

Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the '*Committee on Publication Ethics*'

Online ISSN:2584-184X



Research Article

Narrating the Fragmented Self: Modernist Narrative Techniques and Contemporary Digital Identities

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21370906>

Abstract

This paper argues that the narrative techniques modernist writers devised in the early twentieth century to represent a psychologically fragmented, discontinuous, and internally plural self—anticipate—formally and philosophically—the conditions of self-representation that now govern digital culture. Reading canonical modernist experiments (the developing interior monologue of James Joyce, the multi-personal consciousness of Virginia Woolf, and the anxious, self-divided speaker of T. S. Eliot's early verse) alongside contemporary theories of the "networked self" (Papacharissi, boyd, Marwick and boyd), the analysis identifies a genuine structural convergence: the social-media feed, the multi-platform profile, and the algorithmically curated timeline reproduce, in altered form, the fragmentation, interiority, temporal disorder, and multiplicity that modernism made into an aesthetic program. Yet the paper resists a simple equivalence. Where modernist fragmentation was a controlled authorial strategy that used a disintegrating surface to reach a deeper subjective truth, digital fragmentation is frequently involuntary, commodified, and algorithmically imposed, dispersing the self without the orchestrating consciousness that modernism preserved. The comparison thus illuminates both a continuity in how modernity conceives the subject and a decisive break in who—or what—now holds the fragments together

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2584-184X
- Received: 07-06-2026
- Accepted: 10-07-2026
- Published: 15-07-2026
- MRR:4(7); 2026: 109-113
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Muskaan. Narrating the Fragmented Self: Modernist Narrative Techniques and Contemporary Digital Identities. Indian J Mod Res Rev. 2026;4(7):109-113.

Access this Article Online



www.mrrjournal.in

KEYWORDS: Modernism, Digital Identity, Fragmentation, Stream of Consciousness, Networked Self, Social Media, Algorithmic Culture, Remediation, Context Collapse, Polyphony, Temporal Montage, Free Indirect Discourse, Modernist Literature, Posthumanism, Self-Representation, Online Identity, Literary Theory, Media Studies, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot.

1. INTRODUCTION

The stable, unified, self-transparent individual—the sovereign “I” inherited from Enlightenment humanism—was already in crisis when the modernists began to write. Freud had located an unconscious beneath conscious intention; Bergson had dissolved measurable clock-time into the flowing, heterogeneous *durée* of lived experience; Nietzsche had questioned whether a single agent stood behind the grammatical subject at all. Confronted with a self that seemed layered, discontinuous, and internally divided, writers such as Joyce, Woolf, and Eliot concluded that the well-made realist novel, with its omniscient narrator and its orderly sequence of external events, could no longer tell the truth about consciousness. They responded by fracturing narrative form itself.

A century later, a strikingly similar vocabulary—fragmentation, multiplicity, performance, the decentred self—dominates discussions of digital identity. To exist online is to be distributed across platforms, to maintain overlapping and sometimes contradictory profiles, to narrate the self in discontinuous fragments scrolled endlessly upward, and to submit that narration to algorithmic curation and an unseen audience. The parallel is not merely rhetorical. This paper contends that the formal innovations of literary modernism constitute an early and prescient grammar for representing precisely the kind of subject that networked media now produce at scale.

The argument proceeds in five movements. It first situates modernist form within the intellectual crisis of the unified self. It then inventories the specific techniques—stream of consciousness, polyphony, temporal montage, free indirect discourse—through which modernism rendered fragmentation legible. It turns next to contemporary theory of digital identity, before staging the central analytical claim: that the feed can be read as a remediated modernist text. Finally, and crucially, it examines where the analogy breaks down, arguing that the disappearance of the orchestrating authorial consciousness marks the decisive difference between modernist and digital fragmentation.

2. The Modernist Crisis of the Unified Self

Modernist narrative experimentation was not an arbitrary flourish of style; it was an epistemological response to a changed understanding of what a person is. The nineteenth-century realist novel assumed a knowable social world and a self that could be represented from the outside, its motives explained by a reliable narrator standing above the action. This assumption depended on a broader confidence: that the self was continuous over time, coherent in its intentions, and ultimately transparent to observation. By the first decades of the twentieth century, that confidence had eroded on several fronts at once.

Psychoanalysis proposed that the conscious ego was only the visible portion of a psyche whose deeper currents were inaccessible to introspection. Henri Bergson argued that ordinary language and clock-time falsified the actual texture of inner life, which he described as a continuous, qualitative flow

in which past and present interpenetrate rather than lining up as discrete units. Stephen Kern has shown how the period’s transformations in technology and physics—the telegraph, the cinema, relativity, standardized time zones—destabilized inherited categories of space and time and, with them, the stability of the perceiving subject (Kern). William James, whose phrase “stream of consciousness” the critics would borrow, had already described thought not as a chain of discrete ideas but as an unbroken, wandering current.

Faced with this reconceived interiority, the realist toolkit looked not merely old-fashioned but inaccurate. If the self is layered, associative, and temporally scrambled, then a narrative that moves in tidy chronological order, filtered through a serene external observer, misrepresents its object. Georg Lukács, writing on the eve of this shift, had already diagnosed the novel as the form of a world in which meaning is no longer immanent and the individual is estranged from any totality (Lukács). Modernism’s formal violence—its ellipses, its broken syntax, its refusal of explanatory transition—was the attempt to build a narrative apparatus adequate to a subject that had lost its guaranteed unity. The fragment was not a failure of form but its new truth-content: the shape of consciousness as it was now understood to be.

Importantly, this fragmentation coexisted with an intensified inwardness. Precisely because the shared external world could no longer be trusted to organize meaning, the modernist novel turned inward, relocating the center of gravity from public event to private perception. The result is a paradox that will matter for the digital comparison: modernist writing is at once dispersed on its surface and profoundly interior in its aim. Its fragmentation serves depth.

3. Techniques of Fragmentation: A Formal Inventory

To compare modernism with digital self-representation responsibly, one must be specific about technique. Four devices are central.

Stream of consciousness and interior monologue.

The signature modernist method renders the unedited flow of a character’s mind—sensations, memories, half-formed judgments, and associative leaps—as they occur, often without the tidying intervention of a narrator. Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* traces the growth of Stephen Dedalus’s consciousness from infancy to young adulthood, its very prose maturing alongside him and dissolving at last into the fragmentary first-person immediacy of diary entries. Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* moves fluidly between the inner lives of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, mapping London not as a fixed setting but as a field of overlapping perceptions. The technique makes interiority itself the primary reality and renders it as inherently discontinuous.

Polyphony and multiple perspective.

Modernism frequently refuses a single authoritative vantage, distributing the narrative across several consciousnesses rather than subordinating them to one external observer. Woolf’s *Mrs*

Dalloway enacts this within a single London day, its narration migrating—often within a single paragraph—from Clarissa to Septimus, from Peter Walsh to passing strangers, so that the city is rendered as a mosaic of simultaneous, non-identical minds. No perspective is granted final authority; meaning must be assembled from partial, overlapping fragments. This is not confusion for its own sake but a formal claim that truth is perspectival and that the self is constituted differently in each relation.

Temporal montage.

Modernist narrative rejects linear chronology in favor of a subjective time in which memory, anticipation, and present sensation coexist. *Mrs Dalloway* unfolds across a single day—its passage marked by the chimes of Big Ben—yet continually plunges backward into the characters’ memories of years past, so that clock-time and the deeper time of recollection run side by side. This montage principle, the juxtaposition of temporally distant fragments without connective explanation, echoes the cinema’s cut. It surfaces in verse as well: the speaker of Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* drifts among deferred futures, imagined scenes, and remembered rooms, his sense of time dissolving into hesitation and repetition rather than advancing in sequence.

Free indirect discourse.

Perhaps the subtlest device, free indirect discourse fuses the narrator’s third-person voice with a character’s first-person idiom, so that it becomes impossible to say cleanly where reporting ends and inner speech begins. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is a locus classicus: the narrating voice takes on the vocabulary and rhythm of Stephen at each stage of his life, babyish at the outset and increasingly abstract as he matures—the phenomenon Hugh Kenner influentially named the “Uncle Charles Principle,” whereby the narration is colored by the idiom of the character it accompanies (Kenner). The boundary between self and narration becomes permeable.

What unites these techniques is a single project: to represent a self that is plural, discontinuous, and temporally unstable, while nonetheless holding that self together through the controlling intelligence of the work. However shattered the surface, an authorial consciousness has arranged the fragments; the disorder is composed. This composed quality is the hinge on which the digital comparison will finally turn.

4. The Digital Self as a Fragmented Construct

The theoretical literature on digital identity converges, from a very different starting point, on many of the same terms. Long before the internet, Erving Goffman had argued that the self is not a fixed essence but a performance staged for particular audiences, managed through the “presentation of self” that shifts as the audience shifts (Goffman). Sociologist Kenneth Gergen extended this into the diagnosis of a “saturated self,” multiplied and dispersed by the sheer volume of relationships and technologies of communication that late-modern life demands (Gergen). Both anticipate the networked condition.

Sherry Turkle’s foundational studies made the connection explicit. In *Life on the Screen*, she observed how early online environments allowed users to construct and inhabit multiple identities simultaneously, treating the self as a distributed, experimental, “multiple” system rather than a single unified core (Turkle, *Life on the Screen*). Her later, more cautionary *Alone Together* tracked how constant connection reshapes intimacy and the sense of an integrated self (Turkle, *Alone Together*). The self-online is not merely represented but assembled and re-assembled across contexts.

Contemporary scholarship formalizes this dispersion. Zizi Papacharissi’s account of the “networked self” describes identity as performed across interlinked platforms, continuously edited, and negotiated between self-expression and the expectations of an audience (Papacharissi). danah boyd’s ethnography of networked teenagers identifies structural features of online sociality—persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability—that alter how the self must be managed (boyd). Especially significant is the phenomenon Alice Marwick and boyd term “context collapse”: online, audiences that would remain separate offline—family, employers, friends, strangers—are flattened into a single imagined public, forcing the individual to address radically incompatible audiences at once (Marwick and boyd).

From these accounts a portrait emerges of a digital self that is: distributed across multiple platforms and profiles; performed for shifting and collapsed audiences; narrated in discontinuous fragments (posts, stories, updates) rather than continuous autobiography; temporally disordered by feeds that mix the recent and the archival; and continuously revised. This is, term for term, a description of a fragmented subject. The question is whether its fragmentation is the same as the modernist kind—and whether the formal structures through which it is expressed inherit modernist techniques.

5. Formal Convergences: Reading the Feed as Modernist Text

The most productive comparison operates not at the level of theme but of form. The dominant literary form of digital selfhood is the feed—the vertically scrolling, reverse-chronological, endlessly extending sequence of fragments through which a person narrates and performs identity. Read formally, the feed is a remediation, in Bolter and Grusin’s sense of one medium refashioning the conventions of another (Bolter and Grusin), of several core modernist techniques.

Consider first the analogy to stream of consciousness. A personal feed presents thought and perception as a discontinuous flow of fragments—an image, a passing observation, a shard of memory, a reaction—juxtaposed without explanatory transition and organized by association and mood rather than by argument. The scrolling interface enacts the very continuity-in-discontinuity that the modernist sentence sought to capture. Yet the resemblance conceals an inversion that is analytically decisive. Modernist stream of consciousness moved *inward*: it made public, on the page, a private interiority that was assumed to be otherwise inaccessible, and its ambition

was psychological depth. The feed moves *outward*: it stages interiority for an audience, converting inner life into a performance calibrated to be seen. The formal grammar—flowing fragments—is shared; the vector is reversed. The modernist stream is confession without an audience; the digital stream is confession that exists only for one. Eliot's Prufrock anticipates precisely this predicament: his monologue is an inner life continually rehearsed for the judgment of others, a self anxiously preparing an outward face for an audience it fears—a modernist premonition of identity performed for the feed.

The polyphony of *Mrs Dalloway* finds a counterpart in the multi-platform self. A single individual maintains a professional voice on one network, an intimate voice on another, an anonymous or playful voice on a third—a genuine multiplicity of narrating personae whose accounts need not cohere. This is Woolf's principle of migrating between minds, but redistributed from several characters within one novel to one person across several platforms. The self becomes its own polyphonic text.

Temporal montage, too, is reproduced and intensified. Where Woolf reordered time according to the subjective weight of experience, the algorithmic feed reorders it according to predicted engagement, splicing the immediate present against resurfaced archival fragments—a memory prompt, a years-old photograph, a “this day” reminder—in a montage no single consciousness has composed. The clock-time linearity that modernism rejected in the name of *durée* is rejected again, though now in the name of the metric.

Context collapse can be read as the social realization of free indirect discourse's blurred boundaries. Free indirect discourse dissolved the line between narrator and character, self and telling; context collapse dissolves the lines between distinct social selves, forcing the incompatible registers of one's life to speak in a single, ambiguous voice addressed to an audience that cannot be clearly seen. In both cases the stabilizing boundary—between voices, between audiences—becomes permeable, and the self is narrated in an idiom that belongs fully to no single context.

A further convergence lies in the interface itself, which functions as a formal device in the way the modernist page once did. The modernists exploited the material surface of the page—the shifting registers of Joyce's prose and its closing turn to dated diary entries, the fluid drift of Woolf's narration between minds, the broken, hesitant lineation of Eliot's verse—so that layout and form became bearers of meaning rather than neutral vessels. The digital interface performs an analogous work: the infinite scroll refuses closure and enforces the continuity-in-fragmentation of the stream; the ephemeral “story” that vanishes after a day formalizes the transience of consciousness that the modernists could only gesture toward; the reverse-chronological ordering builds the recency-bias of memory into the structure itself. In each case the medium's formal properties actively shape the represented self, exactly as modernist typography and structure did. The difference, again, is authorship: the modernist manipulated the page deliberately,

whereas the interface is designed by the platform and imposed on the user, who narrates the self within constraints set elsewhere.

The convergence, then, is real and specific. The feed inherits fragmentation, interiority-made-textual, multiplicity of voice, temporal disorder, boundary permeability, and the expressive use of the material surface—the entire modernist repertoire for representing a divided subject. To scroll a feed is, in a genuine sense, to read a modernist text authored collaboratively by a person and a machine.

6. Divergences: Fragmentation Without an Author

To press the analogy to identity, however, would be to miss its most instructive feature—the point at which it breaks. Three differences mark a decisive discontinuity between modernist and digital fragmentation.

First, and most fundamentally, modernist fragmentation was *composed*. However shattered its surface, the modernist work was arranged by an authorial consciousness that used disorder to reach a deeper order; the fragments were held together, off the page, by the intelligence that had chosen them. The digital feed removes precisely this orchestrating center. Its arrangement is delegated to an algorithm optimizing for attention, not to a subject pursuing self-understanding. The result is fragmentation without an author—dispersion that no consciousness composes into meaning. Modernism fragmented the self in order to represent it more truthfully; digital media fragment the self as a byproduct of capturing and monetizing attention. The disintegration that modernism made into art becomes, online, an ambient condition.

Second, modernist fragmentation was largely voluntary and interpretive, whereas digital fragmentation is substantially imposed and involuntary. The reader of a modernist novel labors to assemble meaning from its shifting, partial perspectives, but that labor is the point, and the perspectives were deliberately given. The networked subject, by contrast, is fragmented by structural forces—persistence, searchability, context collapse, algorithmic reordering—that it did not choose and cannot fully control. One's fragments persist, resurface, and recombine independent of intention.

Third, the digital self is commodified in a way the modernist self is not. Fredric Jameson's analysis of postmodern culture—its “waning of affect,” its stylistic fragmentation, its subordination to the logic of late capitalism—is prophetic here (Jameson). The performed digital self is not only expressed but harvested: its fragments are data, its performance a source of value extracted by platforms. N. Katherine Hayles's account of how information technologies reshape subjectivity toward a “posthuman” condition, in which the self is understood as a pattern of information distributed across systems rather than a bounded interiority, names the deeper transformation (Hayles). The modernist self, however fragmented, remained the seat of an inner truth to be excavated. The digital self is increasingly a distributed informational pattern whose “depth” is uncertain—and whose fragments belong, in part, to someone else.

There is, finally, a difference in the fate of the fragment itself. In the modernist work the fragment is provisional: it exists to be reassembled by an interpreting reader into a meaning that the disordered surface withholds but implies. The whole difficulty of reading Woolf or Joyce is the labor of synthesis the text demands and rewards. The digital fragment, by contrast, is often terminal—a post is consumed, ranked, and buried, rarely reassembled into any larger account of a life. The feed encourages perpetual production over retrospective integration; it privileges the next fragment over the synthesis of previous ones. Where modernist fragmentation was oriented toward an eventual, hard-won coherence, digital fragmentation tends toward an endless present that resists being gathered into a story at all. This may be the sharpest divergence of all: modernism fragmented narrative but never abandoned the horizon of meaning, whereas the feed can fragment the self indefinitely without ever pointing toward a whole. These divergences do not dissolve the comparison; they sharpen it. Modernism supplies the formal grammar through which digital selfhood becomes legible, but the philosophical situation has shifted from a fragmentation that serves depth and is authored by a subject to a fragmentation that serves attention and is authored, in significant part, by the machine.

7. CONCLUSION

Confronted a century ago with a self that could no longer be assumed to be unified, continuous, and transparent, the modernists invented a repertoire of techniques—stream of consciousness, polyphony, temporal montage, free indirect discourse—to narrate fragmentation from within. In doing so they produced not only a body of difficult novels but a durable grammar for representing the divided subject of modernity. This paper has argued that digital culture now inhabits that grammar. The feed, the multi-platform profile, and the algorithmic timeline reproduce the modernist repertoire with uncanny fidelity, staging the self as a flowing, discontinuous, multiply voiced, temporally scrambled construct.

Yet the inheritance is transformative rather than faithful. Modernist fragmentation was composed by an author toward the end of a deeper truth; it moved inward and served depth. Digital fragmentation, however similar in form, is frequently involuntary, algorithmically arranged, and commodified; it moves outward toward an audience and serves the capture of attention. The orchestrating consciousness that held modernism's fragments together has been displaced—partly onto the platform, partly onto the algorithm—leaving a fragmentation that no single subject fully authors.

The comparison, then, yields a double conclusion. There is genuine continuity: the way modernity conceives the self—as plural, discontinuous, and performed—persists from Woolf's London to the contemporary feed, and modernism remains our most powerful vocabulary for describing it. But there is also a genuine break: the disappearance of the author-function from the scene of self-narration. Reading the digital self through the modernist lens does not merely reveal how much we have inherited; it reveals, with new precision, what we have lost—

the composing consciousness that once ensured the fragments meant something. If the modernists fragmented the self in order to find it, the contemporary condition may be one in which the self is fragmented without any guarantee that it will be found again.

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