DELILLO'S HALL OF MIRRORS: CREATION, NARRATIVE TRUTH AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE SELF

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Abstract: *This article examines Don DeLillo's sustained engagement with embedded authorship and mirror-based narrative structures as metafictional mechanisms through which the very notions of narrative truth and coherent subjectivity are placed under pressure. Drawing on Graley Herren's account of DeLillo's self-reflexive aesthetic, alongside postmodern and psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks, the study argues that DeLillo constructs a literary "hall of mirrors" in which artistic creation functions ambivalently—as both an interpretive strategy and a form of epistemological confinement. Through the presence of authorial surrogates in Libra, Underworld, and Americana, DeLillo demonstrates how fiction intervenes in historical and psychological absences, offering provisional patterns of meaning that simultaneously erode claims to authenticity. In parallel, recurring mirror imagery and symmetrical narrative designs, often approaching mise en abyme, dramatize a subjectivity increasingly severed from stable referents. Rather than endorsing metafiction as a mode of playful liberation, DeLillo presents self-reflexivity as symptomatic of the closed, self-referential logic of late-capitalist culture. The article concludes that DeLillo's fiction articulates a critical vision of modern identity as constructed, unstable, and perpetually deferred within a world that has collapsed into its own reflection.*

Keywords: *Don DeLillo; metafiction; embedded authorship; mirror structures; narrative truth; postmodern subjectivity.*

Introduction

Throughout his literary career, Don DeLillo has persistently interrogated the unstable boundary between reality and representation, between historical fact and narrative fabrication, and between selfhood and its cultural mediations. His novels repeatedly return to the problem of how meaning is produced—and distorted—in a world saturated by images, information systems, and abstract structures of power. Central to this interrogation is DeLillo's sophisticated deployment of metafictional strategies, most notably embedded authorship and mirroring devices, which simultaneously foreground the act of artistic creation and undermine its epistemic authority.

As critics such as Graley Herren have observed, DeLillo's fiction operates as a self-reflexive "hall of mirrors," a textual space in which narrative forms continuously reflect upon their own construction and limitations. Building upon this critical insight, the present study contends that DeLillo's metafiction should not be understood as mere formal experimentation or postmodern playfulness. Rather, it constitutes a sustained response to the epistemological and ontological crises of late modernity. In DeLillo's work, storytelling does not restore coherence or stabilize truth; instead, it exposes the degree to which narrative itself participates in the fragmentation of meaning and the dissolution of the unified self.

By tracing the function of embedded author-figures and mirroring structures across several major novels, this article demonstrates how DeLillo complicates conventional notions of narrative truth and reveals subjectivity as a precarious, constructed phenomenon shaped by historical rupture, cultural mediation, and psychological projection.

Embedded Authorship and the Crisis of Narrative Truth

One of DeLillo's most consequential metafictional techniques is his recurrent use of embedded author-figures—characters who, overtly or implicitly, assume the role of narrative producers within the fictional world. These figures draw sustained attention to the artificiality of storytelling and destabilize the distinction between fiction, history, and memory.

In *Libra*, this function is embodied by Nicholas Branch, a retired CIA analyst charged with assembling a comprehensive account of the Kennedy assassination. Branch's archival labor gradually transforms into a creative enterprise, as speculation, invention, and narrative patterning fill the inevitable gaps left by historical documentation. While this process exposes the constructed nature of official history, it simultaneously reveals the impossibility of narrative closure. The more Branch writes, the deeper he is drawn into an ever-expanding network of explanations—a self-perpetuating "Libranth" in which fiction substitutes for certainty without ever arriving at truth.

A comparable dynamic emerges in *Underworld*, where Nick Shay invents the so-called Martiniad as a private mythologization of the Bobby Thomson home run baseball. On one level, this embedded narrative serves a therapeutic function, enabling Nick to confront unresolved emotions linked to paternal absence and loss. Yet DeLillo frames this act of narrative invention with skepticism. The Martiniad exemplifies the consolatory power of storytelling while simultaneously exposing its distortive tendencies: narrative symmetry and symbolic coherence are imposed upon an experience that remains fundamentally fragmented.

In *Americana*, the impulse toward narrative fabrication assumes a more explicitly pathological dimension. David Bell, both narrator and filmmaker, describes his artistic practice as the creation of an alternative "mirror reality," openly equating art with deception and self-mystification. His characterization of storytelling as a form of "pathological lying" articulates one of DeLillo's

central anxieties: that narrative creation may come to replace reality rather than illuminate it.

Mirror Imagery and the Disintegration of the Self

Alongside embedded authorship, DeLillo's fiction is permeated by mirror imagery and mirroring dynamics that function as metaphors for the formation—and deformation—of identity. Drawing implicitly on psychoanalytic theories of narcissism and the Lacanian mirror stage, DeLillo presents subjectivity as fundamentally mediated, relational, and prone to misrecognition.

Characters frequently encounter reflections of themselves, whether literal or symbolic, only to experience estrangement rather than self-knowledge. David Bell's obsession with images, fantasies, and cinematic representations situates him as a distinctly postmodern narcissist, whose identity is composed of borrowed surfaces and idealized projections. The self that emerges is not authentic but assembled—a fragile construction sustained through repetition and imitation.

In later works such as *Zero K*, DeLillo radicalizes this critique by foregrounding the solipsistic risks of self-reflexive creation. Jeff Lockhart's imagined reconstruction of his stepmother's consciousness within the cryonic facility initially appears to promise access to another's interiority. Yet this imaginative act ultimately reveals itself as a projection of Jeff's own anxieties and desires. Creation thus becomes a closed circuit in which the subject encounters only variations of the self, reinforcing isolation rather than transcendence.

Structural Symmetry and Infinite Regression

DeLillo's engagement with mirroring is not confined to character and imagery but extends to the formal architecture of his novels. Drawing on modernist precedents, particularly Joycean strategies of chiasmus and structural symmetry, DeLillo constructs narratives that loop back upon

themselves and resist linear progression. In *Ratner's Star*, for instance, the second half of the novel mirrors the first in reverse sequence, producing a sense of circularity that undermines teleological movement.

Such formal designs generate a sustained experience of mise en abyme, in which acts of creation are endlessly reflected within the created object itself. The result is a condition of infinite regression—a narrative hall of mirrors without an external vantage point. Meaning is continually deferred, and the possibility of a stable referent dissolves. Through these structural strategies, DeLillo dramatizes a cultural condition characterized by radical self-reference, echoing broader concerns with media saturation, simulation, and ideological enclosure.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Don DeLillo's use of embedded authorship and mirror structures constitutes a sustained and deeply critical engagement with the problem of narrative truth and the instability of modern subjectivity. Rather than celebrating metafiction as a space of playful freedom, DeLillo exposes its limits and latent dangers within a cultural landscape increasingly defined by abstraction, mediation, and repetition. Embedded narratives offer temporary consolation yet risk becoming interpretive traps; mirrors promise recognition but instead deliver estrangement.

Through these intertwined strategies, DeLillo articulates a vision of contemporary existence as a closed system of reflections, in which identity, history, and art are endlessly produced yet never secured. In a world transformed into a hall of mirrors, the act of creation no longer guarantees meaning; instead, it reveals the profound precariousness of the self that creates.

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