

DECONSTRUCTING HARRY (1997)

by

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*Deconstructing Harry. Written and directed by Woody Allen. Cinematography by Carlo Di Palma.
Distributed by Fine Line Features, 1998. (Rated R)*

Harry Block (Woody Allen) is a successful writer (in the vein of Philip Roth) who uses his personal miseries and those of his friends as fodder for the thinly disguised subject matter of his salacious novels. Through this non-linear telling of a day in his life, he is troubled by his three ex-wives (Judy Davis, Kirstie Alley, Amy Irving), is trying to overcome writer's block, and tries to gather a group of friends to accompany him to the college that once expelled him, and now wants to honor him as an illustrious alumnus. At the same time, he is trying to convince his current girlfriend, Faye (Elisabeth Shue) not to marry his friend Larry (Billy Crystal). So isolated is Harry that he winds up in a car with a distant friend, Richard (Bob Balaban), a hooker hired for the occasion (Hazelle Goodman), and his kidnapped son (Eric Lloyd). Interlaced are flashbacks to his real life interlaced with flashes of episodes from his writing – his “reel” life? – in which he has cast himself, his wives, and friends as other characters (Richard Benjamin and Stanley Tucci play Block/Allen and Demi Moore plays the fictional second wife while Kirstie Alley plays her in “real life,” etc.). Among these stories are a trip to Hell (operated by Billy Crystal) and the story of an actor who cannot keep focused – literally (Robin Williams).

The film begins in a way that leaves no doubt that this is not a traditional, linear film: under the titles, Harry Block's twitchy ex-wife (Judy Davis) gets out of a taxi, muttering, and begins to walk toward his door. Then she gets out of the taxi again and again in a series of jump cuts that move back and forth slightly in time and point of view, inspecting and reinspecting the same action over and over, tempting us to discover the differences and similarities, inviting us into nuances we missed the first (or second, or third) time around. And for the Allen fan, it evokes the jolting carriage-return photography of *Husbands and Wives* [1992]. Thus, in the first few seconds of the film, the deconstruction of the title is writ broad on the screen.

What is deconstruction? Here is a dictionary definition, "To write about or analyze in a way that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth, asserts that words can only refer to other words, and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own meanings."

One way to deconstruct a film is to constantly remind the audience that it is watching a film. Allen, presuming his audience to be film literate, quotes liberally from other films. For instance, the whole idea of the awards ceremony is lifted wholesale from Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* [1957]. And once we get this in-group joke, others come to light. For instance, the central character in *Deconstructing Harry* is Harry Block while the central character in Bergman's other masterpiece, *The Seventh Seal*

[1957], is Andreas Bloch. By combining *Wild Strawberries* and *The Seventh Seal*, we have a pretty good summary of the two major plot actions of *Deconstructing Harry*: a man in search of the meaning of life and a man reminiscing about his life, both good and bad, while on an automobile trip to be honored by an institution. Additionally, the idea of an over-active imagination raising a milquetoast to the heights of bravery can be traced to films like *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* [1947] which functions as an homage to fellow comedian Danny Kaye. And so on, with many other film references.

But Allen quotes not only others' films, but also his own. Here, the deconstruction process takes on everything from the mundane to the sublime. The "Trip to Hell," for instance, is similar to the one cut from the original version of *Annie Hall* [1997]. But despite the modernism he is slipping into, Allen the film maker is also Allen the social comic and takes full advantage of the scene for a dozen or so comic swipes (in a slap-stick homage to Dante Alighieri). Within the nether depths are places reserved for lawyers who appear on television, the man who invented aluminum siding, and journalists (who, presumably, Allen has not been too happy with recently). But it is a surreal Hell too, complete with percolating hot tub, topless women, and a band playing "Sing, Sing, Sing." But what really makes it hell is the devil himself, Billy Crystal in a Spandex mock-turtleneck.

Other Allen films appear. There is the scatological, sex-obsessed profanity of *Mighty Aphrodite* [1995] and the incestuous betrayals of *Hannah and Her Sisters* [1986]. And, as in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* [1985], he distorts reality by confusing the real world with the film world by making the screen as a separator between reel and real disappear (here it is the literary world rather than the movie world that intrudes into reality). And the final round of applause is from *Stardust Memories* [1980].

Allen has always generated so unmistakable a screen persona as an anthology of angst that this too becomes self-referential and, after so many films, deconstructive. Audiences also come to expect a wide range of intellectual jokes from Allen: references to Clifford Odets, Franz Kafka, the Holocaust and, strangely, Max Schmeling. He never for a moment lets us forget we are watching a Woody Allen film. Has there ever been a Woody Allen character who wasn't poorly adjusted, neurotic, insecure, and self-absorbed? Add to this the fear of death, the failure of psychiatry, young women as lust objects for older men, abandonment by friends, vengeful ex-wives, friends stealing girlfriends, inability to commit to an emotion-based relationship, and on, and on.

Another way to break the cinematic proscenium arch is to have the film refer to events in the real world. In this way, Allen has taken advantage of the recent spate of publicity about his private life. In 1992, Allen's personal life

became public when the Mia Farrow-Soon Yi Previn imbroglio made tabloid headlines. And much of this is reflected in *Deconstructing Harry*.

With all this modernist ado, who, then, is being deconstructed? There are four possibilities: Harry Block, Woody Allen, the idea of character, and the concept of film itself.

Harry Block first. Harry is simultaneously deconstructed as he is constructed. Allen uses the relatively mundane plot as a springboard for revealing Harry's life and personality through "normal" movie storytelling, "true" flashbacks just as vignettes from Harry's books and short stories come to life on the screen (or perhaps in Harry's imagination to which we are privy). All are given equal screen merit. What is revealed is a very ugly man who produces, by all accounts, great art. Perhaps this is the theme of *Deconstructing Harry*: the man and the artist must be considered separately and, even if the man is a despicable work, his artwork may redeem him in some transcendental way (the same of Richard Wagner and his operas).

Now let us look at Woody Allen as the subject of deconstruction. From this point of view we must consider whether Harry Block is a screen stand-in for Woody Allen, since Allen plays Block on screen. Allen acts like Block off screen (angry ex-wives, an artistic temperament, a predilection for young women, and so on). We are forced to ask how much of Allen there is in his

character as Harry Block. And by “forcing” us to ask this question, Allen has taken a big step in the deconstruction process promised by the title.

The deconstruction of the idea of character is undertaken by the deliberate confusion of just who we are watching on the screen. We hear someone describe Harry’s goal in life as “nihilism, cynicism, sarcasm, and orgasm.” To whom are they referring? Harry Block, or one of the actors playing Harry Block’s alter ego in one of the visually materialized literary works? Or, moving the other direction, is it Harry Block or Woody Allen? Realizing that all this multi-layered confusion comes from a single-layered script makes us question the very process of characterization itself. Or is this simply on-screen therapy?

At the nether end of Allen’s deconstruction agenda is the process of film making itself. While it is fashionable to comment on the process of making a film within a film, Allen has taken this a step further. Common difficulties of screen actors (as opposed to stage actors) are how to deal with the dozens of people working around the set, the tons of various machinery, making the film out of the story sequence (all the scenes in one set will be shot at one time), and the need to repeat a scene over and over. The difficulty is staying “focused.” And one of *Deconstructing Harry*’s side stories is about an actor who, with the help of some delightful digital trickery, cannot stay in focus – literally. In a further layer of references, this version of Harry (played by Robin Williams) has a wife played by Julie Kavner – close your eyes and you

hear Marge Simpson. Thus, we are led to ask (falling down still another Allen-generated, seemingly infinite rabbit holes): Harry = Homer? Homer = Odyssey? (Allen cannot go home!)

Perhaps the greatest delight of *Deconstructing Harry* is watching it deconstruct the idea of film itself. By connecting the film with the news media, typically TV and newspapers, we add reality to the film. However, the same connection, realizing that the film *is* fiction, begins to cast doubt on the veracity of the “truth” which we assume is presented by the news. In this web of interactions, we really do not know what we are watching on screen.

Thus, Woody Allen’s latest film is perhaps the ultimate conceit in a long series of cinematic conceits. Allen is apparently playing himself as Harry Block, a moral worm of a writer who produces successful semi-autobiographical novels for which all his friends hate him. In the film, bits of his novels appear alongside the “real” people around him for a thoroughly delightful and engrossing effect.

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