

Deconstructing Woody: Film as Autobiography



Harry Block (Woody Allen) with Fay (Elizabeth Shue) and Larry (Billy Crystal)

Rating: ***½ (1997) **Running Time:** 95 minutes. MPAA rated R (for sexual references and profanity).

Credits

<u>Director:</u> Woody Allen	<u>Screenplay:</u> Woody Allen
<u>Producer:</u> Jean Doumanian	<u>Editor:</u> Susan E. Morse
<u>Director of Photography:</u> Carlo diPalma	<u>Production Design:</u> Santo Loquasto
<u>Costume Design:</u> Colleen Atwood	<u>Costume Designer:</u> Suzy Benzing

Cast

<u>Harry Block:</u> Woody Allen	<u>Lucy:</u> Judy Davis
<u>Joan:</u> Kirstie Alley	<u>Harry's Girlfriend:</u> Elizabeth Shue
<u>Doris:</u> Caroline Aaron	<u>The Devil (Larry):</u> Billy Crystal
<u>Ken:</u> Richard Benjamin	<u>Cookie:</u> Hazelle Goodman
<u>Jane:</u> Amy Irving	<u>Beth Kramer:</u> Mariel Hemingway
<u>Leslie:</u> Julia Louis-Dreyfus	<u>Harvey Stern:</u> Tobey Maguire
<u>Helen:</u> Demi Moore	<u>Mel:</u> Robin Williams

By T. Larry Verburg

Deconstructing Harry is a beautifully crafted and entertaining film by Woody Allen, who wrote, directed, and starred in the film. Although the film may not be as innovative as *Mighty Aphrodite*, nor quite as charming, it is certainly one of Woody's best films. *Deconstructing Harry* does allow the pain and anguish—as well as the comedy and absurdity—of the guilt-ridden, self-absorbed, but basically good-guy Harry Block to bubble and percolate, and it often erupts to the surface in scenes of wincing pain or comic and dramatic sequences that are powerful and moving.

Because Harry Block (played by Woody Allen) is afraid of life, he lives vicariously through the

books he writes. These books are all thinly veiled autobiography (a fact that enrages his family, friends, and acquaintances). Harry's ex-wife Joan (Kirstie Alley) in one early scene verbally runs Harry through for his exposure of their private lives in his latest novel. (Harry, like Kenneth Starr, reveals too much.)

Harry comes to realize, only slowly and painfully, and only at the end of the film, that Ken, his fictive alter ego (admirably played by Richard Benjamin), is more open to life's limitless potential—more attuned to life's rhythms, nuances, and possibilities—than he is. For someone of Harry's intellect and insight, this a rather obvious revelation—certainly not the epiphany it appears to be to Harry.

Harry's fictional works have an order and logic that his real life lacks. Like the poet Wallace Steven's "jar in Tennessee," Harry uses his fiction as an ordering principle—or perhaps, like Robert Frost's definition of a poem as a "momentary stay against confusion," Harry's novels are an attempt to create a world in which he may live without fear. Harry's fictional world is essentially an attempt to make sense of a world without a faith in God or the comfort of religion, which sounds like (and is) one of Ingmar Bergman's major themes. (Woody's respect and admiration for the Swedish director has been well-documented in essays and interviews.)

Harry's inability to sustain relationships and his need to confess the intimate details of his life and those around him are symptoms of his desperation. He seeks to use his art as a surgeon does a lancet. Through his art, he seeks to erect a foundation, a kind of stillpoint in a universe filled with awesome and terrifying change. He desperately seeks balance in a world of Heracleitean change, and, because he relies almost solely on physical gratification and sensual pleasures—as evinced by his many affairs—he is bound to be disappointed.

Interpersonal relationships, as E. M. Forster pointed out, are all we have, and are of the utmost importance. If nothing else in our world is as important as these relationships, Harry is on the right track, yet he is always missing the mark. Like Sisyphus, Harry appears doomed to a life of unfulfilled repetition. He is forever doomed to begin a relationship that could (literally) save him, only to destroy that relationship by acts of cowardice and an unwillingness to achieve and maintain a relationship or a marriage.



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Fineline Features

Harry is too much the controller, as when he tells his doting young girlfriend Fay (Elizabeth Shue), "Don't love me, I'll only hurt you." In fairness to Harry, it is certainly true that he is aware of his own shortcomings. He is, however, powerless to act, and this makes him a somewhat comical figure, like T. S. Eliot's Prufrock. And yet Harry is aware of this ridiculous aspect of his persona. He knows that a part of him is the buffoon, the clown, the fool. In fact, Harry takes full advantage of this side of his personality to make jokes that are often quite cogent and barbed. From *Sleeper* onward, many of Woody Allen's best jokes come from an awareness of the absurdities in the protagonist's life, combined with a comic self-deprecation.

One critic has written that to Woody Allen, the film is a kind of therapy. Certainly this is no more true than in *Deconstructing Harry*. Comedy, for Woody Allen, is potent therapy; it is the Janus face of tragedy, and, while both can be cathartic, comedy is the medium through which we achieve genuine humility. Laughter is the key to—if not happiness, at least contentment.

The title, *Deconstructing Harry*, refers to *deconstructionism*, a contemporary literary theory that sees the author as less important than the reader of the text. In this critical approach, each reader encodes a literary text with meaning, so that to each person approaching that work, the work means something else—something unique. The reader, then, is more important than the author, since it is ultimately the reader who writes the text.

The film thus establishes a paradox: the protagonists of Harry's novels come to life, but Harry is himself the alter ego of Woody Allen. Thus the fictive and real selves tend to blend, bifurcate, and then remerge. In one sense, in watching the film, we are seeing Woody Allen dreaming Harry Block who is himself dreaming the lives of Ken, Mel (Robin Williams), and Harvey Stern (Tobey Maguire). But this aspect of metafiction is well-handled in *Deconstructing Harry*, as in the case of *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, when the people in his novels walk off the pages of his books and take on lives of their own—lives that are beyond the control of their creator, but that mirror the possibilities and perplexities of Harry's own life.

In Harry's case, since his work is his own imagined existence, he is his own best reader. In the discovery of the literary text, Harry as both author and reader will also discover himself, will reach within to find his creative soul, his wisdom, and his strength. If making films is therapy for the director of the film, Woody Allen, then the act of writing is itself a metaphor for the journey to self-discovery of Harry, the film's protagonist. Since the creator in a sense becomes a part of his own creation, the title of the film is both apt and ironic.

The irony of the title comes from the literary theory that forms a subtext to the film. If deconstructionism heralds the death of the author, as Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God, then each reader encodes and decodes his or her own unique message from the written text. From this there arises a dangerous corollary: no text can be understood socially, and we are doomed to the prison-house (to use Nietzsche's phrase) of a language that holds meaning only for the individual.

What this means for Harry, if the deconstructionists are correct, is that his quest is futile. He can communicate only in a very limited sense. And what then is the use or value of art? If the text is written by the reader, then how can anyone achieve understanding—how can we judge correspondences, metaphors, and processes? How can Harry hope to achieve a communion with those he loves and whom he abuses in his struggle for comprehension?



*Harry (Woody Allen) being watched by
Beth Kramer (Mariel Hemingway)*

By the end of the film, Harry appears to have found some answers to these apparent enigmas. For Harry, at least, the system of language does work, does enable two separate souls to share emotions, ideas, and information, even if they have neither the vocabulary or the souls of poets. Society and the larger culture, with its novels, films, and literary and psychiatric theories, must be predicated on a belief in the community. True understanding (of self and others, to use M. Esther Harding's phrase) can only come from communality. Without a linguistic base of communality, we fail to comprehend any system, even that of deconstructionism.

Because those around Harry see themselves reflected in his art, they do not react to the vulnerable, fragile person who is physically with them, but rather to the fictive persona within the literary work that Harry has created. And who, after all, is "deconstructing" Harry? The words imply that others are seeking to know Harry. And yet this is not true. The others are simply reacting to ghost images of themselves. Ultimately they are ghosts reflected from the pages of Harry's novels like celluloid images caught in a bright rush of light and flashed upon a screen.

It is Harry who is seeking to know *Harry*. Ultimately it is Harry alone who learns in the film, who grows emotionally and spiritually. In the film Harry discovers an important truth about himself, about life, and about life's magnificent and inscrutable mystery.

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