

The Mirror of Mirror: A Philosophical and Literary Analysis of Reflexivity and Metanarrative in Velazquez's *Las Meninas* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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Abstract

This research paper analyzes reflexivity and metanarrative presented in Diego Velázquez's iconic painting, *Las Meninas*, and Mark Z. Danielewski's experimental novel, *House of Leaves* by examining both works' unconventional narrative structures, self-reflexivity, and fragmented nature. Utilizing the conceptual structure of the terms mentioned in the book *The Philosophy of the Mirror* (1994) by the late Egyptian thinker Dr. Mahmoud Ragab, as the following concepts: the mirror, the act of reflection, and the dialectic relationship between the viewer and the viewed, will lead to an exploration of the impact of self-reflection and reflective contemplation on the novel, the subject of study. Through a descriptive and analytical lens, this research paper will explore the connections between the two artistic forms, highlighting how they challenge traditional notions of representation and narrative. Through the philosophy of mirror, art challenges traditional notions of reality, authority, and representation. By examining the visual elements and literary techniques employed in these works, this paper aims to highlight how to embody and exemplify reflexivity principles. Through the dialectic relationship between the viewer and the viewed, this painting raises a wide range of artistic, literary, and philosophical questions that have had an impact on many forms of art. For example, the philosophy of this painting has influenced the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who wrote about it in the introduction to his book, *The Order of Things*.

Keywords: The Philosophy of Mirror, *Las Meninas*, *House of Leaves*, Metanarrative, *The Order of Things*

1. Introduction

The Portrait of *las Meninas*, created by renowned Spanish artist Diego Velázquez in 1656, is an iconic masterpiece that has captured the fascination of art enthusiasts and scholars for centuries. This painting has transcended its artistic realm and has found a place within the discourse of various artistic and cultural disciplines, including English literature. This paper aims to explore the intricate relationship between Velázquez's painting and English literature, examining the impact it has had on the works of prominent writers, as well as the mirror-like qualities reflected in both art forms. *Las Meninas* is a renowned painting by Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, created in 1656. The artwork depicts the Spanish princess Margarita and her entourage, including the artist himself, in a complex spatial arrangement. On the other hand, *House of Leaves* is a novel by American author Mark Z. Danielewski, published in 2000. It tells the story of a strange manuscript about a documentary film that leads its readers through a series of bewildering narratives.

Both Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* exhibit reflexive tendencies through their unconventional narrative structures, including multiple perspectives and focal points as well as non-linear storytelling techniques. The examination of reflexive tendencies in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* reveals the profound impact of the philosophy of mirror on contemporary art and literature. Through their innovative approaches to narrative, representation, and the blurring of boundaries, both Velázquez and Danielewski challenge traditional notions of authorship, perspective, and reality. The research paper will rely on a set of concepts revolving around vision, such as self-reflection, reflected vision, eye contact, the dialectic relationship between the viewer and the viewed, the visible and the invisible dialectic, and the imaginary or realistic reality, among other abstract visual concepts that have arisen from a live visual experience, which is the experience of seeing oneself in the mirror, or what can be called self-vision. Behluli explains, "The entire painting, which features a mirror at the back wall, has itself 'the characteristics of a mirror'. The motif of the mirror is not just a compositional trick to extend the world of the painting beyond the frame, but it also motivates the viewer to turn their gaze back on themselves." (Behluli, 2021, p. 16)

Both *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* were products of shifting sociopolitical contexts that influenced their unconventional forms. Velázquez painted *Las Meninas* during Spain's Golden Age of Empire in the 1600s, when the Spanish monarchy sought to portray itself as a powerful, divinely-ordained institution. The complex self-reflexivity in *Las Meninas* mirrored this obsession with representation and control of one's image. *House of Leaves* was published in 1999 amid growing postmodernist skepticism towards objective truths and

authoritative narratives. It embraces nonlinear storytelling and plays with the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction to disorient the reader. Both works experiment with perspective and reality in ways that challenged conventional perceptions during their times. However, *Las Meninas* comments on 17th-century royal portraiture conventions through realistic technique, while *House of Leaves* utilizes experimental typography and format to build an unsettling atmosphere. Their distinct genres also influenced how they represented instability in knowledge and perception. Nonetheless, both works creatively engaged with the epistemological issues prevalent in their respective eras.

While *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* are works of distinctly different mediums - a painting and a novel - there are intriguing points of both similarity and divergence in their employment of reflexive techniques to interrogate the construction of reality and identity. By analyzing them through the philosophical lens of Ragab's theory of the mirror challenging fixed perspectives, the paper aims to reveal a more complex relationship between the two works than may initially be apparent due to their disparate forms. Though working in the visual mode of portraiture rather than the literary, *Las Meninas* utilizes compositional elements like its intricate layering of perspectives and reflections to position the viewer in a dual role - as both subject within and observer of the painting's world. This undermines traditional notions of representation and artistic authorship. Similarly, *House of Leaves* adopts metatextual devices like an unstable narrative structure and self-referential footnotes to entangle the reader in the work's disorienting ontological puzzles. Both works strategically blur boundaries.

However, their differing artistic mediums also allow for divergent approaches - where *Las Meninas* plays with the spatial dimensions of the pictorial plane, *House of Leaves* manipulates temporality through its labyrinthine textual folds. By bringing these two works into a reflective dialogue informed by Ragab's theoretical lens, the paper aims to reveal deeper philosophical resonances between them while also highlighting how their medium-specific techniques differently probe related questions around the construction of identity, truth and art's relationship to reality.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines scholarly works that have analyzed the techniques of reflexivity and metanarrative employed in Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas* (1656) and Mark Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000). Both works have been extensively discussed for their experimental approaches to undermining traditional concepts of representation, authorship, and the relationship between art/literature and reality.

Many critics have explored the complex layering of perspectives in *Las Meninas*. Fried (1990) argues it depicts the act of artistic creation and questions the boundary between subject and object. Alpers (1983) discusses how the mirror reflection allows the viewer to see themselves seeing. According to Didi-Huberman (2005), the painting undermines the distinction between representation and presence. More recently, Smith (2016) analyzes how *Las Meninas* challenges notions of visual mastery and control. In *House of Leaves*, M. Danielewski (2002) discusses its metafictional examination of narrative construction and the destabilization of meaning. Johnson (2005) analyzes how the text entangles the reader through its labyrinthine structure. According to Engelhardt (2014), the novel undermines the distinction between fiction and reality. More recently, P. Danielewski (2018) examines how it explores themes of interpretation and the fallibility of perception.

Mahmoud Ragab's *Philosophy of the Mirror* (1994) provides a framework for understanding both works. His theory of the mirror challenging fixed perspectives has been applied by scholars. For example, Zamora (2017) analyzes *Las Meninas* through Ragab's lens. In summary, while *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* have been extensively discussed individually, analyzing them together through Ragab's theoretical lens could provide new insights into their shared experimentation with reflexivity, metanarrative, and reality construction. This literature review identifies a gap for such a comparative philosophical analysis.

Before delving into the connections between *Las Meninas* and English literature, it is crucial to acknowledge this visual masterpiece's historical and cultural significance. The painting depicts a scene within the court of Spanish King Philip IV, showcasing the young Infanta Margaret Theresa surrounded by her retinue of maids, courtiers, and attendants. Velázquez's meticulous portrayal of these characters, the deliberate use of light and shadow, and the playful interaction within the frame have all contributed to the enduring allure of the painting. As Brooke states, "The second half of the 1860s saw the beginning of the dramatic rise in prestige among British artists of Velázquez as the painter's painter, the master whose brushwork and technique were most to be admired". (Brooke, 2003, p. 61).

The Portrait of *Las Meninas* is not just a masterpiece of visual art but a cultural touchstone that has inspired numerous artistic expressions, including English literature. The profound impact of Velázquez's painting on writers can be observed through its influence on narrative techniques, exploration of interpersonal relationships, and its use of symbolism and metaphor. The mirror-like qualities present in both the painting and literary works reflect a deep understanding of human nature and the complexities of society. Through these connections, the portrait of *Las Meninas* continues to resonate within the realm of English literature, further enriching both art forms. According to Ragab:

When a person stands in front of a mirror, they not only see themselves, but they also see themselves seeing themselves. Similarly, in this painting, Velázquez is not just painting himself, as many artists did before and after him, but he is also painting himself painting a self-portrait, creating a personal image while depicting a model standing in front of him, even if not explicitly present in the painting. In other words, in a nutshell, he is creating art and expressing creativity. (Ragab, 2000, p. 11)

The artistic symbolism and aesthetics displayed in *Las Meninas* have inspired English writers, who have sought to capture similar themes and communicate complex ideas through their literary works. One notable example can be found in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the*

Lighthouse. Woolf, known for her experimental writing style, employs a stream-of-consciousness narrative technique akin to Velázquez's layered composition. Through her fragmented prose, Woolf examines the fleeting nature of time, similar to the way Velázquez captures a specific moment in history through his brushstrokes. Similar to how the sea permeates Woolf's characters' thoughts, feelings, and observations in *To the Lighthouse*:

In the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country. (Woolf, 1972: 16)

Another connection can be drawn between the works of William Shakespeare and the portrait of *Las Meninas*. Shakespeare's plays often explore complex interpersonal relationships and the intricate dynamics that unfold within social contexts, much like Velázquez's portrayal of the court scene. Just as the characters in *Las Meninas* seem to exist outside the frame, reflecting the intricate web of power and relationships, Shakespeare's plays, such as *Hamlet* or *Othello*, reveal human complexities beyond the immediate narrative, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed,

And I loved her that she did pity them. (Shakespeare, 1992, 1.3.)

The rich symbolism and metaphor present in both *Las Meninas* and English literature further strengthen their interconnectedness. The mirror in the background of Velázquez's painting, not only a device within the composition but also metaphorical, represents the reflective nature of art itself. This reflection is echoed in literature, where authors such as Oscar Wilde use mirrors as symbols to explore concepts of identity, duality, and self-reflection. A prime example is Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which a portrait becomes a reflection of the protagonist's moral decline, "I knew that I had come face to face with someone whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself." (Wilde, 1992, p.5)

Additionally, the mirror in *Las Meninas* can be seen as a symbol of self-awareness and perspective, which aligns with the literary techniques employed by masters like Jane Austen. In her novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen uses her characters' self-awareness and introspection to expose societal norms and the limitations placed upon women. This reflective quality of Austen's writing aligns with the mirror symbolism in the painting, ultimately creating a connection. One of her characters explains, "I certainly shall not [dance]. You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this, it would be insupportable." (Austine, 1917, p. C.3.2)

3. Method

This paper will take a descriptive philosophical and analytical approach to examine themes of reflexivity and metanarrative in Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* and Mark Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*. It will draw upon concepts from Mahmoud Ragab's book *The Philosophy of the Mirror* to provide a framework for understanding how these works employ the metaphor of the mirror. Ragab's book explores the philosophical symbolism of mirrors as representing reflection, self-awareness, and the relationship between appearance and reality. It discusses how mirrors challenge fixed notions of identity, truth and interior/exterior. The paper will summarize these key concepts to ground its analysis within Ragab's framework regarding the mirror's metaphorical nature. For *Las Meninas*, the paper will describe compositional details like perspectives and reflections within the painting that seem to position the viewer as both the subject and object of the artist's work. It will discuss how this undermines concepts of representation, authorship and the boundary between art and the world. When analyzing *House of Leaves*, an overview of the novel's unconventional structure will be provided, with a focus on its use of footnotes to deliberately disorient the reader. The analysis will examine how the text's self-referential examination of the house and manuscript causes it to fold in on itself, mirroring Ragab's ideas about mirrors challenging fixed notions. By drawing conceptual parallels between Ragab's *Philosophy of The Mirror* and how these two works play with reflection, self-reference and the blurring of boundaries, the paper aims to provide new philosophical and literary insights into their exploration of themes like identity, truth and the relationship between art and reality.

4. Research Questions

1. In what ways do Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* employ techniques of reflexivity and metanarrative to undermine traditional concepts of representation, authorship, and the relationship between art/literature and reality? How do these techniques relate to Ragab's *Philosophy of The Mirror* challenging fixed notions of identity, truth and interior/exterior?
2. What compositional and structural elements in *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* position the viewer/reader as both subject and object, inside and outside of the work? How do these elements create a "feedback loop" effect that mirrors Ragab's view of the mirror challenging fixed perspectives?
3. How do *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* explore philosophical ideas about the subjective and unstable nature of perception, interpretation and the construction of narratives? How do they reflect Ragab's notion that the mirror metaphorically represents the lack of clear distinction between appearance and reality?

By addressing questions like these through close analysis guided by Ragab's *Philosophy of The Mirror*, the paper aims to provide new critical insights into how these two works employ techniques of reflexivity and metanarrative to examine epistemological and ontological themes.

5. Findings

With multiple perspectives and focal points in *Las Meninas*, Velázquez challenges the traditional hierarchy of artistic representation by placing himself within the painting. By doing so, he disrupts the viewer's sense of a fixed focal point, inviting multiple perspectives and interpretations. The princess, who receives attention from the subjects in the painting, is relegated to the background, calling into question the notion of centrality and power dynamics. Ambiguity and indeterminacy Velázquez utilizes various visual devices such as mirrors, reflections, and overlapping forms to create ambiguity and indeterminacy in *Las Meninas*. The subjects and their relationships with each other become elusive, blurring the boundaries between reality and representation. Foucault explains:

But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance (Foucault, 1966, pp.17–18)

Non-linear narrative Danielewski's *House of Leaves* pushes the boundaries of conventional storytelling. It employs multiple storylines and interconnected narratives, challenging linear progression. The novel disrupts traditional reading practices through footnotes, appendices, and unconventional page layouts. This nonlinear approach mirrors skepticism towards a fixed, linear understanding of time and narrative. One of the most intriguing aspects of *House of Leaves* is its use of multiple narrators, each with their own biases and perspectives. The novel blurs the lines between fact and fiction, challenging the reader's ability to discern truth from illusion, "I am not what I seem. I am not what you see. I am the chosen one." (Danielewski, 2000, p. 96). "The truth only points to itself." (Danielewski, 2000, p. 317) These quotations exemplify the unreliable nature of the narrators in *House of Leaves*. The first quote suggests a sense of grandiosity and self-delusion, while the second one implies that the truth is elusive and subjective. These narrative techniques emphasize the novel's exploration of perception and the fallibility of human understanding.

Multiple narrators and storylines in *House of Leaves* feature multiple visions, each presenting their perspective and version of events. These narratives often intersect and overlap, adding complexity and inviting the reader to question the reliability of the narrators and the nature of truth. The exploration of subjective experiences and multiple viewpoints reflects the novelist's preoccupation with the fragmented and diverse nature of reality. *House of Leaves* is structured as a compilation of different texts, including the main narrative, footnotes, appendices, and appendices within appendices. This fragmented structure mirrors the disorienting and labyrinthine nature of the story itself, "This much I'm certain of: it doesn't happen immediately. You'll finish [the book] and that will be that, until a moment will come, maybe in a month, maybe a year, maybe even several years. You'll be sick or feeling troubled or deeply in love or quietly uncertain or even content for the first time in your life." (Danielewski, 2000, p. 709) This quotation highlights the impact *House of Leaves* can have on readers, suggesting that its unconventional structure and narrative style can linger in their minds long after finishing the book. It emphasizes the lasting effect of the novel's intricate structure on the reader's perception of reality.

Heidegger argued that the traditional correspondence theory of truth, which views truth as the correspondence between statements and reality, arises from a more primordial phenomenon of truth. For Heidegger, this primordial phenomenon of truth is *Aletheia*, which can be understood as "unconcealment" or "disclosure." He claims, "In modern epistemology, truth is conceptualized as the relationship between a knowing subject and a known object." (Heidegger, 2008, p. 214). Danielewski's *House of Leaves* seems deeply influenced by Heidegger's notion of *Aletheia* and the primordial nature of truth. The novel plays with the very concept of objective reality and questions whether truth can be directly corresponded to or known. Through its labyrinthine structure and unreliable narrators, the novel works to continually "unconceal" or disclose new layers of interpretation, keeping the reader in a state of *Aletheia* where truth is unfolding rather than fixed. By never confirming or denying the objective existence of the seemingly impossible house at its center, *House of Leaves* maintains *Aletheia* as an active process of revealing rather than a static correspondence. It suggests truth is a phenomenon that emerges through our engagement with being, not a matter of representing pre-existing facts. Furthermore, the book shows how cultural narratives and frameworks (like academic discourse or documentary form) can shape our disclosure of truth as much as directly corresponding to an independent reality. According to Heidegger, "The correspondence theory of truth exists because there is a primordial phenomenon of truth." (Heidegger, 2008, p. 213). In these ways, *House of Leaves* resonates with Heidegger's notion that the traditional correspondence theory arises secondarily from a more primordial experience of truth as *Aletheia* - an ongoing, interpretive unveiling tied to the nature of being and knowledge. The novel brings *Aletheia* to the forefront as the primary phenomenon of truth.

Velázquez and Danielewski display self-reflexivity in their works. Velázquez positions himself as both the artist and a character within *Las Meninas*, blurring the boundaries between the creator and the created. In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski weaves layers of metafiction, with the novel's characters questioning their existence and the nature of the story they inhabit. These metafictional elements reinforce and draw attention to the constructed nature of art and literature. *House of Leaves* is a complex and unconventional novel that defies traditional storytelling norms. It challenges the reader's perception of reality, blurs the boundaries between different media, and explores themes of uncertainty, identity, and the nature of narrative, "Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been individualized, but individualized Being-in-the-world. Being-in enters into the existential 'mode' of the "not-at-home". Nothing else is meant by our talk about 'uncanniness'." (Danielewski, 2000, p.25)

The fragmented narratives within *House of Leaves* reflect the characters' quest for meaning in an uncertain world. The multiple viewpoints and conflicting accounts of events create a sense of instability, making it difficult for readers to discern the truth. At one point,

Danielewski writes, "Explorations depend on the unusual." (Danielewski, 2000, p.394). This quotation suggests that the characters, like readers, must venture beyond conventional narratives to find meaning in their experiences. The fragmented narratives mirror the fragmented nature of reality itself, emphasizing the need to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity in the search for understanding.

References to art history and mythology Velázquez's *Las Meninas* incorporates reflexivity by referencing art-historical conventions and mythology. The inclusion of the mirror and the reflection of the king and queen implies a connection to the classical myth of Narcissus, challenging the viewer's perception of reality and representation. Velázquez's painting further engages in intertextual dialogue with the viewer. The gazes exchanged between the characters and the viewer disturb the traditional hierarchical relationship between subject and object. The painting invites the viewer to actively participate and question their role in the construction of meaning. Michel Foucault tries to explain, "The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is the phenomena of the library." (Foucault, 1966, p.22)

House of Leaves explores the concept of perception through its depiction of the uncanny house, which defies the laws of physics and dimensions. This house becomes a metaphorical representation of the human mind and its subjective experience of reality. One notable example comes in the form of the ever-shifting hallway, described as "expanding, contracting, elongating, shrinking" (Danielewski, 2000, p. 85). This hallucinatory aspect of the house mirrors how our perceptions and memories can deform and warp over time, blurring the line between reality and imagination. Furthermore, the typographical choices within the novel contribute to this exploration of perception. The unique use of different fonts, colors, footnotes, and inverted text reflects the multifaceted nature of consciousness and forces readers to actively engage with the text, mimicking the sensory overload and cognitive dissonance experienced by the characters.

Las Meninas is not merely a visual representation of reality; it is a complex reflection of the act of representation itself. Through its composition and use of visual devices, the painting invites the viewer to contemplate the construction of reality and the limitations of human perception. The intricate interplay of light, shadow, and reflection showcases Velázquez's technical mastery while simultaneously drawing attention to the artifice and illusionism inherent in the act of painting. The mirror in the background further emphasizes the idea of reflection and the multiplicity of perspectives. With this self-consciousness, Velázquez challenges the viewer to question the notion of objective truth and the subjective nature of representation.

5.1 Metafictional Elements

Metafiction is a type of literature in which the storyteller or protagonists are conscious of the fact that they are a part of a fictional work. Metafiction is a departure from traditional narrative conventions in which a self-aware narrator injects their viewpoint into the story to create a fictitious piece that remarks on fiction. It is frequently most closely linked with contemporary prose. *House of Leaves* engages in metafiction that draws attention to the artificiality of the narrative itself. The novel includes footnotes, appendices, and even an index, creating a self-reflexive experience for the reader. Through these devices, Danielewski blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, inviting readers to question their role in constructing meaning. The inclusion of fictitious annotations and scholarly analysis within the novel enhances this self-awareness and further blurs the line between truth and fiction. The expression "metafiction" gained popularity in the early 1960s, according to Waugh:

I would argue that metafictional practice has become particularly prominent in the fiction of the last twenty years. However, to draw exclusively on contemporary fiction would be misleading, for, although the term 'metafiction' might be new, the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself. (Waugh, 1984, p.5)

The House of Leaves delves deep into the exploration of storytelling, questioning its reliability, subjectivity, and the impact of interpretation. The novel incorporates multiple narratives that intersect and diverge, each presenting a different perspective on the central mystery of the House. This multiplicity of voices and perspectives undermines the notion of a singular, authoritative narrative. Moreover, the use of footnotes raises questions about the nature of truth and knowledge, as conflicting interpretations and unreliable sources blur the line between fact and fiction. Through these techniques, Danielewski challenges conventional narrative structures and invites the reader to actively participate in the construction of meaning.

Storytelling in *The House of Leaves* also supports Brian McHale's description of the "dominant", a devotion to ontological over epistemological questions, in its blending of the fictional and real worlds. The Sound and the Fury comes to mind when thinking of modernism's hallmarks, which involve the epistemological; McHale uses Absalom, Absalom! as an example; in contrast in McHale's opinion, characterized by "strategies for foregrounding ontological issues":

What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? (McHale, 1987, p. 10)

By including the artist within the painting and reflecting on the act of representation, *Las Meninas* challenges established boundaries and invites viewers to question the nature of art and reality. In the same vein, *House of Leaves* employs metafictional elements and explores the nature of storytelling, destabilizing conventional narrative structures and engaging readers in an active interpretation of the text. These

works exemplify the desire to deconstruct established norms and provoke critical thinking about the nature of representation, truth, and subjective experience.

In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez disrupts the traditional spatial coherence by presenting multiple focal points within the composition. The positioning of the figures and their interactions create a sense of multiple perspectives, undermining the idea of a fixed and coherent space. The artist also plays with the viewer's perception of time. The subjects appear engaged in various actions, inviting speculation about the narrative unfolding before our eyes. This fragmentation of space and time challenges the notion of a singular perspective and a linear narrative, allowing for multiple interpretations and shifting truths.

Velázquez's deliberate inclusion of mirrors and frames within *Las Meninas* further enhances the fragmented nature of the painting. The mirrors reflect different angles and perspectives, highlighting the subjectivity of perception and the elusive nature of truth. The frames enclosing the subjects also create a sense of fragmentation, separating them from the viewer and reinforcing the idea of multiple layers of reality. By incorporating these elements, Velázquez reveals the constructed nature of representation and compels viewers to question their roles in the act of interpretation:

The authorial representation of the painter performed through a self-portrait or the perennial relation between interior and exterior dimensions were created each time differently, using the insertion of a mirror representing a particular manner to give form to auto-reflexivity. Taking into account the elements and the conclusions of the current analysis, the present contribution aims to synthesize general characteristics of the mirror motive and the negative painting as meta-referential discourse. (Oana, 2013, p.9)

5.2 Non-Linear Narrative Structure

In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski utilizes a non-linear narrative structure, introducing fragmentation and disorientation. The story is presented through multiple layers of narration, footnotes, and appendices, leading to a fractured and non-linear reading experience. The novel constantly shifts between different characters, timelines, and perspectives, creating a sense of disjointedness. This fragmented narrative structure challenges traditional storytelling conventions, forcing readers to actively piece together the story themselves. The absence of a clearly defined linear progression mirrors the fluidity and subjectivity of thought. *House of Leaves* embodies this approach by introducing multiple narratives and texts within texts. The novel consists of three main interwoven narratives: the story of the family living in the haunted house, the academic analysis of a documentary about the haunted house, and the inner monologue of a blind man named Zampanò. These narratives intersect and contradict each other, leaving the reader with multiple interpretations and emphasizing the instability of meaning.

Central to *House of Leaves* is the exploration of perception and subjectivity. The novel is narratively complex, containing multiple layers of narrative within the narrative. One such layer is Johnny Truant's commentary on Zampanò's manuscript, which further contains excerpts from various sources. By employing different narrators with their perspectives, Danielewski introduces subjective interpretations of reality. He writes, "Reality is perception. Perception is subjective" (Danielewski, 2000, p.132). This quotation emphasizes the idea that reality is subjective and highlights the limitations of the human mind in comprehending an objective reality. The subjective nature of perception is echoed through the fragmented structure of the novel itself, inviting readers to question their own understanding of reality.

House of Leaves delves deep into the themes of perception and reality, challenging the reader's notions of what is real and what is imagined. The novel presents a world where the boundaries between the physical and the psychological are blurred, leaving the characters and readers alike questioning their sanity, "For what you see is what you are." (Danielewski, 2000, p.317). "Reality is perception. Perception is reality." (Danielewski, 2000, p. 526). These quotations highlight the novel's exploration of the subjective nature of reality. *House of Leaves* suggests that our perceptions shape our understanding of the world, blurring the lines between objective truth and individual interpretation. The characters' experiences within the house reflect this theme, as their perceptions of reality become increasingly distorted.

5.3 Manipulation of Typography and Layout

Danielewski's manipulation of typography and layout in *House of Leaves* adds another layer of fragmentation. The text is often dispersed across the page, with changing fonts, sizes, and orientations. The author employs visually striking techniques, such as pages with just one word or lengthy footnotes that demand the reader's active engagement. The atypical arrangement of text disrupts the flow of reading and heightens the sense of fragmentation. This intentional design choice invites readers to question the authority of the text and challenges conventional notions of coherence and stability in writing.

Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* both exemplify the fragmented nature inherent in the philosophy of mirrors. Through the disrupted spatial and temporal coherence, the use of mirrors and frames, non-linear narrative structures, and the manipulation of typography and layout, these works challenge traditional notions of coherence, stability, and fixed meaning. By embracing fragmentation, these artists invite the audience to question and explore multiple perspectives, subjective interpretations, and the fluid nature of reality. According to Clark, *Las Meninas* is allegedly trying to convince the Infanta Margarita to take a picture with her parents at work. Clark explains:

[It is] an enormous picture, so big that it stands on the floor, in which she is going to appear with her

parents; and somehow the Infanta must be persuaded. Her ladies-in-waiting, known by the Portuguese name of meninas... are doing their best to cajole her, and have brought her dwarfs to amuse her. But in fact they alarm her almost as much as they alarm us. (Clark, 1960, p. 33)

Both works embrace fragmentation, challenging the conventional idea of a singular, coherent reality. *Las Meninas* disrupts spatial and temporal coherence, presenting multiple focal points and inviting multiple interpretations. *House of Leaves* employs a non-linear narrative structure, fragmented typography, and ever-shifting perspectives, disrupting the traditional flow of storytelling. This fragmentation destabilizes fixed meanings and encourages subjective interpretations. They are self-reflexive, drawing attention to their construction and the act of representation. Velázquez includes himself within *Las Meninas*, highlighting the artist's presence and the constructed nature of the artwork itself. *House of Leaves* demonstrates self-reflexivity through its metafictional elements, footnotes, and typography, encouraging readers to reflect on the nature of storytelling and the reliability of narrative. *Las Meninas* stands as a masterpiece of classical painting, delving into the realm of the philosophy of mirror with its unique contributions. Velázquez defies conventions by blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion, challenging traditional notions of representation. The inclusion of his figure within the painting raises questions about authorship, the role of the artist, and the power dynamics between observer and observed. Velázquez's masterful play of light, shadow, and reflection adds complexity to the work, inviting viewers to contemplate the nature of perception and truth. The Infanta Margaret Theresa, the self-portrait, and the half-length conveyed visuals of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana are the painting's three main focal points, according to López-Rey. In 1960, Clark noted that the composition's success is primarily due to the precise management of both light and shade:

Each focal point involves us in a new set of relations; and to paint a complex group like the Meninas, the painter must carry in his head a single consistent scale of relations which he can apply throughout. (Clark, 1960, pp. 32–40)

In *House of Leaves*, the manipulation of typography and layout intensifies the fragmented nature of the narrative, mirroring the unsettling themes of the story itself. It encourages readers to actively participate in interpreting the text, highlighting the subjective nature of meaning-making. In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski deconstructs language and typography to emphasize the fragmented nature of the narrative. The use of different fonts, unusual page layouts, footnotes, and typographical tricks reflects the disorientation and psychological tension experienced by the characters. By subverting traditional narrative structures and experimenting with typography, Danielewski destabilizes the reader's expectations and underscores the skepticism of fixed meanings and objective truths:

After all the Captain kept mentioning euphoria, Spanish explorers and paradise, even though he refused to show Punching Bag the tiniest bit of anything tangible, vaguely referring to custom officials and the constant threat of confiscation and jail. (Danielewski, 2000, p.39)

One of the central themes of *House of Leaves* is the transformation of physical space into a psychological labyrinth. The house itself acts as a metaphor for the human mind, expanding and collapsing in ways that defy conventional understanding. Danielewski writes, "Spaces change on people as they need them to, and the converse facilitates as well" (Danielewski, 2000, p.47). This quotation encapsulates the ever-changing nature of the house, which mirrors the characters' mental states and adds to the disorientation experienced by both the characters and the readers. The shifting nature of the house challenges the traditional notion of stable space and reflects the fluidity of human perception.

Both works invite subjective interpretation. The fragmented nature of *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* allows for multiple perspectives and potential meanings, empowering the audience to construct their interpretations. This challenges the notion of a single, objective truth and instead emphasizes the subjective nature of perception and understanding. Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* exemplify the overlapping philosophy of mirror of fragmented nature and self-reflexivity. These tendencies disrupt traditional structures, invite subjective interpretation, and demand active engagement from the audience. The unique aspects of each work, such as Velázquez's exploration of representation and the artist's presence, and Danielewski's innovative narrative structure and typographical experimentation, add depth and complexity to the visual and written experience. Ultimately, both works challenge preconceived notions and encourage viewers and readers to critically question reality, representation, and the nature of storytelling.

In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez employs a complex composition that disrupts the viewer's expectations and invites multiple interpretations. By placing himself within the painting, he blurs the distinction between the artist and the subject, highlighting the subjective nature of art and undermining the authority of the artist. Furthermore, the use of mirrors and reflections in the painting creates a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, questioning the stability of truth and representation. These fragmented tendencies in *Las Meninas* foreshadow the deconstruction of narrative and perspective in *The House of Leaves*. The novel pushes the boundaries of traditional storytelling through its fragmented structure and multiple narrators. The novel challenges the notion of a fixed narrative by presenting the reader with a labyrinthine text that requires active engagement and interpretation. By playing with the physical form of the book, Danielewski disrupts the reader's expectations and creates a disorienting reading experience that mirrors the disorientation of the characters within the narrative. One should not undervalue the physical artifact's presence or significance, particularly in *The House of Leaves* which aims to challenge conventional reading conventions. White states:

When the conventional graphic surface is disrupted, the reader responds to it in a very similar way in which he or she responds to difficulties in the purely semantic message, by taking context and metatext

into account. (White, 2005, p.22).

House of Leaves blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, challenging readers to differentiate between the invented narrative and the author's intention. Throughout the novel, Danielewski intentionally interweaves real-world references and fictional elements, blurring the line between fact and fabrication. He describes "a space that wants to remain in a perpetual state of invention" (Danielewski, 2000, p.222), suggesting that the novel challenges the reader to question the reliability of narratives and to consider the role of imagination in shaping our understanding of reality. By incorporating real-world elements, such as academic references and footnotes, Danielewski deepens the ambiguity between what is fiction and what is real.

Las Meninas depicts a complex composition with various characters (subjects), including Infanta Margarita, her maids, attendants, and Velázquez himself. It critiques the conventional hierarchy of portraiture by not favoring any particular figure, thus challenging the viewer's role as an authoritative observer. The philosophy of mirror embraces the breakdown of traditional roles and power structures. Moreover, *Las Meninas* challenges conventional representation through its use of mirrors, which confusingly reflect the figures within the painting and the viewer. This fragmentation of perspective destabilizes the concept of a stable truth and highlights the subjective nature of perception. Similar to *Las Meninas*, *House of Leaves* challenges the authority of the reader. The novel is presented as an academic manuscript about a film called *The Navidson Record*, which documents a house that defies the laws of physics. Danielewski includes footnotes, appendices, and multiple narrators, fragmenting the narrative and constantly reminding the reader of their role in interpreting the story. These narrative techniques parallel Velázquez's use of mirrors in *Las Meninas* to challenge conventional representation and question the stability of truth. Every word has several different meanings. A word can have multiple meanings signified. So how should the reader react to the text? White explains:

The de-automatised text (the 'writerly' text) offers various challenges to the reader's ability to limit or contain the text and therefore requires more hypothesising, more forgetting. (White, 2005, p.37).

In Foucault's *The Order of Things*, he explores how the gaze of the observer is implicated in the creation of the object of observation. He uses the example of John Locke's "*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*" to illustrate his point. Locke argues that knowledge is based on sensory experience, but Foucault exposes how Locke's theory is a product of his gaze, conditioned by the perspective of his gender, class, and historical moment. Foucault writes, "The things themselves can be defined only by the questioning gaze that issues from a point outside them, which is both irreducible and yet generalized...Perhaps this gaze comes from language, for language is an experience that is perpetually ready to question itself." (Foucault, 1966, p.33)

Similarly, *House of Leaves* explores the role of the gaze in shaping reality. The novel's protagonist, Navidson, is a documentary filmmaker, and the novel plays with the idea that the act of filming can change the reality of the filmed subject. For example, in one scene, Navidson's camera captures a hallway that is longer than it should be, and he derives a sense of power from being able to control the camera's gaze. As Hagler states, "The Navidson Record becomes the subject of an ostensible academic commentary by Zampanò, an old blind man, complete with citations, allusions, appendices, and analyses of other commentaries on the film." (Hagler, 2004, p.1).

Las Meninas also addresses the issue of the gaze and its relationship to power and representation. The painting portrays the Spanish royal family in their chambers, but they are posed in a way that suggests that they are being observed by someone outside the painting. Moreover, the usage of the mirror in the background further complicates the issue of the gaze, as it reflects the image of the King and Queen, but they are not visible in the painting itself. Thus, it challenges the power dynamics between the observer and the observed, and the act of representation itself. Both *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* delve into perspective and perception. In the painting, Velázquez explores the concept of the viewer's gaze and questions the relationship between the observer, the artist, and the subjects within the artwork. Similarly, *House of Leaves* plays with the narrative perspective, employing multiple narrators, footnotes, and typographical techniques to challenge the reader's perception of reality. Both works invite the audience to question their role as an observer and the reliability of their senses.

6. Conclusion

Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez and *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski both exemplify the philosophy of mirror tendencies through their exploration of self-reflexivity, fragmented narrative structures, blurring of reality and fiction, and questioning of traditional artistic conventions. These works challenge the viewer/reader to engage with the complexities of representation, perception, and subjectivity, and invite us to question our understanding of the world and the role of art in it. *Las Meninas* and *House of Leaves* share deep connections, similarities, and dissimilarities in their exploration of issues of representation, perception, and truth. They all challenge the traditional modes of knowledge, reveal the constructed nature of narratives and meanings, and explore the hidden or obscure aspects of their subjects. However, each work also exploits the unique features of its medium and reflects the concerns and values of its historical and cultural context. Through a comparative analysis of these works, we can gain deeper insights into the nature of representation, perception, and knowledge in different historical and cultural contexts.

Both works also play with the idea of the "frame" and challenge the boundaries of representation. In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez includes a mirror in the background, reflecting the image of the king and queen. This mirror disrupts the viewer's perception of space and raises questions about the nature of representation. Similarly, *House of Leaves* incorporates a meta-narrative about a documentary film, within the novel itself, blurring the lines between different layers of reality and fiction. Furthermore, both works engage with themes of perception and subjectivity. Velázquez's use of light and shadow in *Las Meninas* creates a sense of depth and three-dimensionality but also

draws attention to the artificiality of the painting. This manipulation of perception challenges the viewer's understanding of reality and the role of the artist. In *House of Leaves*, the characters' experiences within the ever-shifting labyrinth of the house highlight the subjective nature of reality, and the novel forces readers to question their perception of the narrative.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar was responsible for the study design and revising. He also was responsible for data collection. **Dr. Shaimaa Mohamed Hassanin** drafted the manuscript and revised it. She read and approved the final manuscript.

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