

# Surrealist Aesthetics and the Subversion of Reality in Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle*

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## Abstract

This article undertakes a critical examination of Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* (1990) through the aesthetic and philosophical framework of Surrealism. Engaging primarily with André Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1924) alongside other foundational texts, the study interrogates how the novel subverts conventional constructs of reality, identity, and historical continuity. Pamuk's use of some Surrealist themes -such as dream logic, the unconscious, and the irrational by using some motifs like doppelgängers, mirrors, and automata gives this novel a new height. These motifs used by Pamuk function as destabilizing narrative mechanisms, challenging and collapsing fixed binaries such as self/other, East/West, and fiction/historical truth. The non-linear structure and symbolic density of the novel enact a Surrealist challenge to chronological time, displacing conventional historiography with fragmented, dream-inflected representations of memory. From this perspective, *The White Castle* emerges not merely as a postmodern allegory but as a Surrealist-inflected critique of Enlightenment rationalism, mechanized subjectivity, and dominant epistemological structures. Through a hallucinatory interplay of the rational and the irrational, the real and the spectral, Pamuk subverts the illusion of a unified self, offering instead a vision of identity as dispersed, mirrored, and ceaselessly evolving.

**Keywords:** Surrealism, Orhan Pamuk, Dream Logic, The Unconscious, Oneiric Narrative, Mirror Imagery, Irrationality

## 1. Introduction

Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* occupies a unique position in contemporary world literature. This study shifts the critical conversation around the novel beyond the dominant postcolonial (Gökner, 2024), historiographic (Gürbilek, 2011), or postmodern (Ecevit, 2004) frameworks, proposing instead a Surrealist lens that foregrounds the novel's engagement with the unconscious, dream logic, and the irrational. While prior scholarship has focused on the novel's exploration of East-West dichotomies, identity crises, and cultural hybridity, this paper argues for a fundamental reassessment of the text through the theoretical lens of Surrealism by demonstrating how Pamuk's narrative strategies both engage with and extend the movement's aesthetics and philosophical innovations.

By analyzing the novel's mirroring, doppelgänger motifs, and ambiguous narrative voice through Surrealist aesthetics, the study reveals how Pamuk destabilizes the boundaries between self and other, reality and dream, history and imagination. This approach highlights the novel's capacity to enact what André Breton, in his seminal *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), called "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute

reality, a surreality” (Breton, 1924, p. 14). By adopting this perspective, the study reveals that *The White Castle* reflects not just on cultural or historical identity but more fundamentally on the fluidity and artifice inherent in all forms of identity—a universally resonant theme.

*The White Castle* embodies Surrealist principles through its narrative structure, thematic concerns, and symbolic construction. The novel’s central conceit— the gradual merging of identities between a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Italian scholar and his Ottoman doppelgänger Hoja— enacts a characteristically Surrealist destabilization of unitary subjectivity. Their relationship, unfolding through a series of mirroring encounters and psychological exchanges, exemplifies what Breton (1936) identifies as the Surrealist “crisis of the object”—the moment when familiar categories of perception and identity begin to dissolve into their contradictory elements.

This paper unfolds through four interrelated analytical phases. First, it lays the theoretical groundwork of Surrealist aesthetics, with particular attention to dream logic, the unconscious, and irrationality as articulated by Breton and later scholars. Second, it investigates how Pamuk’s use of mirror motifs and doppelgänger produces a narrative of fractured identity, aligning with Surrealist visual and literary techniques. Third, the study interrogates the novel’s portrayal of history and temporality as inherently oneiric formations. Lastly, it argues that *The White Castle* extends Surrealism’s challenge to Enlightenment rationality into postcolonial critique and epistemological enquiry.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations: Surrealism, Dream Logic, and the Unconscious

### 2.1. Defining the Surrealist Project

The Surrealist movement emerged in 1920s Paris as both an artistic revolution and a philosophical intervention against what its proponents saw as the oppressive rationalism of Western thought. As Matthews (1977) notes, Surrealism constituted “not simply another aesthetic school but a comprehensive way of reimagining human experience” (p.3). Central to this reimagining was Breton’s concept of surreality — the visionary state achieved through the synthesis of dreaming and waking consciousness.

It is worth examining Breton’s definition in detail. According to him, Surrealism is “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” (Breton, 1924, p. 26)

This formulation contains several crucial elements that illuminate our reading of *The White Castle*. The emphasis on “psychic automatism” suggests a writing practice that bypasses conscious control, a method Pamuk replicates in his characters’ compulsive, almost trance-like exchanges. For instance, when the narrator recalls how he and Hoja would “speak for hours without remembering who had said what,” the text enacts a blurring of agency and intention emblematic of automatic writing (Pamuk, 1990, p. 58). The rejection of rational control anticipates the novel’s systematic undermining of Enlightenment epistemology: “I realized with horror that I had been speaking with his voice, not my own” (Pamuk, 1990, p. 116), the narrator reflects, unsettling the very concept of a sovereign, rational self. Most significantly, the suspension of “aesthetic or moral concern” mirrors Pamuk’s refusal to provide clear moral resolutions or aesthetic closure. Rather than punishing or redeeming either figure, the novel ends with an ambiguous merging of identities.

### 2.2. Dream Logic as Narrative Principle

Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) provided Surrealism with its foundational model of unconscious processes. Freud identified two primary mechanisms of dreamwork:

1. Condensation: The combining of multiple thoughts/images into single dream elements
2. Displacement: The shifting of psychic energy from significant to trivial elements

In *The White Castle*, Pamuk employs both mechanisms to construct his narrative. The protagonists’ identities undergo constant condensation — the Italian scholar and Hoja increasingly incorporate each other’s memories, knowledge, and personality traits. As the narrator observes: “I was becoming him as he was becoming me” (Pamuk 1990, p. 104). This psychic merging exemplifies what Balakian (1970) describes as the Surrealist “principle of paradoxical union” (p. 87), where apparent opposites coalesce into unstable syntheses.

Displacement operates through the novel’s symbolic economy, particularly in the recurring but ever-elusive image of the white castle itself. Like the surrealist objects depicted by Magritte or Dalí, the castle functions as what Breton called a “crisis object” (André Breton defined the “crisis object” as a material object transformed through Surrealist intervention to reveal unconscious desires and contradictions, thereby disrupting ordinary perception and provoking psychological or cultural crisis) — its significance continually shifting, never settling into fixed meaning. The castle first appears as military objective, then as scientific project, finally as metaphysical ideal, its symbolic weight displacing across these registers without resolution. Critic Azade Seyhan (2001) interprets the castle as a metaphor for the “unattainable West” arguing that its shifting significance mirrors Turkey’s fraught cultural duality. The castle’s displacement from military to metaphysical, she claims, reflects Pamuk’s critique of Ottoman/Eurocentric binaries.

### 2.3. The Unconscious and Irrational Knowledge

Surrealism’s connection to Freudian theory goes beyond dream, delving into the unconscious as a distinct realm of knowledge. Rubin (1968) demonstrates that Surrealist artists sought to access “that liminal space where the laws of rational thought no longer obtain” (p. 42). *The White Castle* mirrors this pursuit as its protagonists slip into a collective unconsciousness.

The novel's treatment of scientific knowledge proves particularly revealing in this regard. Hoja's various experiments - the fireworks display, the epidemic treatise, the war machine - all follow a trajectory from rational endeavor to irrational spectacle. His final project, the creation of an automaton, exemplifies what Foster (1993) identifies as the Surrealist "return of the repressed" (a concept in psychoanalysis, primarily associated with Sigmund Freud, where repressed thoughts, desires, or experiences return to consciousness, often in a distorted or symbolic way) (p. 19), where technological rationality reveals its own irrational underpinnings. The automaton, intended as triumph of engineering, becomes instead an uncanny double, exposing the irrationality at the heart of Enlightenment science.

This pattern aligns with Breton's insistence that "the imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights" (Breton 1924, p. 10). Pamuk's narrative demonstrates how even the most rational projects inevitably succumb to the irrational - a theme that resonates deeply with Surrealism's critique of positivist epistemology.

### 3. Mirrors and Doppelgängers: The Surrealist Subject in Crisis

#### 3.1. Mirror Imagery and Specular Identity

The motif of the mirror in *The White Castle* functions as a central metaphor for the destabilization of identity, a concept deeply embedded in Surrealist aesthetics. In René Magritte's *The False Mirror* (1929), the eye becomes a reflective surface that both perceives and distorts reality, illustrating the Surrealist preoccupation with vision as an unreliable mediator of truth. Similarly, Pamuk's use of mirrors does not merely reflect reality but fractures it, creating a labyrinth of shifting selves. When the Italian scholar first encounters Hoja, their relationship is framed through reciprocal gazing: "When I looked into the mirror, I saw not myself but him. And when he looked, he saw me." (Pamuk, 1990, p. 78)

This pivotal moment resonates with Jacques Lacan's mirror stage (1949), where identity formation is predicated on misrecognition—the self is constructed through an external image that is both familiar and alien. The mirror in *The White Castle* does not consolidate identity but dissolves it, rendering the boundaries between self and other permeable. As the narrator reflects, "I saw that my face was not mine, that the eyes looking at me from the mirror were someone else's" (Pamuk, 1990, p. 92). This unsettling recognition of the self as other mirrors Lacan's theory: the ego is born not through affirmation but through alienation. Later, the narrator confesses, "I began to suspect that I was not myself but he" (Pamuk, 1990, p. 147), underscoring how the mirror functions not as a site of unification but of psychic disintegration and doubling.

Pamuk's mirrors also evoke the Surrealist technique of *dédoublement* (doubling), where characters become spectral reflections of one another. This is not merely psychological but ontological—the Italian scholar and Hoja do not simply resemble each other; they inhabit each other's identities, exchanging memories, fears, and even physical mannerisms. The mirror thus becomes a portal to what Breton called "the Communicating Vessels" (1932), where conscious and unconscious selves flow into one another.

#### 3.2. The Doppelgänger Motif in Surrealist Tradition

The doppelgänger, a recurring figure in Gothic and Romantic literature, undergoes a Surrealist transformation in *The White Castle*. Unlike the traditional double, which often represents repressed sin or moral duality (e.g., Dostoevsky's *The Double*), Pamuk's doppelgängers embody the Surrealist collapse of binary oppositions.

Hoja and the Italian scholar are not opposites but interchangeable entities, their identities merging like the composite figures in Max Ernst's collages. This reflects the Surrealist belief in "the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella" (Lautréamont, 1868)—an irrational juxtaposition that generates new meaning. Their relationship is not one of conflict but of mutual erasure, culminating in their final, indistinguishable disappearance into the crowd.

The doppelgänger motif also critiques Enlightenment individualism. The novel's central question—"Who is the original, and who is the copy?"—undermines the Western ideal of the autonomous self. As Foucault argues in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), the Enlightenment subject is a construct of discourse, not an inherent truth. Pamuk's doubles literalize this idea, presenting identity as a performative, unstable construct.

#### 3.3. Automata and the Mechanized Self

Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* is rich with motifs of repetition, imitation, and mechanical production, all of which converge in the figure of the automaton—a central metaphor through which the novel explores the fragmentation and construction of selfhood. The automaton not only literalizes Enlightenment fantasies of reason and control but also dramatizes the ontological instability of identity in a world increasingly governed by mechanistic logic. This idea resonates with both Surrealist and postcolonial readings of the novel.

Hoja, the Ottoman polymath, obsesses over building an automaton that mimics human movement and thought, hoping to unlock the secrets of the mind through mechanistic replication. This project is emblematic of the Enlightenment drive to Systematize and master the unknown ambition imported via the Venetian narrator and filtered through Hoja's own hybridized intellectual world. The automaton becomes a site where Western rationalism intersects with Ottoman mysticism, highlighting the tension between colonial knowledge and indigenous epistemology.

Surrealist aesthetics often engage with automata as uncanny objects that disrupt the boundary between animate and inanimate, self and other. In *The White Castle*, the automaton functions in precisely this way, destabilizing the narrator's identity and fostering an ontological confusion between Hoja and the Venetian. The automaton is not just a machine but a mirror - an echo of the doppelgänger motif that runs throughout the novel.

The final scene Where Hoja and the narrator may have switched places- a question left unresolved- mirror the function of the automaton as a figure of identity collapse. Like a surrealist mannequin, the automaton embodies both familiarity and eerie otherness, reflecting back the self as something alien.

The automaton in *The White Castle* functions as a striking metaphor for colonial mimicry, articulating the Ottoman Empire's ambivalent relationship with European modernity. In line with Homi Bhabha's (1984) concept of mimicry as "almost the same, but not quite," Hoja's attempt to construct a mechanical double of the narrator reveals both desire and failure: an imitation that uncannily resembles but never fully replicates its model. The automaton, which "moved its head as if it were alive, its eyes glittering" (Pamuk, 1990, p. 118), evokes a Surrealist uncanniness, wherein the boundaries between subject and object collapse into a dreamlike indeterminacy. This uncanny doubling is not confined to the machine; it reverberates through the narrative structure itself, particularly in the narrator's gradual psychological merging with Hoja. "I'd begun to see the world through his eyes," the narrator admits, "I'd become him" (Pamuk, 1990, p. 147). This fusion enacts what Surrealist theorist André Breton celebrates as the collapse of rational distinctions, inviting a deeper ontological uncertainty. In this sense, the novel does not merely represent mimicry as a form of colonial dependency; rather, it transforms imitation into a destabilizing force, unsettling the epistemic authority of both West and East, self and other. By the end, when the narrator declares, "I am the one who left that evening, and he who stayed behind is someone else" (Pamuk, 1990, p. 161), the text subverts any clear notion of identity or origin, aligning Bhabha's mimicry with Surrealism's dream logic to challenge imperial and rationalist structures alike.

The automaton in Hoja's imagination is more than a scientific project; it is an extension of his and the narrator's fractured psyches. In the Surrealist tradition—particularly in André Breton's concept of "convulsive beauty"—mechanical beings like mannequins or automata become vehicles for the eruption of the unconscious into waking reality. These constructs are not passive machines but dream-figures, expressing a repressed or mirrored self. As the narrator reflects, "I felt as if Hoja were building not a machine, but me, a mechanical version of my own self" (Pamuk, 1990, p. 95). Later, he dreams of becoming the machine—"I moved in fits and jerks, I opened and closed my mouth like a puppet, and nobody could tell I wasn't real" (p. 98)—a moment that directly embodies Breton's notion of convulsive beauty through the uncanny convergence of flesh and mechanism.

The very process of building the automaton mimics Surrealist automatism, where the artist becomes a conduit for unconscious expression, bypassing rational control. Hoja's obsessive instructions to the narrator—to "write down everything" about himself—resemble a forced psychic excavation, as if identity could be reduced to a machine-readable blueprint. Yet the more data he gathers, the more indistinct the boundary between self and other becomes.

As Hoja and the narrator exchange memories and inner thoughts, they engage in a grotesque form of surrealistic collage: splicing together fragmented subjectivities to form a composite self. This recalls Breton's *Nadja*, in which identity is not fixed but experienced as a kaleidoscopic, dreamlike process. In Pamuk's novel, the mind is not a soul but a programmable device—mirroring the Surrealist belief that reason is a mask concealing the deeper truths of the unconscious.

#### 4. Oneiric Temporality and Historical Consciousness

##### 4.1. *The Ambiguity of Identity and the Shifting Sands of Time*

The Mirroring of the Narrator and Hoja and their striking resemblance and the constant swapping of roles and stories create a profound sense of temporal instability. Are they two distinct individuals existing simultaneously, or are they fragmented aspects of a single consciousness across different time periods? This ambiguity mirrors the way historical identities can be fluid and contested, influenced by perspective and narrative.

The moments where the narrator and Hoja seem to share memories or even dreams blur the lines between individual and collective experience, and also between past and present. This suggests that historical understanding can be a shared, almost intuitive process, rather than a purely objective recounting of facts. Consider the experiments they conduct – do these truly happen, or are they enacted in a shared mental space, collapsing temporal boundaries?

##### 4.2. *The Unreliable Narrator and the Subjectivity of History*

The narrator's own doubts and uncertainties about his memories and experiences directly impact our understanding of the historical events he describes. Is his account a reliable record, or is it colored by his psychological state and the passage of time? This mirrors the inherent subjectivity in historical interpretation, where personal biases and perspectives inevitably shape our understanding of the past.

The novel highlights how stories and narratives play a crucial role in constructing our understanding of history. The tales the narrator and Hoja tell each other, their interpretations of events, and even the act of writing the memoir itself are all acts of shaping and reshaping the past. The oneiric elements underscore the imaginative and subjective dimensions of historical consciousness.

##### 4.3. *The Exploration of East-West Encounter Through a Dreamlike Lens*

The novel's dreamlike atmosphere allows for a more nuanced exploration of the East-West encounter, moving beyond simplistic binary oppositions. The mirroring of the two characters challenges the idea of a fixed and essential "Eastern" or "Western" identity. Their shared experiences, whether real or imagined, suggest a more fluid and interconnected reality.

The historical context of the Ottoman Empire's engagement with Western science and technology is filtered through the narrator's subjective and often disoriented perspective. This oneiric lens captures the anxieties and uncertainties of a society

grappling with modernization and the potential erosion of traditional ways of life. The strange experiments and inventions can be seen as reflections of this unsettling encounter.

#### 4.4. *The Cyclical Nature of Time and History*

The recurring patterns and mirrored situations within the novel suggest a cyclical view of time and history, rather than a purely linear progression. The power dynamics between the narrator and Hoja, for example, shift and repeat, perhaps reflecting recurring patterns of dominance and submission throughout history.

#### 4.5. *Nonlinear Narrative as Surrealist Chronology*

Surrealism rejects linear time in favor of oneiric temporality—a dreamlike state where past, present, and future coalesce. *The White Castle* replicates this through its nested narratives: the frame story (a historian discovering the manuscript) and the embedded tale (the Italian scholar's memoir) blur into a single, recursive temporality.

This structure mirrors Salvador Dalí's "The Persistence of Memory" (1931), where clocks melt into amorphous shapes, symbolizing time's fluidity. Pamuk's narrative similarly "melts" historical chronology, rendering the 17th-century Ottoman Empire and the modern reader's present indistinguishable.

### 5. Surrealism and Postcolonial Critique: Deconstructing East/West Binaries

#### 5.1. *East/West Dialectics Reconfigured*

Pamuk's *The White Castle* engages in a radical Surrealist dismantling of Orientalist frameworks by subverting the fixed binaries of "East" and "West." The novel's central dynamic—between the Italian scholar and his Ottoman double, Hoja—does not reinforce colonial hierarchies but instead dissolves them through a process of mutual absorption. Their relationship exemplifies what Homi Bhabha terms "hybridity" (1994), where cultural identities are not static but continually renegotiated through mimicry and exchange.

The Italian scholar's initial captivity by Ottoman forces inverts the traditional colonial narrative: rather than the "Oriental" being objectified by European gaze, the European protagonist becomes the object of Ottoman intellectual curiosity. Hoja's relentless interrogation of his captive—demanding Western scientific knowledge while simultaneously asserting Ottoman superiority—creates a paradoxical power dynamic. This mirrors the Surrealist fascination with "l'amour fou" (mad love), where domination and submission blur into an irrational, almost erotic interdependence.

By the novel's conclusion, the two men have traded not just knowledge but identities, rendering the East/West divide meaningless. Their final merging into an anonymous crowd literalizes Frantz Fanon's observation that "the Negro is not. Any more than the white man" (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952)—a Surrealist erasure of essentialist racial and cultural categories.

#### 5.2. *Enlightenment Rationalism in Question*

Pamuk's critique extends beyond colonialism to challenge the epistemological foundations of Enlightenment thought itself. The novel systematically undermines the European narrative of scientific progress by showing how Hoja's attempts to master Western technology descend into absurdity. His failed automaton—a grotesque parody of human rationality—echoes the Surrealist mockery of mechanized modernity in works like Francis Picabia's "Machine Turn Quickly" (1917), where machines become symbols of irrational obsession rather than progress.

The Sultan's court, with its blend of superstition and imperial ambition, further destabilizes the myth of Western rationality's superiority. When Hoja and the Italian scholar present their "scientific" war machine—only for it to be rejected as useless—Pamuk highlights what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called "the dialectic of Enlightenment" (1944): the paradox that rational systems inevitably produce their own irrationality.

Most strikingly, the protagonists' ultimate rejection of knowledge—abandoning their quest for the elusive white castle—enacts a Surrealist "acte gratuit" (gratuitous act), a gesture celebrated by Breton as a revolt against the tyranny of reason and a reclamation of the irrational, the dreamlike, and the absurd. The white castle itself, shimmering always at a distance, functions as more than a narrative objective; it becomes an allegorical locus of Enlightenment rationality—an architectural embodiment of Western epistemological ambition and imperial control. Its inaccessibility serves as a critique of the Enlightenment's false promise of universal knowledge and the colonialist impulse to conquer and categorize the Other. By ultimately turning away from the castle, the protagonists reject the totalizing logic of both European modernity and colonial domination. In its place, Pamuk stages a Surrealist refusal of binary thinking—East versus West, self versus other, master versus slave—in favor of ambiguity, dislocation, and imaginative liberation. The void left by this rejection is not nihilistic but generative: it gestures toward a space beyond rigid structures, where identity, knowledge, and power are no longer fixed but fluid, echoing both Surrealist ideals and postcolonial strategies of resistance.

### 6. Conclusion

Orhan Pamuk's *The White Castle* exemplifies how Surrealist aesthetics continue to shape contemporary literature by transcending historical and cultural boundaries. Through its dreamlike narrative, psychological doubling, and subversion of rational thought, the novel demonstrates Surrealism's enduring capacity to challenge Western epistemological frameworks while offering alternative modes of understanding identity and history. The work's dissolution of fixed realities mirrors broader twentieth-century artistic and philosophical movements that sought to deconstruct Enlightenment rationality, placing it in dialogue with modernist experiments in perception and postmodern critiques of grand narratives. By employing quintessentially

Surrealist techniques - from uncanny repetitions to the fusion of opposing states - Pamuk not only revitalizes the movement's core principles but also adapts them to postcolonial contexts, revealing their continued relevance in global literature. This suggests that Surrealism's radical potential persists beyond its historical moment as a vital tool for interrogating contemporary realities, where the boundaries between truth and fiction, self and other, remain as unstable as ever. The novel ultimately affirms art's power to access deeper truths through irrational means, maintaining Surrealism's fundamental challenge to conventional ways of seeing and knowing the world.

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