

Superposition of Trauma: Temporal and Spatial Displacement in *The Brutalist*

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Abstract

Trauma does not merely reside in memory – it is structured into space, embedded in material and cinematic form. *The Brutalist* (2024) does not narrate trauma directly but inscribes it into spatial and visual architecture, constructing trauma as a superpositional phenomenon – both present and unspoken, remembered yet inaccessible. This paper introduces a dual-layered superpositional model, tracing trauma’s displacement across time and space while interrogating the film’s refusal of cathartic healing. The temporal displacement layer examines how trauma remains suspended: neither fully past nor fully present. The film fractures time through ambiguous chronology, elliptical disclosure, and displaced agency, enacting trauma’s delayed return. The spatial displacement layer advances a critical innovation: trauma is not merely remembered but materially embedded. Through *mise-en-scène*, spatial framing, and architecture, *The Brutalist* externalizes trauma into built environments, ensuring its structural persistence. The film also foregrounds cinema’s archival function as a spatial displacement technique, extending trauma beyond narration into filmic space itself. Ultimately, *The Brutalist* expands trauma theory beyond individual psychology, centering its structural, material, and historical dimensions. In doing so, the film does not simply depict trauma – it becomes an archive, preserving trauma’s continuing rupture as an enduring force.

Keywords: Superposition and Trauma, Temporal and Spatial Displacement in Film, Cinematic Memory and Historical Erasure, Non-Cathartic Healing in Cinema,

Cinema as Archive, Mise-en-Scène and Trauma Representation, Material Persistence of Memory, Displacement and Subjectivity in Film.

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Introduction

Some histories refuse to be told in words alone. Cinema, with its unique ability to visualize the unspoken and to fragment time, has emerged as a crucial medium for engaging with historical trauma, rendering what evades articulation and resists linear representation. *The Brutalist* (2024) joins this tradition, but rather than treating trauma as a narrative event to be recalled or resolved, it embeds trauma into space – both architectural and cinematic. The film sidesteps conventional testimony, portraying trauma as something paradoxical: both vividly present yet quietly absent, seen but not fully spoken, inscribed into the world yet resistant to stable meaning. This paper argues that *The Brutalist* reveals trauma as existing in a state of superposition, a concept drawn from quantum mechanics where multiple realities coexist without collapsing into certainty. Here, superposition is invoked not as a literal borrowing from physics but as a conceptual analogy. In quantum theory, it names a state in which possibilities coexist without reducing to one. Transposed into trauma studies, it illuminates how trauma can persist in simultaneous, contradictory forms – present and absent, spoken and withheld – without resolving into narrative certainty. Traditionally, trauma studies have privileged time as the primary structure through which trauma manifests. However, *The Brutalist* resists this purely temporal framing, suggesting that trauma is not only deferred in time but actively inscribed into space. This shift demands an expanded critical framework, one that moves beyond trauma's delayed return and into its spatialization within built environments, visual compositions, and cinematic framing.

To analyze this spatialization, the paper integrates several key theoretical perspectives. Cathy Caruth (1996) and Ann Kaplan (2008) provide a foundation for understanding trauma's indirect representation, while Siegfried Kracauer (1997) and Gilles Deleuze (1989) situate cinema as an archive that preserves historical memory in visual fragments. Yet, *The Brutalist* goes further, not just archiving

trauma temporally, but structuring it spatially – a process that aligns with Dominick LaCapra's (2014) exploration of trauma and the sublime. His distinction between historical and structural trauma provides insight into how brutalist architecture in the film both materializes and displaces historical wounds, existing in a superpositional state between permanence and erasure. Architectural theorists Reinhold Martin (2010) and Beatriz Colomina (1996) reinforce this reading, demonstrating how brutalist structures are never neutral but function as sites of both commemoration and suppression.

This interplay between trauma, space, and superposition is central to *The Brutalist's* treatment of its protagonist, László. Rather than occupying the center of the film's narrative, László is shaped by forces beyond his control. His passivity is not just a character trait but a structural function – his erasure mirrors the film's broader concern with how trauma is displaced into architectural and cinematic space rather than directly articulated. His structures, like his own body, become sites of memory and contested power, at once resilient yet vulnerable, enduring yet subject to suppression. The film's cinematographic strategies – long takes, overwhelming spatial framing, and architectural enormity – further reinforce that trauma is not dramatized but materially inscribed into built space, where it lingers unresolved.

This paper builds a model of trauma as superposition, where trauma refuses the logic of either/or and instead exists in simultaneous states: rupture and continuity, presence and absence, articulation and suppression. Drawing from trauma theory, cinema studies, and architectural discourse, the analysis moves through two intertwined dimensions. First, it considers trauma's temporal displacement, tracing how the film stages belatedness, repression, and recurrence without ever anchoring trauma to a stable origin. Second, it turns to spatial displacement, examining how trauma is absorbed into the frame – through panoramic compositions, bodily positioning, and the oppressive scale of brutalist architecture. These two lines of inquiry come together in the conclusion, which shifts focus to cinema's archival function and the refusal of cathartic healing. Here, the film's resistance to resolution is not treated as a failure, but as an ethical gesture – one that insists on holding space for what remains unresolved, unclaimed, and uncomfortable. The conclusion also opens toward future questions, asking what it means to witness trauma that never arrives at closure, and what role viewers and archives alike play in sustaining that tension.

Ultimately, this exploration raises a critical question: If trauma exists across multiple, conflicting states at once – remembered yet erased, visible yet withheld – can cinema and architecture serve as archives that preserve trauma not by resolving its contradictions, but by sustaining them? Rather than merely narrating trauma, *The Brutalist* inscribes it into cinematic and architectural space, where it lingers as an unresolved imprint of history. In this sense, trauma is not just a reenacted story; it is something spatially encoded, materially felt, and embedded into film itself, ensuring that its ruptures remain visible, perceptible, and profoundly unsettling.

The Superposition of Trauma: A Two-Layered Framework of Displacement

From its opening sequence, *The Brutalist* vividly evokes trauma's paradoxical essence, capturing it as an overwhelming yet invisible force that shapes the narrative without ever being explicitly articulated. Aiming to address the complexity at hand, this paper introduces the concept of trauma as superposition, a framework inspired by quantum mechanics that I bring forward as a way to capture trauma's simultaneous existence in contradictory states: visible yet unspoken, immediate yet delayed, remembered yet profoundly suppressed. While classical trauma theories emphasize trauma's inherent resistance to coherent narrative or direct representation, my superpositional model extends these insights by explicitly positioning trauma's unresolved contradictions as essential and productive rather than merely disruptive or problematic, thus placing them at the very heart of understanding trauma. Through this lens, trauma's ambiguity and persistent contradiction are not obstacles to representation, but precisely what must be preserved to authentically engage with its entanglements. Furthermore, the superpositional model explicitly builds upon and complements classical trauma theory by structuring trauma around two interlinked yet distinct dimensions: temporal displacement and spatial displacement. Through this dual-layered approach, the model provides a powerful synthesis of classical theoretical insights while extending them significantly.

Temporal displacement of trauma

Trauma resists containment within linear time. Rather than existing as a discrete past event that can be recalled, processed, and integrated, trauma lingers in a state of temporal instability – both absent and present, forgotten yet continually returning. It does not unfold as a singular moment but instead echoes across time, often only revealing its full impact long after the initial experience. Traditional trauma theories have recognized this disruption, emphasizing how traumatic events do not conform to conventional memory structures but surface unpredictably, resisting full articulation. Trauma unsettles narrative coherence: sometimes intruding as involuntary flashes, other times remaining at the periphery, shaping experience in ways that cannot be consciously grasped. It is never entirely there, yet never fully gone – hovering at the threshold between recognition and oblivion, refusing resolution.

Cathy Caruth has described trauma as an experience whose impact is not assimilated in the moment but emerges belatedly, through intrusive returns that disrupt coherent narration (Caruth, 1996, pp. 4–5). This builds on Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), in which an initial event gains traumatic significance only retroactively when reactivated by a later encounter (Freud, 1895). In both accounts, trauma is structurally suspended between latency and eruption, absence and recall.

The superpositional model extends these insights by refusing to treat trauma as either belated or immediate, known or repressed. Instead, it insists on simultaneous coexistence: trauma is structurally suspended, neither assimilated into narrative nor lost to forgetting. Gilles Deleuze's (1989) concept of the cinematic time-image reinforces this logic, as film does not simply recount the past but holds past and present together in the same frame. Unlike the movement-image, which depicts time through linear progression, the time-image disrupts causality and produces coexistence. *The Brutalist* enacts this structure by layering temporal registers into its compositions so that trauma persists as an indeterminate force embedded in the film's aesthetic.

The opening sequence of *The Brutalist* enacts trauma's temporal instability, refusing to establish László as an active participant in his own narrative. Instead of asserting his presence through direct testimony or agency, he is first spoken about rather than speaking for himself. Erzsébet's voice-over, initially layered atop a black

screen, states that she heard from Atilla that László is alive. The information is delivered as secondhand knowledge, not a moment of direct recognition, reinforcing that László's survival is not something he asserts but something relayed to him, belated and external to his own subjectivity. His history is not his own to narrate – he exists within the film as an echo, a figure who is persistently named but rarely given the space to define himself.

This external framing of his existence mirrors the structural deferral of trauma: László's past is not assimilated within the present, but suspended between recognition and erasure. His absence is reinforced by the fragmented spatial and visual construction of the sequence. The first figure onscreen is not László, but a terrified young woman under interrogation, positioned against a blank wall, her fear palpable. Her close-up is superimposed onto itself, a doubling effect that creates an uncanny visual instability – she appears both immediate and distant, trapped within overlapping temporal registers. Her silence, the withholding of her identity, and the uncertainty surrounding her circumstances all reinforce trauma's resistance to direct representation. The image itself becomes unmoored from a singular temporal location, mirroring the way trauma does not unfold as a discrete event but lingers in a state of unresolved potentiality. Erzsébet's voice-over then intervenes, layering yet another dislocated temporal register onto the unfolding sequence. Her words, ostensibly a letter, exist outside the present moment, neither fully past nor fully active in the now. As her narration continues, the film cuts to an indistinct, chaotic crowd, waiting in darkness, their purpose unclear. The film deliberately withholds concrete spatial and temporal markers, reinforcing displacement as a condition rather than a moment in time. László does not engage with his surroundings, he moves through them, without direction or control, his presence absorbed into the larger uncertainty of mass movement. The camera follows him from behind, refusing to grant him narrative authority, emphasizing that he is not directing his own journey but being carried forward by forces outside his control.

Even the symbolic arrival in America denies resolution. The camera tilts upward to frame the Statue of Liberty, an iconic representation of freedom, yet László remains a diminished figure, visually and narratively subordinate to the structures around him. The triumphant orchestral score plays in stark contrast to his passive demeanor, his trauma remaining unstated, suspended, structured by absence rather than catharsis. By withholding László's direct articulation of his past and structuring the sequence through superimposed images, temporal gaps, and

deferred narration, *The Brutalist* cinematically enacts the belated, fragmented nature of trauma. His history is neither assimilated nor actively remembered, but dispersed across different layers of time, registered only in disjointed echoes and dislocated presences. Rather than depicting trauma as an event that can be fully recalled or confronted, the film situates it within a perpetual state of latency, reinforcing its superpositional existence between presence and absence, past and present, knowledge and erasure.

Later in the film, trauma's temporality collapses entirely during a night shared by László and Erzsébet, where the line between memory, confession, fantasy, and intimacy dissolves. The film's structure has already prepared for this moment through its deliberate use of segmented chapter titles: "Overture", "The Enigma of Arrival", and "The Hard Core of Beauty." These are not chronological indicators but temporal ruptures, formal interruptions that mirror trauma's non-linearity. Rather than progressing in sequence, these titles signal recursive intensities – each a new point of reentry into the traumatic event, each a misnamed beginning already saturated with aftermath. "Overture" presents trauma not as something that happens but as something already structuring perception. "The Enigma of Arrival" marks not the arrival itself, but the impossibility of arrival without loss. And "The Hard Core of Beauty" aestheticizes collapse, staging contradiction as its central mode of expression. These chapter breaks do not stabilize the narrative – they fracture it, making temporal disjunction a formal condition of the film.

Within this recursive architecture, the night with Erzsébet becomes a node of rupture where temporality unravels. As she touches László, she begins to speak – not in confession, but in a collapsing sequence of remembrance and imagined continuity. She recalls her illness, recounts how visions of László sustained her, and insists that what once felt like fantasy now appears as premonition. Her speech folds past and present into one another, enacting what Caruth (1996) describes as trauma's return: not as a direct recollection, but as an unlocatable repetition. The past arrives belatedly, not as content, but as an affective disruption of time itself. László, meanwhile, does not respond with language. He cries silently, groaning from a place that resists identification. His body becomes the site of disarticulated knowledge, suspended in a moment that exists outside of historical sequence. There is no revelation – only a shared disruption. This moment does not clarify the past; it literalizes *Nachträglichkeit*, Freud's theory of deferred action, in which trauma is

not fully registered when it occurs, but only returns with delayed significance – disjointed, disfigured, and often irreconcilable.

This is not a flashback, nor an emotional resolution. It is trauma rendered in superposition: a scene that suspends the usual logic of memory, moving between embodied pain and displaced recognition. In doing so, *The Brutalist* enacts a temporality where past and present refuse to separate, and where speech does not communicate but circulates – folded, doubled, and unresolved. This scene materializes Deleuze's time-image, where the distinction between past and present is not only blurred but rendered structurally irrelevant. Erzsébet's narration does not signal a flashback; rather, it dissolves temporal markers altogether. Her vision of survival, once imagined, now becomes real through speech, as if time had looped inward. László's mute reaction reinforces this rupture. He does not act, explain, or reflect – he endures. In Deleuzian terms, the film abandons the sensory-motor schema, privileging pure time: time as a coexistence of virtual and actual, where the past lives in the present not as recollection but as haunting simultaneity.

Rather than merely depicting trauma, *The Brutalist* actively structures it through its refusal to differentiate past from present, reinforcing its status as an ongoing, unresolved crisis of perception. By embedding trauma into the very mechanics of cinematic time, the film ensures that it remains in superposition – neither fully past nor entirely present, neither wholly repressed nor narratively assimilable. Trauma in *The Brutalist* thus exists neither fully in memory nor wholly in forgetting, neither entirely present nor truly absent, directly challenging conventional trauma narratives that insist trauma must eventually find coherent representation.

Spatial displacement of trauma

If trauma disrupts time, it also unsettles space – not merely as a site of recollection but as an active force that absorbs, distorts, and reconfigures history. Traditional trauma theories have largely centered on temporal displacement, treating trauma as an event that resurfaces belatedly, haunting the present through its deferred return. However, this emphasis on belatedness has often overlooked the ways in which trauma is also embedded in physical, visual, and architectural structures, not as a symbolic aftereffect but as a fundamental condition of its persistence.

This section advances a spatialized understanding of trauma, in which space is not a passive container for memory but a dynamic structure that organizes,

sustains, and alters historical experience. In this framework, trauma does not “return” because it was never fully absent. It persists – fixed into materials, encoded within *mise-en-scène*, and inscribed across architectural form – as a spatial logic that conditions perception. Trauma is not only experienced through time but structured into environments, informing how bodies move, how space is seen, and how history is lived.

This reframing challenges the conventional view that trauma recedes and later reemerges. Instead, it suggests that trauma is continuously active, woven into spatial configurations that shape engagement with the past even in the absence of explicit narrative acknowledgment. Its presence is neither spectral nor recovered through memory; it is material and durational, embedded in the very textures and geometries of lived space. From this perspective, cinema and architecture become living archives of trauma – not because they retrieve history, but because they maintain its unresolved presence. They do not commemorate a past event; they expose how that event remains structurally active. Trauma, here, is not an interruption in time but a condition of space, a residue that organizes form, restricts movement, and conditions vision.

The Brutalist enacts this principle by refusing to locate trauma in verbal recollection or subjective memory. Instead, it sustains trauma within the spatial field of the image itself. Trauma is not revealed; it is assumed. It saturates *mise-en-scène*, inflects architectural environments, and persists within the materiality of cinematic space, not as content, but as structure.

Cinematic Spatialization: Mise-en-Scène, Absence, and the Persistence of Trauma

Kaplan and Wang (Kaplan & Wang, 2008) argue that trauma in cinema is not always articulated directly but displaced into *mise-en-scène*, where fragmented perspectives, obstructive compositions, and visual asymmetries echo trauma’s disorganizing force. These are not surface-level stylistic gestures but foundational strategies that render trauma inaccessible by traditional narrative means. The image does not explain; it defers. The visual field becomes a space of residue – of emotional excess that cannot be translated into language. The unspeakable, in this model, is not simply omitted – it is structured into form.

The Brutalist intensifies this logic by externalizing trauma into architectural and visual configurations that render it both omnipresent and unreachable. Trauma

is not remembered, nor is it narrated. It is withheld, suspended in the film's spatial grammar – a grammar of estrangement, where meaning is displaced into architectural scale, negative space, and framing decisions that exclude the possibility of intimacy. The built environment is not symbolic here; it is operative. It enacts trauma without revealing it. The camera does not offer access to the subject's interiority – it captures the overwhelming scale of the structures that engulf him. Kaplan and Wang's argument that trauma cinema absorbs emotional intensity into *mise-en-scène* is reflected in the film's treatment of trauma – not as a clearly articulated historical narrative, but as something embedded within spatial design and visual composition. Crucially, the film's use of VistaVision – a high-resolution, widescreen format known for its visual precision and expansive depth of field – significantly deepens this spatialization. VistaVision enables a meticulous capturing of architectural details, subtle spatial relationships, and expansive visual emptiness, turning built environments from mere backdrops into active and oppressive presences. The format amplifies the visual hierarchy, reinforcing the cinematic displacement through depth, perspective, and negative space. Rather than granting Laszlo clear narrative subjectivity, the film subordinates him within overpowering structures, which visually diminish his autonomy. Often, he appears in wide shots that emphasize his smallness within the landscape, his figure engulfed by geometric compositions of concrete and shadow. Even the sporadic close-ups fail to allow identification, as the width of the shot overwhelms with background information. The effect is one of estrangement rather than psychological intimacy – Laszlo's trauma is never fully articulated, nor is it granted a privileged position within the film's emotional structure. Instead, it is displaced into the visual and spatial grammar of the film itself, ensuring that trauma is encountered indirectly, through framing and absence rather than direct expression. Through this cinematic staging, the film enacts trauma's paradoxical state – central yet unspoken, past yet materially present. The built environments do not merely represent memory; they function as cinematic inscriptions of displacement, both preserving trauma and obscuring its legibility. The question then becomes: does the imposed visual structure bring trauma into confrontation, or does it aestheticize it, transforming suffering into a distant formal arrangement? Rather than offering resolution, *The Brutalist* embeds trauma into its spatial and visual composition, ensuring that history is not simply recalled but remains an active condition of experience. Absence, displacement, and unresolved architectural inscriptions replace direct testimony, refusing to contain trauma within a fixed historical narrative.

If trauma is inscribed into cinematic and architectural space, does it remain inert, or does film act as a force that continually reshapes its presence? Kracauer's (1997) theory of cinema as a medium that interacts with material reality suggests that film does not merely capture traces of the past but actively mediates its persistence. He argues that cinema uniquely engages with material reality by capturing seemingly incidental details, overlooked textures and fleeting spatial relationships that conventional narratives typically neglect. Yet while Kracauer reads these textures as sites of latent historical recovery, *The Brutalist* withholds such redemption. The film does not retrieve memory; it constructs the impossibility of doing so. What remains are not fragments waiting to be assembled, but traces organized around refusal. Space becomes a container not of memory, but of interruption. The environment does not preserve what was lost; it renders it unapproachable.

One of the film's most striking demonstrations of trauma as spatial inscription occurs late in the narrative, when Erzsébet's letter to Zsófia is voiced over a fast-forward montage of construction progress on the Van Buren monument. As László walks through the unfinished structure, torch in hand, the surrounding space is defined by massive pillars, pools of captured rain water, and a haunting emptiness. Erzsébet's words – "the man I married is inside, but the lock's combination I cannot decipher" – mirror the camera's drift through brutalist corridors that offer no orientation. She continues: "I suppose that inside, he worships at the altar of only himself." The scene displaces trauma not into flashback or dialogue but into form: the coldness of cement, the labyrinthine halls, and the refusal of light all serve as embodiments of László's psychological fragmentation. Architecture holds the unspeakable not by representing it, but by obstructing its articulation.

This unresolved spatiality foregrounded in the visual-material inscription of reality articulated by Kracauer introduces a different mode of engagement with trauma, one that extends into LaCapra's (2014) conception of the sublime as a response to the limits of symbolization. If Kracauer suggests that cinema renders trauma perceptible by exposing its material traces, LaCapra argues that trauma's excess – its resistance to full integration – manifests as an overwhelming aesthetic force. The sublime here does not produce awe but rupture. It names the moment when trauma exceeds comprehension and disturbs representation itself. The film stages this breakdown through its refusal to explain, through its saturation of the

frame with silence and distance. Its architecture does not signify – it overwhelms. It is not the beauty of the image that disorients, but the impossibility of integrating what it withholds.

In place of dramatizing trauma through recollection or testimony, the film suspends it. Even pivotal events — like Van Buren’s death or László’s rape — remain unseen. These absences are not gaps to be filled, but structuring devices. They do not obscure trauma; they formalize it. The altar is never named as memorial, just as the monument is never explicitly tied to a death. Yet absence pulses at their core. The unspoken is not outside the frame; it is what gives the frame its shape. Trauma, in this logic, is not an interruption but a condition of cinematic space.

The result is not catharsis but containment – a visual logic that preserves suffering as unresolved structure. Kaplan and Wang’s unrepresentable (Kaplan & Wang, 2008) and LaCapra’s excess (2014) converge here: trauma is not what escapes language, but what undermines its conditions of possibility. *The Brutalist* does not grant trauma the dignity of explanation. It stages it as a residue – central, structuring, but ultimately withheld. It is in this sense that the film reaffirms trauma’s superpositional nature: not revealed or resolved, but sustained in spatial form, simultaneously visible and inaccessible.

Brutalism as a Site of Suppression, Power, and Contested Memory

Brutalist architecture in *The Brutalist* does not function as a passive backdrop but as a continuation of the spatial displacement of trauma. The film externalizes trauma into built environments, positioning architecture as both a materialization of suffering and a mechanism through which trauma is reshaped, controlled, and, at times, erased from dominant historical narratives. These structures do not offer a stable repository of memory; rather, they embody trauma’s superpositional nature, existing at the intersection of preservation and suppression, permanence and erasure, recognition and obfuscation.

This instability aligns with Reinhold Martin’s (2010) argument that modernist architecture is not simply a product of aesthetic or functional design, but an ideological force that structures power (pp. xiv–xv). Martin suggests that brutalist structures, in particular, operate as sites of negotiation, inscription, and erasure, subjected to dominant historical forces that seek to shape or eliminate the narratives embedded within them. Under authoritarian regimes, brutalism was

often actively suppressed in favor of neoclassical styles, which better reflected hierarchical power structures. In *The Brutalist*, this tension plays out in Van Buren's control over the architectural memorial, dictating which trauma is commemorated, how it is framed, and whether it is remembered at all.

Freud's (2003) concept of repetition compulsion, originally theorized as an unconscious mechanism that drives individuals to reenact traumatic experiences, extends beyond the realm of the individual psyche and into spatial configurations. Trauma is not merely recalled or symbolically expressed – it is structurally inscribed, embedded in the very logic of built environments. The superpositional model reinterprets repetition compulsion as a spatial phenomenon, in which trauma does not return as a discrete event but remains actively negotiated through physical structures, shaping experience beyond the confines of memory. Rather than being repressed and later resurfacing, trauma in this framework is never truly absent — it persists, embedded within space itself, oscillating between recognition and erasure, visibility and suppression.

László's architectural vision makes this spatial inscription explicit. Though the film never directly states that his design draws upon the concentration camp in which he was imprisoned, the viewer gradually learns — first through a quiet exchange with Erzsébet as she studies the blueprints, and later through Zsófia's speech in the epilogue — that his plans echo the dimensions and spatial logic of Buchenwald. The small, enclosed rooms and the claustrophobic corridors that form the foundation of the complex are not arbitrary; they reproduce the architecture of confinement. Yet, they are not replicated wholesale. László alters the oppressive geometry of the camp by inserting vertical ruptures — exaggerated ceiling heights, glass skylights, and dramatic vertical expanses that direct the gaze upward. These are not merely aesthetic decisions; they are architectural interventions meant to undo, or at least interrupt, the logic of entrapment. His insistence on maintaining these features, even when doing so requires sacrificing his own fee to cover additional construction costs, reveals that this design is not simply professional – it is personal. In refusing to lower the ceiling heights, László refuses to flatten his trauma into a manageable civic story. His architecture enacts repetition compulsion not as passive reenactment, but as active reworking – a spatial negotiation between memory and transformation.

Just as significant is the memorial's composite structure. The building must house four distinct components – a library, an auditorium, a gymnasium, and a

chapel – and László’s solution is to connect them through a maze-like network of passageways. In the final moments of the film, we learn that these interlinking corridors recreate, in reimagined form, the proximity between his own barrack in Buchenwald and Erzsébet’s in Dachau. What once separated them – death, war, geography – is now reconfigured through architecture. The space does not merely preserve memory; it attempts to rewrite it. The passageways are not literal reconstructions of camp geography but acts of spatial yearning – attempts to stitch together fragmented history through form. In connecting these elements through concealed circulation, the building rejects narrative coherence. It becomes a physical trace of trauma’s dislocation, binding together disparate functions through a shared structure of unresolved loss.

This is not healing in the redemptive sense. László’s design does not resolve trauma, nor does it offer closure. But it does materialize an effort to live with trauma spatially — to house it, guide it, shape it. The upward pull of the ceilings, the symmetry of the cross, the flooded natural light: these are gestures toward the possibility of meaning. Not meaning in the sense of a resolved past, but a space where grief is held, where suffering is not buried but reframed.

The instability of architectural authorship is central to the film’s depiction of László. His architectural vision is never truly his own; his work, much like his personal history, is dictated by external forces that reshape its meaning to serve their interests. Van Buren commissioning the memorial does not merely finance the project — he curates its historical narrative, deciding what is preserved, whose suffering is acknowledged, and how that suffering is framed. This reinforces Martin’s assertion that brutalist structures are never fixed symbols of history but rather contested spaces where dominant ideologies inscribe their authority onto collective memory (Martin, 2010, pp. xvi–xvii). László, much like the buildings he designs, is displaced, rewritten, and repurposed by those in power. This contested authorship is visually encoded in the film’s cinematography as previously discussed. These architectural fragments become material markers of László’s erasure, mirroring Martin’s argument that modernist architecture exists in a perpetual state of negotiation between meaning and suppression (Martin, 2010, pp. 9–13).

Yet *The Brutalist* does not present this erasure as passive. The film does not simply suppress László’s trauma; it reveals how it is strategically rewritten, absorbed into ideological structures that reshape its meaning to fit external narratives of history and power. The patron, as a curator of memory, dictates how

history is framed within the memorial, choosing which stories are acknowledged and which are suppressed. Architectural design itself becomes a contested space, where László's vision is compromised, his personal investment overshadowed by financial and political constraints. This process mirrors the broader mechanisms of historical inscription and suppression: just as brutalist architecture has historically been repurposed, erased, or politically sanitized under shifting regimes, László's suffering is not preserved as an autonomous experience but manipulated, recontextualized, and subordinated to forces beyond his control. His trauma remains visible, yet its meaning is dictated by others, suspended between recognition and erasure.

This dynamic extends beyond architecture to László's body, which, like his work, becomes a site of suppression, control, and violent inscription. The rape sequence in *The Brutalist* unfolds not as rupture, but as assimilation. There is no build-up, no narrative emphasis, no aftermath. Instead, it is embedded within a continuum of institutional, architectural, and aesthetic processes that render violence not exceptional, but procedural. The quarry, initially framed through serene panoramas and reverent gestures – the marble stroked, wetted, admired – is introduced as a space of material origin, the point from which the monument will emerge. It is also, without narrative preparation or dramatic escalation, the site of László's violation.

The assault is choreographed in the same spatial register as the setting itself. There is no shift in visual language: the camera remains at a distance, the bodies folded into darkness, their outlines blurred, their gestures muted. No scream is heard, no boundary visibly crossed. The camera does not flinch because it has never offered intimacy to begin with. What occurs is not revealed, but absorbed into the architectural continuum. It is as if the act belongs to the materials themselves, as if the marble has simply taken in one more layer of silence.

László never speaks of the assault. The film never names it. The viewer is not positioned as witness, but as participant in a shared complicity of suppression. The act is real, but unverifiable – displaced into spatial composition and left to circulate through subsequent silences. The marble selected during this trip becomes the altar's centerpiece. Its polished surface carries no mark, but its history is embedded, illegible but present. In this logic, brutalism does not commemorate trauma. It seals it.

Here, memory is not denied – it is formalized. Violence is not excluded – it is integrated, seamlessly, into the spatial and material systems that organize power. The quarry does not rupture the film’s architecture; it extends it. László’s silence does not break from the narrative; it completes it. What is suppressed is not the event, but its interpretability. This is the logic of suppression that *The Brutalist* enacts most chillingly: trauma is not hidden, it is institutionalized.

Expanding on this, Beatriz Colomina’s (1994) analysis of architecture as a system of mediation and surveillance provides another crucial layer. Colomina argues that modernist architecture does not merely provide shelter but actively structures perception and experience. Brutalism in *The Brutalist* operates under this logic: it does not merely house memory but dictates how history is seen, remembered, and controlled. The patron’s ability to shape the memorial’s form, pause its construction, or dictate its meaning reinforces Colomina’s assertion that architectural space is never neutral – it is always a medium through which power is exercised.

This dynamic directly intersects with Michael Rothberg’s (2009) concept of multidirectional memory, which argues that memory is not a finite resource, nor a singular narrative, but a relational and dynamic field, shaped by competing histories (p. 3). *The Brutalist* visually enacts this theory: the memorial complex that László is commissioned to build does not simply preserve a singular trauma – it is a contested site where multiple histories are in negotiation, some amplified while others are displaced or erased. The film positions brutalism as a space of historical and biopolitical control, where trauma is not merely commemorated but actively manipulated by those in power.

This leads directly into *The Brutalist*’s broader meditation on cinema as an archival medium. Just as brutalist structures function as unstable repositories of history – sites where memory is both materialized and manipulated – cinema, too, operates as an archive of trauma that does not simply document history but actively constructs, distorts, and reframes it. Siegfried Kracauer’s (1997) theory of cinema as an archival medium reinforces this transition, arguing that film does not merely reconstruct history but captures its contradictions and absences, preserving trauma in unresolved fragments (p. 54). *The Brutalist* visualizes this function: its architectural spaces do not merely contain memory; they actively reshape it, implicating the viewer in its contradictions.

Through its architectural spaces, *The Brutalist* demonstrates that memory is not simply stored but shaped, contested, and controlled – both by those who

commission its inscription and by the mediums through which it is represented. This merges brutalism and cinema into a single layer of the superpositional system, where trauma remains neither fully erased nor fully preserved, but perpetually suspended between visibility and suppression, recognition and distortion. The film reveals that trauma is not a static entity – it is actively shaped by architectural and ideological frameworks that govern its visibility, interpretation, and suppression. By embedding trauma within contested spatial forms, *The Brutalist* aligns with the superpositional model, demonstrating that history is not simply recalled or forgotten but continuously mediated within structures that enforce simultaneous inscription and erasure.

Conclusion: Unstable Archives, Incomplete Healing

Cinema as archive

As argued throughout this paper, trauma in *The Brutalist* does not exist as a single, locatable event but rather as a continually shifting state of presence and absence, articulation and suppression. Thus, cinema in the film does not merely fix history within archival structures; instead, it unsettles history, allowing fragments of the past to persist in forms that resist closure. Building on the superpositional framework established earlier, the film's archival function emerges clearly as a conclusion to our analysis: trauma is archived precisely through its instability, embedded structurally into cinematic and architectural space.

Kracauer (1997) suggests that film's ability to capture the incidental, the overlooked, and the transient transforms it into an archive unlike any other – one that does not stabilize memory but preserves its contradictions and absences. Unlike traditional historical archives, which seek to establish definitive accounts, cinema resists containment, ensuring history remains in flux. Kracauer's notion of cinematic indeterminacy reinforces this idea, arguing that film does not impose structured historical narratives but sustains unresolved tensions, ensuring history remains an open question rather than a settled discourse. For Kracauer, cinema captures the unprocessed remnants of history, those aspects that evade structured historiography, allowing contradictions and silences to remain embedded within the frame (1997, p. 230). The film enacts this principle not by offering direct testimony or reconstructing trauma as an event to be recalled, but by dispersing it through spatial configurations. Memory, in this framework, is not something narrated but something traversed – encountered within the material environment

rather than confined to individual recollection. Architectural spaces do not merely house the past; they condition the ways it is experienced, dictating how absence is navigated and how unresolved histories remain structurally embedded within the cinematic frame. Through these spatial inscriptions, trauma is not relived in the mind but encountered as a force shaping movement, perspective, and perception.

Rather than constricting memory in fixed archival forms, the film positions trauma as a site of contestation, reinforcing Pierre Nora's (1989) argument that modern societies no longer experience history as a continuous, lived process. Instead, history is displaced into *lieux de mémoire* – externalized sites of memory, such as monuments, museums, and memorials – where it is preserved but also susceptible to appropriation and erasure. While these sites are designed to function as repositories of historical consciousness, Nora warns that they risk becoming static artifacts, where memory is stored rather than actively engaged with. The film resists this tendency by ensuring its spatial inscriptions remain unstable, preventing trauma from being reduced to a fixed commemorative function. The architectural spaces in the film do not function as completed memorials but as unresolved environments where trauma remains in active negotiation.

This instability is heightened by the film's treatment of brutalist architecture. Brutalist spaces operate not as stable commemorative sites but as locations of persistent erasure, where historical trauma is simultaneously invoked and concealed. By refusing to frame these structures within a singular historical discourse, the film aligns with Kracauer's archival cinema – not as a medium that passively stores memory, but as one that sustains its dissonances, preserving contradictions within visual and spatial form. The long, detached compositions ensure architectural structures dominate the frame, enforcing a visual hierarchy that subordinates human figures to the overwhelming scale of built space. Trauma, in this sense, does not exist within individual recollection but is externalized, imprinted onto the landscape in a way that is both present and inaccessible.

Rather than treating trauma as a historical event definitively archived, the film foregrounds its contested nature, reinforcing LaCapra's (2014) argument that memory is never passively inherited but always subject to ideological negotiation. His distinction between acting out and working through is particularly relevant here, not as a psychological process but as a framework for understanding how trauma is mediated and re-inscribed through historical and cinematic structures. Acting out, in LaCapra's terms, refers to a repetitive reliving of trauma, where the past remains unresolved and unassimilated. Working through, by contrast, requires

critical confrontation with history, allowing for transformation rather than repetition (p. 22).

Yet the film complicates this binary by ensuring trauma remains suspended between these two states: never fully confronted, but never allowed to disappear. Its architectural and cinematic forms do not enable complete working through, but neither do they permit trauma to remain in a pure state of repetition. Instead, trauma is mediated through structures of power, spatial inscriptions, and ideological framing, ensuring it remains in circulation rather than resolved or forgotten. Thus, the superpositional model of trauma is reinforced explicitly here as conclusion: trauma exists simultaneously as archival inscription and suppression, as something actively present yet continually deferred. Rather than depicting history as something conclusively stored or retrieved, the film ensures its contradictions remain embedded in visual and spatial form.

Healing and the Refusal of Catharsis

By refusing to stabilize trauma in archival structures or to narratively resolve it, *The Brutalist* concludes by explicitly rejecting conventional models of cathartic healing. Trauma resists immediate articulation. It eludes language, returning in fragments, imposing itself in spectral forms. The film internalizes this structure, not by narrating trauma, but by staging its displacement, enacting it through absence, repetition, and the deferred encounter. The film thus concludes by aligning clearly with Cathy Caruth's (1996) argument that trauma exists in a state of belated recognition, revealing itself only in ruptures and incompletions. However, where Caruth frames belatedness psychologically, the film spatializes this delay, embedding the failure of resolution within its architectural and cinematic structures.

Caruth (1996) describes trauma as an event not experienced in real-time but returning later as an unclaimed possession, a force entering consciousness only in its aftershocks (pp. 4-11). *The Brutalist* mirrors this structure by withholding direct access to its protagonist's trauma, instead making the audience experience its lingering presence through cinematic absence. For Kaplan and Wang (2008), trauma cinema resists classical narrative structure, rejecting the coherence of cause and effect, the reliability of testimony, the stability of an anchoring subject (pp. 37-39). *The Brutalist* explicitly concludes with this logic: refusing the interiority of flashbacks or psychological confession, it translates trauma into spatial

arrangements, prolonged silences, and physical displacement. László does not speak his suffering; the film does not grant audiences privileged access to his memory. Instead, the environment absorbs it, encasing trauma in brutalist structures that visually embed his erasure, stripping him of subjectivity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Brutalist's* refusal of narrative catharsis. Caruth argues trauma unfolds as interruptions – returns, repetitions, incompletions (1996, pp. 16-18). Kaplan and Wang observe trauma cinema withholds closure, denying emotional resolution (2008, p. 13). This is precisely the film's concluding strategy. Trauma is neither overcome nor narrated into legibility. It remains suspended, its representation marked by negation and withholding, ensuring history is never fully absorbed.

Yet, Kaplan and Caruth's frameworks stop short of addressing the ethical stakes of cinematic strategy. LaCapra's (2014) concept of empathic unsettlement provides a concluding lens—shifting attention from formal representation toward ethical obligations of witnessing. Rather than allowing trauma to fade into abstraction, this approach insists on sustained confrontation, ensuring suffering remains active rather than distant. Empathic unsettlement disrupts passive spectatorship, confronting trauma as ongoing ethical relation (LaCapra, 2014, pp. 41-44, 78-79).

Thus, by explicitly refusing to transform trauma into consumable narrative or aestheticized absence, *The Brutalist* concludes by demanding audiences sit with the discomfort of an unclaimed, unhealed history – one that, like the brutalist structures it foregrounds, remains exposed, contested, and impossible to fully erase. Ultimately, conceptualizing trauma as a superpositional phenomenon marks a significant innovation within trauma theory, film studies, and architectural analysis. By demonstrating trauma's simultaneous states of articulation and suppression, visibility and concealment, and its embeddedness in both temporal suspension and spatial inscription, the superpositional model moves decisively beyond traditional paradigms focused predominantly on psychological frameworks of memory and narrative closure. This approach does not merely expand trauma theory but reframes trauma as structurally and ethically unresolved, persistently active within material, cinematic, and architectural forms. The implications of this innovative conceptualization invite several promising directions for future research. Scholars might further explore how audiences ethically and affectively negotiate trauma's unresolved contradictions, especially examining how empathic unsettlement functions in differing cultural or historical viewing contexts.

Moreover, considering cinema's unique archival dimension identified here, future inquiries might examine how trauma's superpositional characteristics inform practices of memory preservation beyond film – such as urban commemorative spaces, architectural memorials, or even digital and virtual archives. How might these varied mediums ethically sustain trauma without simplifying or resolving its inherent contradictions? Such questions highlight the broader relevance and future potential of the superpositional trauma model introduced here.

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