where individuals are reduced to mere cogs in a machine, their identities fragmented into roles, tasks, and paperwork. As Gordon (1997) argues, this type of bureaucratic haunting is not confined to the individual but is a collective experience, affecting the entire workforce. Workers, depersonalized and reduced to ID numbers, become part of a larger system that minimizes their autonomy and subjectivity. The traumatic effects of such systems are structural, not merely individual. This resonates with Judith Herman’s (1992) assertion that trauma shatters the sense of self and agency. Surreal depictions of employees dissolving into paperwork or fading into cubicles serve as a metaphor for psychic breakdown, where trauma is not only personal but systemic. This idea is also aligned with Caruth’s (1996) theory of “belatedness,” where trauma emerges unexpectedly and non-linearly, resurfacing as an embodied experience that defies the logic of time and order. As the narrator experiences this dissociation: “*Is my mouth moving? I don’t know. I can’t move to check these things. I am in the darkness, but if I move I will be seen, and that’s not acceptable. I am way up stage right. That’s the back left-hand corner to anyone in the audience. It’s not even a real stage*” (Pester, 2025:42). The image of the narrator frozen in darkness, unable to move or speak, reflects the existential paralysis induced by bureaucratic structures that inhibit agency and self-expression.

The novel employs satire and surrealism as both coping mechanisms and critical tools to interrogate these conditions. Bureaucratic rituals are exaggerated to grotesque proportions, with absurdity serving as a vehicle for revealing the power embedded within these systems. Hodgart (2010) suggests that satire destabilizes authority by inducing laughter, yet this laughter also exposes the underlying violence of the systems it critiques. Surrealism, on the other hand, disrupts the rational control of bureaucratic systems, creating space for alternative interpretations and forms of resistance (Richardson, 2016). In *The Expansion Project*, the surreal expansion of office spaces resists the capitalist logic of productivity, offering an escape from the oppressive demands of neoliberal labor. For the characters, humor and absurdity become survival strategies in the face of systemic trauma. For the readers, the grotesque absurdity of bureaucratic rituals unveils the inherent violence of these systems by transforming them into a spectacle of the irrational. Satire and surrealism, therefore, act as counter-trauma narratives, providing a space for political and imaginative resistance.

Discussion

Synthesis of Findings

Bureaucracy, haunting, and trauma in *The Expansion Project* are not isolated motifs but interconnected forces. Bureaucracy creates absence, which manifests as haunting and shapes lived trauma. Corporate systems function as ghost-making machines, erasing personal histories while demanding mechanical labor. Surreal satire

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ties these elements together by exposing how absurd structures both traumatize and destabilize power. The novel moves beyond personal and wartime trauma to explore institutional and workplace trauma, illustrating how trauma circulates through archives, paperwork, and corporate architecture. Satire, in this context, is not merely comic relief but a trauma response, serving as both a form of survival and a method of critique. It bridges the gap between trauma theory and satirical form.

Corporate fiction now maps the affective economies of neoliberalism, revealing alienation, burnout, and anxiety. In *The Expansion Project*, bureaucracy is positioned not only as a work condition but as a psychic condition. This reflects broader cultural anxieties, including precarious work, rationalization, and automation. The novel suggests that literature is documenting how workplaces themselves are becoming traumatic landscapes, embodying the emotional and psychological toll of modern labor.

Conclusion

This study interprets Ben Pester's *The Expansion Project* through trauma theory, haunting, and surreal satire, demonstrating how bureaucracy becomes a source of psychological disturbance. The analysis reveals that the expansion of bureaucracy, endless archival systems, and missing documentation are not just structural or aesthetic elements but mechanisms that generate and sustain trauma. The bureaucratic enforcement of absence, as seen in the protagonist's daughter's disappearance, amplifies loss and reverberates spectrally into both personal and systemic haunting experiences. This convergence of trauma, haunting, and bureaucratic absurdism underscores the novel's exploration of the inextricable link between institutional formation and psychic disintegration in contemporary workplaces.

Surreal and satirical narrative strategies emphasize this connection, showing that humor, absurdity, and exaggeration are not merely stylistic devices but means through which literature processes and critiques trauma. *The Expansion Project* thus carves a unique space within contemporary literary studies.

In literary discourse, the novel sparks discussions about surrealism and satire as aesthetic tools to mediate trauma. Surreal excess and absurdist wit challenge bureaucratic authority while providing imaginative avenues for both characters and readers to grapple with otherwise inexpressible psychic distress (Richardson, 2016; Hodgart, 2010). Satire and irony, therefore, serve not only to amplify or entertain but to mediate the effects of structural trauma.

Ultimately, *The Expansion Project* offers an exploration of how contemporary fiction engages with the intersection of institutional, social, and psychological dynamics. It shows that bureaucracy is not neutral but actively constructs and sustains trauma. As a 2025 text, it makes a significant contribution to trauma studies, literary criticism, and the expansion of surreal satire, illustrating how contemporary literature can expose and critically engage with modern life.

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