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Representing the Unpresentable: Traumatic Realism in the Holocaust Narratives

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Abstract

Aims: *This paper aims to critically examine the representational challenges posed by the Holocaust as both a historical and cultural trauma. It investigates the tensions between Realist and Anti-Realist narrative modes and introduces Michael Rothberg's concept of Traumatic Realism as a mediating framework capable of addressing the complexities of Holocaust representation.*

Methodology and Approach: *The study adopts a comparative literary analysis, drawing on Rothberg's theoretical model to evaluate how Traumatic Realism integrates the structured coherence of Realism with the fragmented, non-linear characteristics of Anti-Realism. Two key texts are analysed as case studies: Ruth Kluger's Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered and Charlotte Delbo's Auschwitz and After.*

Outcome: *The analysis reveals that both Kluger's and Delbo's narratives embody the principles of Traumatic Realism by simultaneously acknowledging the incomprehensibility of Holocaust experiences and maintaining a tether to historical specificity.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper concludes that Traumatic Realism offers a nuanced and ethically sensitive framework for representing the Holocaust, one that avoids the pitfalls of both reductive Realism and excessive abstraction. It suggests that future representations of genocide and mass trauma should continue to adopt hybrid approaches that can accommodate* contradiction, fragmentation, and affective resonance while remaining historically grounded.

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How does one represent the unpresentable? The Holocaust—a seismic rupture in human history—pushes the boundaries of language, defying articulation yet demanding to be spoken of. The sheer scale and the depth of the Holocaust challenge every attempt to fully comprehend it. Language falters, memory ruptures, and narratives collapse under the weight of its enormity. Emphasizing the limits of human understanding and representation, Felman and Laub observe, "Our cultural frames of reference and our pre-existing categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history."(xv) This recognition does not diminish the importance of remembering and bearing witness, but rather underscores the complexity of fully grappling with such an unfathomable tragedy. Silence risks forgetting; representation risks distortion. At the heart of this dilemma lies a fundamental conflict between realism and anti-realism, two opposing theoretical perspectives that have shaped Holocaust representation and memory. Between these two extreme rests a complex and crucial challenge: the search for ways to articulate the inexpressible, to translate the unknowable into knowable.

This paper examines how these seemingly conflicting perspectives intersect and interact within the framework of Michael Rothberg's concept of Traumatic Realism. Traumatic Realism is posited as a significant intermediary, addressing the tension between the representable and the unrepresentable, the ordinary and the extreme. Thereby, offering an innovative lens for understanding the Holocaust as both a concrete historical reality and a disruption to the traditional mode of representation. Drawing on the works of Ruth Kluger and Charlotte Delbo, the paper delves into the complexities of Holocaust representation, uncovering how seemingly mundane or fragmented images like that of a "rotten potato" or "socks caught on barbed wire" transform as a powerful symbol that carry the burden of the lost worlds. It is within these tangled intersections between words and silence, memory and void, life and death, where the unspeakable becomes both absent and unbearably present that we begin to confront the reverberations of the Holocaust and its enduring shadows on our understanding of human experience.

The paper revisits Michael Rothberg's concept of Traumatic Realism to uncover new depths in Ruth Kluger's Still Alive and Charlotte Delbo's Auschwitz and After. While Rothberg identifies these texts as bridging Realism and Anti-Realism, this study provides a closer examination of how specific moments and narrative choices embody these dual imperatives. By delving into the dissonance between life and death, memory and knowledge, the ordinary and the extraordinary, this analysis not only refines Rothberg's theoretical model but also situates Traumatic Realism within contemporary debates on post-memory and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Ultimately, this paper offers a more granular and ethically grounded perspective on how these texts resist closure, preserve the complexities of Holocaust representation, and extend Rothberg's contributions to modern trauma studies.

The Holocaust, as a historical and cultural trauma, presents profound ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological challenges to representation, testing the boundaries of language, narrative, and meaning with its systematic brutality and depravity. Theoretical frameworks of trauma representation delve into the intricate ways traumatic events, especially ones as monumental as the Holocaust, are depicted and understood in narrative forms. These frameworks are vital for addressing the tension between conveying trauma's profound impact and the inherent limitations of language, memory, and artistic expression. They often wrestle with how to faithfully represent the ineffable, fragmented, and inexpressible nature of traumatic experiences. This section examines the two primary theoretical frameworks for approaching Holocaust narratives—Realism and Anti-Realism—and explores how Michael Rothberg's concept of Traumatic Realism integrates these perspectives into a nuanced framework for representing the Holocaust.

Realism in the Holocaust research prioritizes factual correctness, chronological consistency, and a commitment to maintain the authenticity of historical occurrences. This perspective is based on the conviction that thorough documentation and unbiased analysis are crucial for comprehending the Holocaust and countering denialism. The realist approach means both "an epistemological claim that the Holocaust is knowable and a representational claim that this knowledge can be translated into familiar mimetic universe" (4).

Realism provides a vital framework for ensuring that the Holocaust is remembered as a specific historical event, rather than a vague symbol of suffering. The predominant methods of the realist approach of representation are: Survivors' testimonies, archival materials, and forensic evidences, which forms the foundation of Holocaust education and public memory. Historians and the pioneers of the Holocaust research like Raul Hilberg, Yehuda Bauer and Christopher Browning exemplify this perspective, prioritising meticulous research to capture the systemic mechanisms of genocide Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, for instance, provides a detailed analysis of the methodical and bureaucratic operations behind the genocide, emphasizing the structured efficiency with which the Nazi regime carried out its plans. By focusing on the logistical frameworks—from deportation orders to extermination strategies—Hilberg's work demonstrates that the Holocaust was not an aberration or a chaotic anomaly but a calculated process deeply embedded in the organizational capacities of modern society.

The realist sentiments align with Hannah Arendt's notion of the "*banality of evil"* explicated in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which suggests that "evil is never radical, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension." Extremity, in the realist approach is not something that breaks with the ordinary dimensions of the modern world but exists on a continuum with it and is indeed explainable with reference to the intersection of the very ordinary sociological structures of the modern world. This perspective accentuates how the mechanisms of evil, even in their most horrific manifestations, can emerge from the ordinary workings of bureaucracy, rationality, and social conformity. In other words, realism in Holocaust studies emphasizes the faithful documentation of historical facts, focusing on coherence, detail, and systemic understanding to preserve the veracity of Holocaust events. This approach asserts that accurate representation is essential for bearing witness to the Holocaust and honouring the memory of its victims.

The anti-realist approach within Holocaust Studies posits that the Holocaust is fundamentally unknowable and can only be comprehended through entirely new frameworks of knowledge. Furthermore, it asserts that traditional representational models are inadequate for encapsulating the complexities of this

historical event. This inclination effectively displaces the Holocaust from conventional historical, cultural, or autobiographical frameworks, positioning it as a sublime, unapproachable object beyond discourse and knowledge. Anti-Realism challenges the ability of language, narrative, or even art to fully represent the Holocaust. This viewpoint conceptualizes the Holocaust as a significant historical rupture, representing a trauma of such magnitude that it fundamentally undermines the frameworks through which we interpret and articulate meaning. Significant figures like Elie Wiesel, Claude Lanzmann, Arthur Cohen are the proponents of the anti-realism in the Holocaust Studies. Wiesel, for instance, stated that, "Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualised.... The Holocaust transcends history" (115), highlighting the limits of expression. The assertion made by Theodor Adorno that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34), succinctly embodies the Anti-Realist perspective. However, Adorno refined this position, recognizing that art and literature have the potential to address the Holocaust, albeit through a critical examination of the limitations inherent in representation itself. Similarly, Maurice Blanchot, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, reflects on the Holocaust as an event that challenges language itself, existing more as a void or silence that demands recognition yet defies comprehension.

Anti-Realists underscore the significance of the Holocaust in shaping narrative and memory, conceptualizing it not merely as a historical trauma but as a trauma that affects the very nature of representation. The testimonies of survivors frequently illustrate this complex dynamic. Primo Levi, in *Survival in Auschwitz*, admits the difficulty of conveying his experiences: "Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man." This discourse detaches the extreme from the everyday and seeks to install an unbridgeable rupture between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Michael Rothberg's notion of Traumatic Realism presents a synthesis of Realism and Anti-Realism, effectively responding to the Holocaust's dual imperatives for factual accuracy and acknowledgement of its representational complexity. By acknowledging the Holocaust as both a concrete historical event and a profound rupture in memory and representation, Traumatic Realism offers a

middle ground to explore and inhabit this tension. *In Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation,* Rothberg writes, Traumatic Realism does not resolve the tension between objective truth and narrative complexity; rather, it inhabits this tension, revealing how the Holocaust exists simultaneously within the mundane and the extraordinary (3). This notion elucidates the interplay between everyday and extreme, normalcy and horror, offering a conceptual framework for comprehending the ways in which genocide permeates both everyday life and the limits of representation.

Traumatic Realism unfolds as a tapestry where the mundane collides with the horrific, where fragments of memory resist the linear narrative and where the boundaries of language collapse under the strain of unspeakable trauma. It navigates the delicate space between the historical reality of genocide and its incomprehensible emotional aftershocks, embracing the dissonance between representation and reality. In doing so, it invites us to witness the Holocaust not as a singular, definable event, but as an endless reverberation that exists in the tension between the knowable and the unknowable, the ordinary and the extraordinary. In this dialectic between the known and the unknowable, Traumatic Realism compels us to confront the Holocaust, not as an event in past, but as a perpetual presence that defies closure and demands reflection. Fragmented and non-linear survivor narratives, like that of Ruth Kluger and Charlotte, mirror this dissonance, offering a visceral truth that eludes easy comprehension, much like art and literature, which persist in grappling with trauma through their very structure. These narratives resist closure, reflecting the paradox that the more one seeks to understand trauma, the further its full meaning slips away—forever suspended between what can be expressed and what inevitably escapes articulation. Speaking differently, this framework suggests that effective Holocaust representation requires a balance between historical fidelity and creative strategies that respect the limits of language and narrative.

Ruth Kluger's, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, is a memoir of her experiences growing up in Nazi-occupied Vienna and later in the concentration camps of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz-Birkenau. In *Still Alive,* Ruth Kluger intricately weaves together realism and anti-realism to capture the multifaceted trauma of the Holocaust. The text simultaneously embraces the stark,

grounded truth of lived experiences while resisting the confines of traditional narrative forms, creating a portrait of trauma that is as fragmented and surreal as the experiences themselves and offers a new mode of trauma representation—Traumatic Realism. In an interview, Rothberg says: “Traumatic Realism is a mode of representation that, on the one hand, tries to meet the demand for documenting history and on the other hand, attempts to represent that history in a self-reflexive way that marks the absences, the traumatic losses, and the gaps that necessarily inhere in attempt to write about the Holocaust or other traumatic histories.”

Kluger’s text is grounded in realism through its visceral depictions of the Holocaust: the hunger, the violence, the fear, and the unrelenting survival instinct. These elements are presented with sharp clarity, pulling the reader into the concrete horrors of history. For instance, she writes, “And the naked corpses, heaped on a truck, piled up any which way, and molested by flies. The disfigured features that had faced the ultimate violence, the hair on their heads dishevelled, sparse pubic hair, all in the glaring sun” (108). The stark description vividly conveys the raw, unfiltered historical reality of the Holocaust’s brutality and forces the readers to confront its sheer dehumanization. However, Kluger also grapples with the inherent limitations of language in representing such extreme trauma. She reflects on the inefficacy of language to fully convey the suffering and horror of the Holocaust: "She worries that the very act of literature betrays what was experienced in the Holocaust: do not words make ‘speakable’ what is not?" (Foreword, Lore Segal 13). Highlighting the limitations of memory resulting from the extremity of the genocide, Kluger writes: “There is a gap between knowledge and memory, and I can’t bridge it” (35). This acknowledgment of the gap between knowledge and memory underscores the profound disconnect between experiencing trauma and being able to communicate its full weight, leaving an irreparable void in the act of remembrance.

The text exemplifies Traumatic Realism through its refusal to impose coherence or meaning of the Holocaust experiences and by blurring the boundaries in ways that makes extraordinary appears ordinary. Kluger's memoir provides a map of the “concentrationary” universe as a borderland in which extremity and everydayness coexist and adjoin each other, but without resolving

into a new unity. Rothberg writes: “In her text, the extreme and the everyday are neither opposed, collapsed, nor transcended through a dialectical synthesis — instead, they are at once held together and kept forever apart in a mode of representation I call traumatic realism” (129). Kluger masterfully weaves the ordinary with the extraordinary, demonstrating how the scars of the Holocaust persist in everyday life. She recalls a seemingly mundane moment: "I had been in Germany for only a few months when a teenage bicyclist ran me down one evening... I crash into metal and light, like floodlights over barbed wire" (209). What starts as a simple street crossing transforms into a visceral flashback, where the cyclist and the street become unsettling echoes of the violence and confinement of the camp. These instances of normalcy, disrupted by the ever-present violence, not only convey the trauma of the Holocaust but underscore how the boundaries between life and death, the familiar and the unknown, are constantly in flux.

Drawing on the physical landscape of Birkenau, where multiple subcamps were near one another, separated solely by barbed wire, Kluger presents a situation in which both proximity and distance coexist. A succinct paragraph recounts the interaction between the narrator and her mother with two Hungarian prisoners, who were among the victims of the most extensive stages of the Nazi genocide: “My mother remembered that she still had a pair of woolen socks, ran to fetch them, and prepared to toss them over the wire. I interfered: I can throw better than you, give them to me. My mother refused, threw the socks, and they fell short, ending up stuck on top of the wire, where no one could reach them. Regrets on both sides. A futile gesture. Next day the Hungarian women were gone, their camp empty like a ghost town, our socks still impaled on the wire” (108). The passage very well delineates how the everyday gesture of the mother is “rendered uncanny” (Rothberg 147) by the catastrophic nature of the “concentrationary” universe. The absence of the direct representation of the death of the Hungarian women and the simultaneous presence of their death through the imagery of hung socks speaks how Kluger's memoir intertwined the realist and the antirealist approach giving a way to the new model of representing the genocide i.e. Traumatic Realism. The coexistence of, throwing of the socks(everyday) and the death of the Hungarian women(extreme) suggests that

Trauma resides not in the extreme event itself but in the "barbed" wire that holds together and separates life and death, the inside and the outside, the familiar and the radically foreign. The text, through the deployment of Traumatic Realism "seeks to bring forth traces of trauma, to preserve and even expose the abyss between everyday reality and real extremity" (Rothberg 139) and forces the readers to witness trauma not as a single event in history, but as a perpetual presence in both memory and identity.

Rothberg emphasizes that Traumatic Realism resists any attempt at closure or neat resolution. Kluger's memoir exemplifies this resistance to closure, as she refuses to offer easy answers about her survival or that of her mother. For instance, rather than concluding with catharsis or a return to normalcy, Kluger leaves her readers with a lingering sense of unfinishedness. This narrative choice reflects the ongoing nature of trauma, an aspect that Rothberg highlights as essential to the Traumatic Realism approach. Kluger's memoir does not seek to provide a moral conclusion or a neat resolution; rather, it presents the reader with the raw, unprocessed nature of Holocaust memory, underscoring that trauma can never truly be "fixed" or understood in a conventional narrative sense.

Auschwitz and After, a trilogy, consisting, *None of Us Will Return, Useless Knowledge* and *The Measure of our days* is a first-person account of life and survival in Birkenau by Charlotte Delbo. This memoir serves as a quintessential example of Traumatic Realism, effectively delineating the interplay between the mundane and the extraordinary, the factual and the unspeakable, and memory and its gaps. Her work offers a compelling framework for examining the concept of Traumatic Realism, blending narrative fragmentation, poetic expression, and meticulous accounts of quotidian existence in Auschwitz to represent the Holocaust's incomprehensibility while incorporating the survivors' lived experiences.

Embodying the antirealist approach to trauma representation, Delbo's work evokes the ineffability of the Holocaust through her fragmented narratives, disjointed timelines, and poetic language, which resist linear narration and instead reflect the fractured nature of trauma and the inadequacy of language in conveying such profound experiences. Delbo acknowledges the tension between language and trauma when she writes: "Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is

true. I am certain it is truthful" (29). This statement underscores the impossibility of fully capturing the Holocaust's reality through traditional narrative structures. While "truth" in a literal sense may be unattainable, Delbo emphasizes that the emotional and psychological truths of the experience are what matter. She further explores this dissonance by reflecting on the limitations of language: "Words have all faded since time immemorial. Words lost their color long ago. Grasses—umbels—brook—a cluster of lilacs—spring showers—all vivid images have grown livid long ago" (133). Together, these reflections underscore her struggle to articulate an experience that defies comprehension, relying instead on fragmented forms to convey the irreparable rupture caused by trauma.

Traumatic realism resists coherence and closure, reflecting the chaotic and fragmented reality of trauma itself. Delbo's writing embodies this through fragmented sentences, abrupt juxtapositions, and sudden shifts in perspective, mirroring the disjointed way survivors process and recall unbearable moments. For instance, in "The Dummies", Delbo employs a surreal comparison, likening frozen corpses to shop mannequins: "The dummies are lying in the snow, bathed in a winter light which reminds me of the sunlight on the asphalt" (45). This grotesque imagery, juxtaposed with mundane memories, exemplifies the dissonance central to traumatic realism. The comparison captures the alienation and dehumanization that defined the camp experience, while the surreal, dreamlike tone reflects the impossibility of fully processing such horrors. Through her unsettling imagery, Delbo transforms the unthinkable into something perceptible, bridging the chasm between the reader's understanding and the incomprehensible atrocities of Auschwitz. In reflecting on the fragmentation of memory, Delbo captures the profound emptiness that the Holocaust inflicted on its survivors, where even the simplest recollections become distant and irretrievable: "My memory is more bloodless than an autumn leaf. My memory has forgotten the dew. My memory is drained of its sap. My memory has bled to death" (133). This vivid image of a memory that is drained and lifeless mirrors the breakdown of coherent narrative that traumatic realism emphasizes. Her fragmented narrative structure itself becomes a reflection of the shattered nature of memory post-trauma.

Although her fragmented narrative and poetic style convey the inexpressible nature of trauma, her detailed depictions of the quotidian realities of camp life anchor the memoir within a realist paradigm. Through the integration of careful observation and literary creativity, Delbo articulates the lived experiences of trauma while preserving its intricacies, thereby adhering to the realist imperative to document historical truth. For instance, Delbo starkly portrays the grotesque and dehumanizing reality of camp life: “The yard is full of them. Naked. Stacked side by side. White, a bluish whiteness against the snow. Heads shaved, pubic hair straight and stiff. The corpses are frozen. White with brown toenails” (44). The meticulous descriptions of the dead convey the brutality and dehumanization suffered by the prisoners, forcing the reader to confront the harsh realities of the camp without providing the comfort of emotional distance.

Auschwitz and After is a masterful exploration of how the extreme conditions of Auschwitz coexisted with the quotidian of daily life, revealing the profound dissonance that characterized the Holocaust experience. The text shows how the extraordinary horrors of Auschwitz infiltrated the everyday, transforming the mundane into something grotesque and surreal and blurring the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal. She writes: “The dazzling snow now spotted with diarrhoea. Dirty puddles. The end of the day. Dead women strewn about on the snow, in the puddles. Sometimes we had to step over them. They were just ordinary obstacles so far as we were concerned" (61). The image of "dazzling snow now spotted with diarrhoea" and "dead women strewn about on the snow" juxtaposes the natural beauty of snow with the grotesque reality of death, turning the ordinary into something horrific. The statement "They were just ordinary obstacles so far as we were concerned" highlights how the survivors became desensitized to the unimaginable suffering around them, blurring the boundary between what is normal and what is abnormal. This collapse of boundaries underscores the transformative impact of trauma, where the extreme infiltrates and redefines the everyday.

In the aftermath of Auschwitz, Delbo’s memories of the camp continue to intertwine the ordinary and the extraordinary. She reflects on how everyday objects and actions are haunted by their associations with the camp, she writes: “One day I feel I am walking by the kitchens: it’s because I left a potato rotting at

the bottom of my vegetable basket. At once everything surfaces again: the mud, the snow, the blows of the truncheons received because walking in a certain direction was forbidden" (272). This passage exemplifies the profound impact that the harrowing experiences at Auschwitz have had on Delbo's understanding of the ordinary. Everyday objects and activities are transformed into representations of survival, loss, and trauma, highlighting the persistent interplay between the extraordinary and the mundane in the lives of those who have survived. As Rothberg says, "Delbo offers an example of traumatic realism in which the unsymbolizable real persists within and disrupts the mimetic narrative of everyday reality" (144).

Michael Rothberg's concept of Traumatic Realism provides a balanced approach to representing the Holocaust in literature. It bridges the gaps between two contrasting ways of depiction: Realism, which focuses on presenting events in a straightforward, factual manner, and Anti-Realism, which highlights the fragmented and chaotic nature of trauma. This makes Traumatic Realism particularly useful for dealing with the Holocaust, which combines historical facts with the immense emotional and psychological pain that is hard to express.

Traumatic Realism blends the structured clarity of Realism with the non-linear, broken narratives of Anti-Realism. This approach allows writers to portray both the everyday systems that enabled atrocities and the deep emotional confusion and disorientation caused by them. It respects the historical truth while recognizing that the Holocaust's full impact is beyond what words or stories can fully capture. As a method, Traumatic Realism helps authors and scholars handle the Holocaust's complexities without oversimplifying or sensationalizing it. It acknowledges the limits of language while honouring the experiences of victims and survivors. Additionally, it addresses important issues like preserving memory and countering denial. Traumatic Realism encourages a thoughtful, ethical, and multi-layered way of understanding and representing the Holocaust, ensuring its portrayal is meaningful and responsible.

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