



Review Article

Through the Looking-Glass: Postmodern Metafiction and the Hyperreal in Shahram Mokri's *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit*

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Abstract

Shahram Mokri's *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* (2025) is a radical postmodern experiment that stages a crisis of representation itself. This article argues that the film weaponizes narrative convention through its literalization of Chekhov's Gun, transforms the Möbius strip into a narrative and ontological structure, and refuses the audience the stability of a single "real" reality. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Jean Baudrillard, Linda Hutcheon, and Jean-François Lyotard, the analysis demonstrates how Mokri's reconstruction of a foundational Iranian cinematic text (*Hezardastan*), his use of the *Alice in Wonderland* motif, and the film's unique location in Tajikistan together create a labyrinthine meditation on historiography, hyperreality, and the death of the author. The film exposes cinema as a machine that produces meaning through deliberate, self-aware illusion and then deconstructs that machinery in real time. Ultimately, *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* stands as a challenge to the viewer: to watch it is to enter a labyrinth, to confront the machinery of narrative, and to realize that there is no exit.

Keywords: Chekhov's Gun; Hyperreality; Historiographic Metafiction; Postmodernism; Möbius Strip; Metafiction

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Shahram Mokri's *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* (2025) arrives at a moment when postmodern cinema has increasingly turned its gaze upon its own mechanisms, producing works that are as much about the act of filmmaking as they are about narrative content. Within this cinematic landscape, Mokri's film stands out as a particularly audacious experiment, one that pushes the boundaries of metafictional storytelling to their logical extreme. Unlike the more conventional self-reflexivity of mainstream cinema, *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* constructs a labyrinthine narrative architecture that systematically dismantles the distinction between reality

and its representation, fiction and its production. While Mokri's earlier works – particularly *Fish and Cat* (2013) and *Careless Crime* (2020) – have received considerable scholarly attention for their innovative formal structures and engagement with Iranian history, his most recent production has yet to be examined through the lens of postmodern theory. *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* presents a unique case study: a film that not only tells a story about the making of a film but does so through a complex network of overlapping narratives, self-conscious references, and ontological disruptions. The film's relative neglect in academic discourse constitutes a significant

gap, particularly given its ambitious staging of the very crisis of representation that lies at the heart of postmodernist thought. This article addresses that gap by offering a sustained theoretical analysis of Mokri's cinematic experiment.

The central question guiding this investigation is: How does Mokri use the literalization of Chekhov's Gun, the structural principle of the Möbius strip, and the reconstruction of a foundational Iranian cinematic text (Hezardastan) to stage a crisis of representation? More specifically, how do these elements work together to create a cinematic labyrinth that refuses the audience the stability of a single "real" reality?

This article argues that *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* is a radical postmodern experiment that weaponizes narrative convention, transforms the Möbius strip into an ontological structure, and engages with historiography through a shot-for-shot remake that annihilates the authority of its original. To develop this argument, the analysis proceeds in several stages. First, it establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on Baudrillard's hyperreality, Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, and Lyotard's incredulity toward metanarratives. Second, it examines the film's treatment of Chekhov's Gun as a weaponized narrative convention. Third, it analyzes the Möbius strip as both narrative structure and ontological statement. Fourth, it explores the film's engagement with Iranian cinema history through its reconstruction of Hezardastan. Fifth, it examines the role of the rabbit motif and the significance of the film's location in Tajikistan. Finally, it concludes by reflecting on the film's broader implications for postmodern cinema.

1. Theoretical Framework: Postmodernism, Hyperreality, and Metafiction

To understand Mokri's project, it is necessary to situate it within the broader postmodern theoretical tradition. Three interconnected concepts provide the critical lens for this analysis: metafiction, the Möbius strip narrative, and hyperreality. These three concepts are not chosen arbitrarily; they are deliberately selected because each addresses a distinct dimension of the postmodern condition that is central to Mokri's film. Linda Hutcheon's work on metafiction illuminates the film's self-conscious engagement with its own status as a constructed narrative, exposing the machinery behind the cinematic illusion. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality captures the film's treatment of simulation as a replacement for reality, where props speak and the boundary between the real and the fictional dissolves. The Möbius strip, while not a theorist's concept, serves as a structural principle that binds these two theoretical frameworks together: it provides the architectural model for the film's narrative, where events loop back on themselves and inside and

outside collapse into a single continuous surface. Together, these three frameworks allow for a comprehensive analysis of how Mokri's film stages a crisis of representation, examining its formal strategies, its engagement with reality and simulation, and its self-reflexive commentary on the nature of cinema itself.

2. Metafiction and the Crisis of Representation

Linda Hutcheon (1988) defines postmodern metafiction as a mode of writing that "self-consciously draws attention to its own status as a constructed narrative" (p. 1). This self-awareness is not a retreat from the world but a new way of engaging with it. By exposing the machinery behind the illusion, metafiction refuses the pretense that art is a transparent window onto reality. Mokri explicitly positions himself within this tradition, describing his work as a response to what cinema fundamentally is. He explains his deep appreciation for cinematic grammar and his enjoyment of films that experiment with the medium's own tools, which is precisely the kind of filmmaking he pursues (Kotzathanasis, 2025).

The director's admiration for Abbas Kiarostami is central to his metafictional approach. In an interview, Mokri reflects on Kiarostami's influence, noting that almost all of Kiarostami's films are meta-films that explore the processes of acting and filmmaking. This perspective has shaped Mokri's own approach to *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit*, which he conceived as a film about the act of making a film, creating a layered structure where a filmmaker appears as a character within the narrative (Cheung, 2026). This infinite regress – making a movie about making a movie – is the Möbius strip made narrative.

Hutcheon's framework extends beyond literature to encompass cinema as well. In her analysis of postmodern film, Hutcheon argues that the self-reflexive strategies of metafiction are not merely textual games but serve a critical function, questioning the very assumptions upon which narrative realism is built (Hutcheon, 1988, pp. 50–62). As Stam (2000) observes, metafictional strategies in film do not merely draw attention to the medium's artificiality; they also expose the ideological underpinnings of cinematic narrative, revealing how the conventions of realism naturalize particular ways of seeing and understanding the world. This insight is particularly relevant to Mokri's project, which systematically dismantles the conventions of cinematic realism through its constant reminders of its own constructedness.

Similarly, Waugh (1984) argues that metafiction is not merely a formal game but a mode of writing that questions the relationship between fiction and reality, challenging the reader's assumptions about the nature of truth and representation. Mokri's film extends this inquiry to the

cinematic medium, using its self-reflexive strategies to interrogate the very conditions under which cinematic meaning is produced.

3. The Möbius Strip as Narrative Structure

Mokri's filmmaking is defined by a consistent formal evolution. Critics have noted that he has reimaged the Möbius strip as a cinematic structure, moving beyond conventional time-loop narratives into more complex territory (ScreenAnarchy, 2025). Rather than a simple linear loop, the film presents a network of interlocking Möbius strips that fold back into each other (ScreenAnarchy). The film's narrative follows three interlocking storylines: Sara (Hasti Mahamai), a woman recovering from a suspicious car accident; Babak (Babak Karimi), a prop master convinced that a pistol on set is not a prop at all; and Donya (Kibriyo Dilyobova), an aspiring actress determined to secure an audition (BFI London Film Festival, 2025). These storylines do not simply run in parallel; These storylines are woven together through the complex narrative and formal techniques that characterize Mokri's distinctive cinematic style (ScreenAnarchy).

The film's Möbius-strip structure is realized through a combination of formal techniques. Mokri's affection for long takes is evident in the fluid, brilliantly staged camerawork that moves seamlessly between different realities (BFI London Film Festival, 2025). The narrative repeatedly circles back on itself, with events repeating in altered forms and the constructed nature of the settings becoming increasingly visible which creates a constant uncertainty about whether the audience is observing the production of the film or the world outside its fictional boundaries (BFI London Film Festival). The collapse of boundaries is literalized in a pivotal moment: Sara's domestic drama is suddenly revealed to be a film set when the walls of the house are removed, revealing that the domestic space is actually a film studio (BFI London Film Festival).

This formal choice reflects Mokri's own artistic philosophy. He explains that all his feature films have complex structures, and he begins by working through the architecture and the complex structure of the film before developing the narratives that will fit within that architecture. He starts by composing puzzles and considering which stories can work together to create that puzzle (Cheung, 2026). The Möbius strip is not an afterthought; it is the film's foundational principle.

3.1. Hyperreality and the Collapse of the Real

Jean Baudrillard (1994) defines hyperreality as a state in which simulations no longer refer to an original reality but instead become more real than reality itself (p. 6). This

concept is central to *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit's* aesthetic. Baudrillard argues that in the postmodern era, we have entered a state where "the distinction between subject and object becomes obsolete" (Mishra, 2023, p. 78). The real no longer exists; only simulacra remain.

Mokri's film stages this collapse through its treatment of objects and props. In one of the film's more surreal touches, props communicate with each other through subtitles and gossip about what might happen next (Adlakha, 2025). An enormous prop coffee cup moves about the set by itself, suggesting a world where objects possess autonomous sign-status, detached from their original functions and taking on lives of their own (ScreenAnarchy, 2025). The film possesses a quality of visual playfulness and wild disorder, as characters confront their doubles and move from one scene only to realize they remain within yet another layer of the film (BFI London Film Festival, 2025). This is Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" realized cinematically (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1).

3.2. Historiographic Metafiction and the Remaking of *Hezardastan*

Mokri's decision to reconstruct a scene from *Hezardastan* – the legendary Iranian television series directed by Ali Hatami – is not a tribute. It is a postmodern intervention into the writing of history itself. *Hezardastan* is a foundational text of Iranian cinema, described as part of the collective memory of Iran (ScreenAnarchy, 2025). By displacing it to Tajikistan and subjecting it to a shot-for-shot remake, Mokri performs a radical act of historical decontextualization.

Linda Hutcheon (1988) defines historiographic metafiction as a mode of writing that "both asserts and undermines the claims of historical knowledge" (p. 105). Mokri's film exemplifies this paradox. The remake appears to honor *Hezardastan* through faithful reproduction. But the reproduction is deliberately imperfect: it is performed in a foreign country, with foreign actors, in a foreign language. The original is not restored; it is replicated as a ghost. This is not a continuation of the Iranian cinematic tradition; it is a rupture.

The choice of the assassination scene is particularly significant. The assassination scene in Mokri's film is a meticulous reconstruction of a moment from the original *Hezardastan* series. In the scene, a man concealed beneath a burqa prepares to shoot a young speaker among a group of veiled women. The camera lingers on the details: the fabric of the burqa, the trembling hand gripping the weapon, the tension in the crowd as the speaker's voice rises. Mokri's version is nearly identical to Hatami's original in terms of blocking, composition, and costume design. However, the context is radically different. In the

original *Hezardastan*, the scene functioned as a dramatic climax within a coherent narrative about political intrigue and national identity. In Mokri's film, the scene is stripped of its original narrative context. We do not know who these characters are, why they are there, or what will happen next. The assassination becomes an event without a story: a performance of a performance. The burqa, which in the original concealed a specific assassin with a specific motive, becomes a signifier of concealment itself. It no longer hides a particular identity; it hides the very possibility of stable identity. The scene thus becomes a meditation on the nature of historical reconstruction: we can reproduce the visual details of the past, but we cannot reproduce the meaning that gave them coherence.

This decontextualization is further emphasized by the film's use of sound and editing. The dialogue is in Persian, but the actors are Tajik; their accents subtly shift the intonation of the words, creating a sense of estrangement. The editing rhythm mimics the original but is slightly off, creating a disorienting effect that suggests the past is both present and absent. What we see is *Hezardastan*, but it is *Hezardastan* as ghost: familiar yet hollow, recognizable yet strange. By reconstructing this scene, Mokri foregrounds the postmodern insight that history is always a performance: always a matter of concealment, revelation, and theatricality. The burqa is not just a costume; it is a metaphor for historical representation itself: it covers the truth while pretending to reveal it.

The forced quality of the remake exposes the impossibility of historical reconstruction. History cannot be revived; it can only be performed. And performance is always a form of betrayal. As one critic observes, Mokri's film turns inward so completely that its self-referential layers overwhelm both its characters and any stable interpretation (Adlakha, 2025). The remake does not recover *Hezardastan*; it annihilates it as a stable historical object.

To claim that Mokri's film "annihilates" *Hezardastan* is not to say that it destroys the original or makes it inaccessible. Rather, the annihilation operates on the level of meaning. Mokri's remake does not preserve the original's authority; it usurps it. In the original, *Hezardastan* functioned as a pillar of Iranian cultural identity, a shared reference point that reinforced a sense of national cohesion. By reconstructing a single scene from this monumental work and displacing it to a foreign context, Mokri severs the scene from its initial meaning. The assassination is no longer a moment within a larger narrative of Iranian history; it becomes a floating signifier, detached from any stable referent. What is lost is the original's claim to represent Iranian history authentically. What is gained is a critical awareness of the constructedness of all historical representations. The remake does not replace the original; it exposes the original's contingency. It shows that *Hezardastan* was

never a natural or inevitable text: it was a product of specific historical circumstances that could have been otherwise. Mokri's film thus participates in what Lyotard (1984) calls the "incredulity toward metanarratives": it refuses to accept *Hezardastan* as a foundational myth and instead treats it as raw material for new construction.

This annihilation is a postmodern revolt against the father's name. Ali Hatami, the original creator of *Hezardastan*, is a paternal figure in Iranian cinema – an author whose authority was unchallenged. Mokri's remake is a symbolic patricide: it kills the father by reproducing him imperfectly. The father's name is no longer a guarantee of meaning; it is a signifier that floats free, available for appropriation, distortion, and displacement (Mishra, 2023, p. 97). Mokri does not simply invoke Hatami's legacy; he recontextualizes it. By placing the reconstruction of *Hezardastan* within his own self-reflexive film, Mokri subordinates Hatami's vision to his own. The director of the film-within-the-film, who shares Mokri's real name, becomes the new authority: not by surpassing Hatami, but by showing that authority is always contingent and constructed.

Evidence for this patricidal gesture can be found in the film's treatment of the assassination scene itself. In the original *Hezardastan*, the scene was a moment of high drama, charged with political significance. In Mokri's version, the scene is framed as a rehearsal, a take, a performance that can be repeated and revised. The characters are aware that they are being filmed; the camera is visible; the illusion of reality is perpetually broken. This self-consciousness exposes the paternal authority of the original as a fiction. Hatami's *Hezardastan* claimed to represent Iranian history with authority and gravitas. Mokri's remake shows that such authority is always a construction: a set of conventions that can be dismantled and reassembled. The death of the father's name is thus the death of the idea that any single author or text can claim to represent history definitively. What remains is a field of interpretations, each as contingent and constructed as the next.

The murder that occurs during the remake literalizes this historical crisis. When the prop gun becomes real and a character is killed, the film stages the collapse of the distinction between representation and reality. The assassination scene does not just depict a historical event; it produces a new event: a real death on a simulated set. This is the postmodern condition of historical representation: we cannot reconstruct the past without transforming it into something else, and transformation is always a form of destruction.

Mokri's film thus participates in Lyotard's (1984) diagnosis of the postmodern condition: "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv). *Hezardastan* was a grand narrative of Iranian national cinema: a story of cultural identity, artistic achievement, and collective

memory. By remaking it in Tajikistan, Mokri exposes this grand narrative as a construct, a fiction, a story that can be retold, revised, and ultimately annihilated. The father's name dies. The grand narrative collapses. What remains is the labyrinth.

The emergence of postmodern aesthetics in Iranian cinema has been a subject of increasing scholarly attention, particularly as filmmakers have turned to self-reflexive strategies to navigate the constraints of state censorship and the legacies of national cinema (Naficy, 2011). Mokri's work can be situated within this broader context, as his films engage with Iranian cinematic history not as a tradition to be preserved but as a repository of forms to be deconstructed and reimaged.

3.3. Visual and Technical Strategies in Mokri's Cinematic Labyrinth

While the theoretical frameworks of metafiction, hyperreality, and historiographic metafiction provide the conceptual tools for understanding *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit*, the film's impact is ultimately realized through its visual and technical strategies. Mokri's formal choices – his use of long takes, sound design, mise-en-scène, and editing – are not merely decorative; they are constitutive of the film's meaning. This section examines three key sequences that illustrate how Mokri translates postmodern concepts into cinematic practice, demonstrating that the film's crisis of representation is not just an intellectual argument but a material experience.

3.3.1. Scene 1: The Opening Sequence and the Weaponization of Chekhov's Gun

The film opens with a seemingly straightforward scene that immediately establishes its metafictional stakes. A young man stands in a dimly lit marketplace, offering an antique rifle for sale. The camera holds a medium shot, allowing the viewer to observe the man's nervous behavior, the way his fingers trace the barrel of the gun, and the sweat beading on his forehead. The sound design is sporadic: the murmur of distant voices, the rustle of fabric, and the metallic click of the rifle's mechanism. The scene appears to be a slice of realist cinema: a mundane transaction in an everyday setting. Then the gun fires.

The sound is abrupt, jarring, and disproportionately loud compared to the ambient noise that preceded it. The camera does not cut away; it holds on the man's face as he registers what has happened, then collapses. The scene lasts less than two minutes. The man who sold the rifle is killed by the very weapon he was trying to sell.

This sequence accomplishes several things simultaneously. On a narrative level, it introduces the central threat of the film: the gun that will haunt the characters throughout the story. On a metafictional level,

it literalizes Chekhov's famous principle – that a gun introduced in a story must eventually fire – by showing the principle in action. But on a technical level, the scene is significant for what it shows rather than what it means. The staging emphasizes the gun as an object: the camera lingers on its form, its weight, its potential for violence. The sound design isolates the gunshot, making it an event that disrupts the fictional space. The editing is minimal, allowing the scene to unfold in real time, as if to insist on the physical reality of the event.

Yet this insistence on reality is immediately undercut. The scene is framed within a film that is about filmmaking. The "realism" of the opening sequence is a constructed realism, a simulation of authenticity that Mokri will systematically dismantle as the film progresses. The scene thus serves as a trap: it seduces the viewer into believing in the reality of the fiction, only to reveal that the fiction is always already a construction.

3.3.2. Scene 2: The Animate Props and the Hyperreal Object

One of the film's most striking sequences involves an enormous prop coffee cup that moves about the set by itself. The scene is shot in a wide frame, allowing the viewer to see the cup as it glides across the floor, propelled by no visible force. The camera tracks the cup with a steady, almost documentary-like precision, as if the cup were a character in its own right. Later, other props communicate with each other through subtitles, gossiping about the events that might unfold.

These sequences are not merely whimsical or surreal; they are a direct visual manifestation of Baudrillard's hyperreality. In a hyperreal world, objects are no longer passive commodities or tools; they possess autonomous sign-status, detached from their original functions and taking on lives of their own. The moving coffee cup is not a magical object; it is a signifier that has become detached from its signified. It no longer represents a cup; it is a pure simulacrum, a copy without an original.

The cinematography reinforces this effect. The camera does not treat the cup as an anomaly; it films it with the same neutrality as it films the human characters. The lighting is naturalistic, the focus is sharp, and the framing is balanced. There is no overt cue that the viewer is witnessing something "unreal." The effect is disorienting: the viewer's assumptions about reality are challenged not by a break in the film's visual style but by its consistency. The hyperreal object is presented as if it were ordinary, which makes the ordinariness of the world seem hyperreal in turn.

The subtitles that accompany the props' conversations further blur the boundary between the animate and the inanimate. The viewer is forced to read the props' dialogue, treating them as subjects rather than objects.

This inversion of the usual hierarchy – where humans speak and objects are silent – suggests a world in which the distinction between subject and object is no longer stable. The props are not just props; they are witnesses, commentators, and perhaps even agents. Their presence reminds the audience that the film's reality is constructed, that the objects on screen are part of a larger system of signs.

3.3.3. Scene 3: *The Collapse of the Set and the Revelation of the Studio*

The most powerful visual moment in the film occurs when Sara's domestic drama is suddenly revealed to be a film set. Up to this point, Sara's story has been presented as a realistic domestic drama: she is a woman recovering from a suspicious car accident, confined to her home, uncertain of her identity. The *mise-en-scène* has been carefully constructed to suggest authenticity: worn furniture, naturalistic lighting, the clutter of everyday life. Then the walls are pulled away.

The camera holds a long shot as the set is dismantled, revealing the studio behind it. The lighting shifts: the warm domestic glow is replaced by the harsh, flat light of the production studio. The soundscape changes: the ambient silence is replaced by the hum of machinery and the distant instructions of the crew. The viewer is forced to confront the fact that the world they have been immersed in was a fabrication.

The staging of this moment is crucial. The walls are not simply removed; they are pulled away like stage flats, revealing the framework that supported them. The camera does not cut to the studio; it allows the viewer to see the transition in real time. This creates a sense of vertigo: the viewer must recalibrate their understanding of what is "real" within the film's world.

The *mise-en-scène* of the studio is deliberately unglamorous. The equipment is visible, the crew is present, and the illusion is exposed as a mechanism. This is not a magical transformation; it is a mechanical one. The effect is to demystify the cinematic process, to show that the "reality" of film is produced through labor, technology, and convention. But the effect is also ironic: the revelation of the set is itself a cinematic construction. The viewer is watching a film about a film being made. The collapse of the set is not an escape from illusion; it is another layer of illusion.

Sara's reaction – her confusion, her dazed movement through the production – mirrors the viewer's own disorientation. She cannot tell whether she is a character in a story or a person in the real world, which is to say, she cannot tell where the simulation ends and the real begins. The scene thus stages the epistemological crisis that defines the postmodern condition: the impossibility of distinguishing between representation and reality.

3.4. Chekhov's Gun as Weaponized Narrative Convention

The film's engagement with Chekhov's principle is its most direct and provocative postmodern gesture. The opening quotation, discussed in detail in the previous section for its technical and sensory dimensions, immediately draws attention to the film's constructed nature. As the story progresses, this self-consciousness gradually transforms the narrative into a meditation on its own creation (Adlakha, 2025). This is not a casual reference; it is a commitment. The film will make good on the promise of the gun, but not in the way a conventional narrative would.

The gun is established as a source of anxiety from the outset. Babak, who serves as the prop master, finds himself barred from the set and unable to examine a firearm intended for a scene, and his unease is compounded by his failure to meet the elusive director, Shahram, and by the unsettling coincidence that he is working on his fortieth production—the same number as a crew that suffered a fatal on-set accident (Adlakha, 2025). As one reviewer notes, the threat intensifies as the notion of faulty firearms brings Chekhov's principle into sharp focus, transforming it from a writing tip into an almost magical, inescapable force (Adlakha).

The real-world dimension of this threat is not ignored. The film even references the recent Alec Baldwin incident on-screen, anchoring its self-conscious playfulness in a genuine, contemporary tragedy that occurred on a film set (Adlakha, 2025). This is not a postmodernism that retreats from the world; it is a postmodernism that confronts the world's most uncomfortable realities through the lens of its own self-aware artifice. The film's anxiety about a prop gun is not just a metafictional joke; it offers a reflection on the fragile and unstable line dividing representation from reality (Adlakha).

The film's treatment of Chekhov's Gun exemplifies what Hutcheon (1988) describes as the postmodern use of parody and self-reflexivity to both engage with and critique the conventions of the past (p. 26). By making the narrative rule itself the subject of the narrative, Mokri does not merely follow Chekhov's principle; he makes the principle a character in the drama, a force that the characters must contend with. This is a form of pastiche in Jameson's sense: the film imitates the conventions of dramatic narrative – the rule that a gun must fire – without parodying it. It does not mock the rule; it literalizes it, transforming a principle of craft into a lived, material threat.

The Chekhov epigraph, while possibly directing the viewer's focus toward small narrative elements, ultimately sharpens consciousness of the film's constructed nature, as the story gradually transforms into a meditation on its own creation (Adlakha, 2025). The film is not just a story; it is

a story about what it means to be a story. Its self-reflexivity is not a retreat from the world but a critical engagement with the conventions that make storytelling possible – and, in Mokri's vision, dangerous.

3.5. The Möbius Strip as Ontological Statement

The Möbius-strip structure of Mokri's film is not merely a formal curiosity; it is an ontological statement about the nature of reality itself. Critics consistently describe the film as a Möbius-strip narrative in which narratives coil, repeat, and return to their own starting points (BFI London Film Festival, 2025). The film is described as an M.C. Escher-like meditation on reality and illusion, involving doubles, doppelgängers, and uncanny synchronicities (ScreenAnarchy, 2025). This is not a film that simply has a non-linear timeline; it is a film that structurally collapses the boundary between inside and outside.

The film's constant formal play with time and perspective – returning to scenes from shifted perspectives or with subtle stylistic variations – creates a world where the viewer cannot locate a stable point of reference. Even within the film's own visual language, the boundary between reality and fiction dissolves in increasingly surreal ways (Adlakha, 2025). The film's structure is a labyrinth without a center, a funhouse without an exit. This echoes the postmodern condition as described by Baudrillard: we can no longer distinguish between the real and its simulation because we have no way to bring meaningful evidence to bear on the matter (Mishra, 2023, p. 97). The film stages this epistemological crisis as a formal puzzle.

The collapse of boundaries is literalized in a pivotal moment: Sara's domestic drama is suddenly revealed to be a film set, a moment that will be analyzed in greater detail in the following section. This formal choice reflects Mokri's own artistic philosophy. He explains that all his feature films have complex structures, and he begins by working through the architecture and the complex structure of the film before developing the narratives that will fit within that architecture. He starts by composing puzzles and considering which stories can work together to create that puzzle (Cheung, 2026). The Möbius strip is not an afterthought; it is the film's foundational principle.

3.6. The Hyperreal and the Animate Object

Jean Baudrillard (1994) defines hyperreality as a state in which simulations no longer refer to an original reality but instead become more real than reality itself (p. 6). This concept is central to the film's aesthetic. Baudrillard argues that in the postmodern era, we have entered a state where "the distinction between subject and object becomes obsolete" (Mishra, 2023, p. 78). The real no longer exists; only simulacra remain.

Mokri's film stages this collapse through its treatment of objects and props. As examined in the previous section's close analysis of the film's cinematographic techniques, the film presents a world where objects possess autonomous sign-status, detached from their original functions and taking on lives of their own. Props communicate with each other through subtitles, and an enormous coffee cup moves about the set by itself (Adlakha, 2025; ScreenAnarchy, 2025). These sequences are not merely whimsical or surreal; they are a direct visual manifestation of Baudrillard's hyperreality. The props no longer serve their traditional function as passive tools of the filmmaking process; they have become active participants in the film's reality, signifiers that have detached from their signifieds. The moving coffee cup is not a magical object; it is a pure simulacrum, a copy without an original.

This is Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" realized cinematically (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1). The simulation – the prop as an autonomous, speaking entity – precedes and replaces the reality of the prop as a mere object. The film's world is one in which the boundary between the animate and the inanimate is no longer stable, where objects are no longer passive commodities but agents in their own right. The effect is disorienting: the viewer's assumptions about reality are challenged not by a break in the film's visual style but by its consistency. The hyperreal object is presented as if it were ordinary, which makes the ordinariness of the world seem hyperreal in turn.

The film's texture is one of "visual playfulness and wild disorder, as characters confront their doubles and move from one scene only to realize they remain within yet another layer of the film" (BFI London Film Festival, 2025). This constant layering and self-reflexivity reinforces the hyperreal condition: there is no stable ground, no final reality to which the viewer can retreat. The props, the characters, the sets—all are part of a system of signs that refer only to other signs, never to a stable, external reality.

3.7. Wonderland and the Mirror: The Rabbit Motif in Mokri's Film

The film's title and the repeated appearance of rabbits directly invoke Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: a foundational text of the literary imagination that, like Mokri's film, is a story about falling into a world where the rules of logic no longer apply. The black and white rabbits represent opposing yet complementary forces, mirroring the film's recurring engagement with duality, doubled selves, and fluctuating identities (ScreenAnarchy, 2025).

The rabbit motif operates on multiple levels. At its most basic, it is a visual cue that signals to the audience

that they have entered a space where ordinary rules are suspended. As one critic observes, the film's most overt allusion is to *Alice in Wonderland*, which emerges through its repeated focus on transition and metamorphosis, as a young woman moves across various timeframes and locations within the production (ScreenAnarchy, 2025). The film's structure itself is a rabbit hole: the audience descends into a labyrinth of narratives, unable to find a fixed point of reference.

The rabbits in Mokri's film are not mere decorative symbols; they are active participants in the film's hyperreal aesthetic. They appear at key moments of narrative transition, often when the boundaries between reality and fiction are most unstable. In one sequence, a character in a giant rabbit costume wanders through the film set, interacting with the crew as if the costume were a natural part of the environment. The rabbit does not speak; it simply moves through the frame, observing and being observed. This presence is both absurd and uncanny: it is a figure from a children's story, yet it inhabits the same space as the film's characters, blurring the distinction between the fictional and the real.

The color contrast between the black and white rabbits is equally significant. They appear as a pair, often in scenes that involve mirrors, reflections, or doubling. The black rabbit and the white rabbit are not antagonists; they are complements, two sides of the same coin. This duality reflects the film's broader preoccupation with identity and its instability.

Characters in the film are constantly confronted with their doubles, their reflections, their alternative selves. The rabbits embody this theme: they are identical yet different, separate yet connected, a visual reminder that identity is not fixed but fluid.

The rabbits also function as a form of magical realism. In a film that is otherwise grounded in the mechanics of filmmaking – sets, props, cameras – the rabbits appear as intrusions of the impossible. They do not belong in the world of the production, yet they are present, casually and without explanation.

This is a deliberate choice: the rabbits remind the viewer that the film's reality is not governed by the laws of the physical world but by the logic of the imagination. Their presence is a "glitch" in the fabric of the film's reality, a rupture that exposes the underlying instability of the simulated world.

Screenwriter Nasim Ahmadpour explains that the recurring image of two women whose shifting identities are represented through their black and white clothing carries deep cultural and political undertones. She observes that contemporary women are using clothing as a means of forging new identities which connects to the so-called freedom movement of recent years and to cultural history. This symbolism is rooted in the past and in the stories that Iranian cinema has told (Kotzathanasis,

2025). The rabbits, like the women in black and white, are symbols of transformation and the instability of identity. They suggest that the self is not a stable entity but a construction that can be altered, worn, and discarded like clothing.

The rabbits thus serve as a bridge between the film's postmodern formal experiments and its engagement with the real-world politics of gender and identity in Iranian society. They are not just postmodern signifiers; they are culturally specific symbols that ground the film's abstract concerns in material history.

The rabbit motif is not an ornamental addition; it is a key to understanding the film's central argument about the constructedness of reality, identity, and narrative itself.

3.8. The Significance of Tajikistan: Cinema Across Borders

The film's location in Tajikistan is not incidental; it is a key part of the film's postmodern strategy. Mokri is an Iranian director making his first production made outside Iran (Cheung, 2026). The film is a joint production of Tajikistan and the United Arab Emirates, with dialogue spoken in Russian, Tajik, and Persian (Ramachandran, 2025). It was selected to represent Tajikistan in the Best International Feature category at the 98th Academy Awards, a notable achievement for a nation that has put forward only four films for Oscar consideration (Ramachandran).

This cross-border production creates a powerful feedback loop between the film's content and its production. The fictional director depicted in the film bears the name of the real director, Shahram Mokri (BFI London Film Festival, 2025).

The film is about an Iranian director making a film in Tajikistan; Mokri is an Iranian director making a film in Tajikistan. This collapse of the boundary between the film's fiction and its production is a classic postmodern gesture, but it is also a deeply personal and politically charged one.

Mokri reflects on this dimension, noting that Iranian filmmakers making films abroad often face challenges that push them to leave their country (Cheung, 2026). He explains that he grew tired of portraying women in extraordinary situations and came to understand that depicting them under ordinary conditions would require either waiting for change in Iran or producing the film elsewhere (Cheung, 2026).

The film's location is thus not a neutral choice; it is a response to political constraints and a refusal to accept them.

The film also engages with the history of Iranian cinema on a deeper level. The embedded film is a faithful scene-by-scene recreation of a celebrated Iranian movie, a reference to the foundational works of the country's

cinematic tradition (Adlakha, 2025). Mokri describes himself as a student of Abbas Kiarostami, the master of Iranian cinema, and acknowledges that his filmmaking is a continuation of Kiarostami's legacy (Cheung, 2026).

4. Conclusion: The Postmodern Labyrinth

Black Rabbit, White Rabbit is a self-aware, playful examination of authorship and creative disorder, deliberately designed to keep the viewer from arriving at a definitive reading (BFI London Film Festival, 2025). It is a text that, in Barthesian terms, refuses to be a product and insists on being a production. The film is a work about filmmaking, one that operates on the surface level while encouraging the viewer to engage with its texture in an unusually deep and immersive way (Adlakha, 2025).

The film's effect on its audience is central to its design. As Mokri explains, the goal is not to confuse but to engage. He hopes viewers will feel a constructive sense of puzzlement, believing that confusion is not a weakness but a prompt to re-engage with the film (Kotzathanasis, 2025). The film is structured to reward multiple viewings, to invite a viewer who laughs, questions, and re-watches rather than attempting to solve the movie (Kotzathanasis, 2025).

This self-conscious, puzzle-like quality is a hallmark of postmodern metafiction. The film does not simply tell a story; it interrogates the very conditions under which stories are told. It is an exercise in exploring the contours of storytelling (Adlakha, 2025). The story's elaborate framework tends to do little more than call attention to its own design (Adlakha, 2025). But that self-attention is precisely the point. The film's meaning is in its inability to settle on a single, stable meaning.

Shahram Mokri's *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* is a radical postmodern experiment that stages a crisis of representation itself. By weaponizing narrative convention (Chekhov's Gun), transforming the Möbius strip into a narrative and ontological structure, and refusing the audience the stability of a single "real" reality, the film exposes cinema as a machine that produces meaning through deliberate, self-aware illusion and then deconstructs that machinery in real time.

The film's reconstruction of a foundational Iranian cinematic text, its symbolic rabbits, and its unique location in Tajikistan all serve to deepen this self-reflexive project. It is a film that refuses to be a product and insists on being a production, a film that remains conceptually limited while simultaneously offering a richly textured experience unlike that of most movies (Adlakha, 2025). In a moment of global uncertainty, where the very idea of a stable "real" feels increasingly fragile, *Black Rabbit, White Rabbit* stands as a challenge: to watch it is to enter a labyrinth, to confront the machinery of narrative, and to realize that there is no exit.

Authors' Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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