

Deconstructing Harry (1997)

“All people know the same truth. Our lives consist of how we choose to distort it.”

Major Credits:

Director: Woody Allen

Screenplay: Woody Allen

Cast: Woody Allen (Harry Block), Richard Benjamin (Ken), Julia Louis-Dreyfus (Linda), Judy Davis (Lucy), Kirstie Alley (Joan), Demi Moore (Helen) Stanley Tucci (Paul), Elisabeth Shue (Fay), Mariel Hemingway (Beth Kramer), Amy Irving (Jane), Billy Crystal (Larry), Robin Williams (Mel), Julie Kavner (Mel's wife), Hazelle Goodman (Cookie), Caroline Aron (Doris)

Cinematography: Carlo DiPalma

Context:

Deconstructing Harry appears to be Allen's delayed response to the critics and media commentators who vilified him following the 1992 scandal surrounding his breakup with Mia Farrow. The seventh level of hell is reserved for the media—and is filled to capacity. Harry himself is a caricature of the caricature Woody Allen had become in the eyes of many of his formerly adoring public.

Another way of regarding the inspiration for this film is to return to the works of Allen's cinematic idol, Ingmar Bergman. The plot of *Deconstructing Harry*—an alienated, embittered man travels to his old university to be honored—follows exactly that of Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957); the film's existentialist theme—Harry's search for a single “meaningful idea”—echoes another Bergman masterpiece, *The Seventh Seal* (1956).

Ultimately, *Deconstructing Harry* may be fairly regarded as a paradigm of postmodern filmmaking: fragmented, ironic, playful, complex, confusing, and ephemeral.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. Nested narratives: Allen participates in a contemporary filmmaking trend by constructing a screenplay with many stories-within-the-story: dreams, fictional works, real-life flashbacks—that reflect not only Harry's obsessions but the task of organizing them into a coherent narrative.
2. Special effects: In a brilliant metaphor, Allen creates a story about an actor (Robin Williams) who suddenly becomes out-of-focus. Later in the film, Harry himself will “go soft” before the ceremony. Carlo DiPalma's trick cinematography in these instances takes the viewer back to film's origins as a “cinema of attractions,” allowing us to see heretofore inaccessible or spectacular images,
3. Language: Allen introduced vulgar language—cursing—into his screenplay for the first time in *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995). Some reviewers found this new profanity disappointing while others called it refreshing.

Questions for Discussion:

1. *Deconstructing Harry* extends the ethical debate about the value of art in relation to life seen in many earlier films, most recently *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994) but tracing back at least as far as *Manhattan* (1979). The relationship between Harry and his less talented friend Larry might be compared to that between the pedestrian playwright David and the genius gangster Cheech in *Bullets Over Broadway*. “You put your art into your work,” Larry says near the end. “I put it into my life.” Faye, like Ellen in the earlier movie, falls in love with the author, not the man. Woody Allen had adamantly denied the autobiographical details critics have noticed in his films. Is *Deconstructing Harry* Allen’s personal *confession* under the pressure of his tortuous public humiliation?
2. At the end of the film Harry’s fictional characters all return to honor him. The concluding applause echoes the ending of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), where the wedding guests seem to applaud the words of the suicidal philosopher, Professor Levy. On the other hand, Harry *dreams* this scene (which replaces his actual arrest before the ceremony honoring him), rendering the apparent benediction from his creations potentially ironic. Does Allen let his protagonist “off the hook” in this concluding moment, or does the denouement confirm that Harry is “a guy who can’t function well in life but can only function in art”?
3. One of the funniest of the film’s nested narratives is Harry’s story, “Max Pincus’ Dark Secret.” Like Philip Roth, Allen has been accused of anti-semitism and self-hatred in his portraits on Jews, as Harry is here by his sister Doris and her husband, “I may hate myself,” Harry responds. “But not because I’m Jewish.” How do you assess Allen’s/Harry’s response to his critics on this particular matter?
4. Like Charlie Kaufman’s brilliant screenplay (directed by Spike Jonze), *Adaptation* (2002), *Deconstructing Harry* is about creativity and overcoming writer’s block. “Make peace with your demons,” Richard advises (after he’s dead!), “and your block will pass.” What does the film reveal about Allen’s understanding of the artistic process?