

THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY: a study in absurdity

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The Trouble with Harry provides the best illustration of what a study of absurdity would resemble. This essay will analyze, from start to finish, how the style, in terms of camera movement and montage, reflects the narrative's absurdity. Therefore this essay will be reflective in nature, as the narrative will always be highly dependent on the camera movement and montage and vice versa. In addition the essay attempted to discuss revelations to the narrative as they appeared and are understood when watching the film in order of understanding. This will shed greater light on how the narrative and camera and montage style, interact with together.

The opening credits reflect this absurdity because we see the camera as it pans across the screen displaying images that make no sense in themselves. The opening credits feature images of a landscape with trees that look skinny and birds that look way too big for the branches their sitting on. In addition the pan comes to a stop to a man, which looks way out of proportion to the rest of the images especially considering that he is bigger than the house in the picture. The style in the opening credits consists of a pan, which displays absurd images rather than explaining them.

The camera opens up on a long shot of a church, which foreshadows the issue of life and death as the narrative is primarily concerned with not knowing what to do with a dead body. The five fades that follow the establishing shot reflect a quiet setting which is ironically juxtaposed to the finding of the dead man whom reflects anything but a quiet landscape. The absurdity arises because there are no clues in the style, other than the music, which reflect the plot whose central concern is a dead body.

The camera then focuses on a young innocent looking boy with a toy gun, when shots from a real gun are heard in the background but nonetheless are associated with the images of the young boy. The absurdity here arises because the camera keeps the focus on the young boy as he investigates but the scenery amidst all of this is contrary and completely peaceful. The colors are colorful and don't match a dead body. The camera illustrates images that are completely contradictory to the moods, which the film is portraying with no explanation as of yet. Then the young boy discovers a body, as the camera pans back into a longshot, not allowing us to see the body's face. As the boy approaches, the image cuts to another shot where the boy is standing in front of the body as though he were a continuation of the body. The shot is shot in depth as Harry's feet almost look as big as the boy which, makes the shot awkward looking or absurd. That's not to mention that the dead body is nicely dressed and lying down in a perfect position which makes it look normal and part of the setting. The camera essentially succeeds in associating the young boy to death by linking, through montage, the young boy and his gun to Harry's dead body in an environment, which sets a mood as laid back.

Then the Captain who suspects himself as having shot Harry arrives from a distance as the camera makes the same movements, pulling back and then cutting from to a bird's eye view. In doing so the camera ties another person to the dead body while still suspiciously avoids showing us the face. It makes this awkward situation absurd because the audience is kept from making an association with the body. It's absurd because the style reveals many facets, which are to be known and not known about the narrative but does not explain why things should be known and others should not. For example when the old man is contemplating what to do with the body, Ms. Gravely passes by and the narrative digresses into a sub plot. The Gravely shows absolutely no concern for the body but rather has a casual conversation with the Captain asking him if he wants to come over for coffee. Meanwhile the camera does not explain why this meeting is important but does nonetheless achieve in hiding the face of the dead body. The lady even kicks the body to see if it's dead, as the camera gets a close up shot, and still manage to be kept away from the body's face. However the style in terms of camera placement does reveal a mood of casualness and tells the audience how irrelevant the body is to the discussion. Yet on the other hand the style of the film, in terms of narrative keeps attaching everybody to the body contradicting what the camera is visually saying suggesting that the body is unimportant.

Essentially thus far the narrative is absurd just in terms of it's synopsis in that even in a small town where nothing ever happens, the body does not stir more controversy than it does. Yet the style which presents the images to us manages to transmit these images in the most casual of ways suggesting nothing is wrong. For example a man who is reading a book comes along and just happens to stumble and trip on the body but does not even bother to look back on what he tripped on. During this episode despite the longshot the face of the body is still hidden conveniently by a bush. One gets suspicious because the face is always covered no matter what position you see it from and therefore this attaches an importance to it, literally attaching us to the body the same way as the various characters who run into the body, blaming themselves for its death. When Ms. Rogers comes back with her son we get our first indication of any sort of feeling towards the body as she recognizes him. We still don't see his face and the body is still left there as she does not care for him and seems glad that he is dead. Then a tramp comically steals the shoes from the body as the camera once again pulls back and cuts to a close up of the body, which hides this body's face. However the scene reveals another of the body's element, which will attract our attention from here on end, its tip coated red socks. They appear to have no importance in the narrative but the focus of the camera is on the body's legs and therefore the red tips stick out like a sore thumb.

The next scene opens with a series of cuts, which look as absurd as the body in the forest. We open with scenery, then cut to an old bridge, then to Gravely, then to the happy tramp with his new shoes, then to Rogers, then to the Captain who has fallen asleep, then Harry's socks, then to Marlowe singing from a far. At first one would think that each person or thing is associated to the body but it would not account for Marlowe who has not run into the body yet, nor does it account for the old bridge. Besides the only clear

reactions in association with Harry; the tramp whose very happy with his shoes and the Captain whose totally disinterested as he lies asleep beside the tree.

We then fall into a digression where the scene makes no reference to the body and could literally be cut out without affecting the narrative of the story. The montage does indicate the empty-mindedness of the characters because they all seem to live in their separate worlds. For example Calvin is fixing his car and just looking to give fines to earn a living, whereas Gravelly gets pulled into a make over for her big date, and finally Marlowe, in his fit of artistry, forgets about the one man (in a limousine) who actually shows an interest for his paintings, but leaves because no one even notices that he is there. However this scene goes into separate directions and really has nothing to do with the body in the woods. The camera however indulges in showing us the separate mind states of each characters which adds to the complexity of the film just in terms of understanding why this is included.

The next scene however introduces us to the man's face for the first time, despite it only being a drawing of this man. The scene opens as Marlowe approaches the body and decides to draw it thinking the man is just asleep. Once again all we see are the knees down as the body is again, covered by a bush. Meanwhile the camera cuts to the Captain who is still sleeping and disinterested which illustrates a general disinterest at the process. The camera then cuts to another angle of Marlowe drawing Harry, and then finally we see a picture of the man's face through a drawing. The camera focuses on the drawing because it's the only glimpse of Harry that we first get. The odd thing about the scene is that even through his drawing the camera indicates through montage that something is wrong with the picture. Marlowe looks at the picture then the camera cuts to a close up of the feet, then back to the picture, which makes him notice that something is wrong. In addition the camera's focus foreshadows the importance of the artist in the interpretation and solving of Harry's unknown death. It is thanks to Marlowe that we ever see what Harry looks like as well as providing ideas to solving his reason for dying. In fact the following scene illustrates the camera's revelation as Marlowe and the Captain discuss ways to get rid of the body, as Marlowe gets implicated in the manner without even noticing. This is confirmed when the reader comes by and this time both Marlowe and the Captain run for cover not to be seen near the body despite the fact that they have nothing to do with it.

The two following scenes have more to do with narrative than camera style as the plot thickened and involved more and more people. The scene concerns itself less with style because the couples are shot as they are having a discussion about Harry one after the other as opposed to simultaneously. If these discussions were inter-cut then the meaning would involve the style and choosing to mix two conversations about the same topic into one. In brief both scenes involve a discussion on Harry, one featuring the Captain and Gravelly who talk about how to dispose of the body. While the other discussion focuses on Marlowe and Rogers who discuss Harry's past history. It makes the audience more anxious because we find out a whole lot about him but still have never seen him. These scenes compose a narrative about the information missing thus far. You see Hitchcock, is an expert at building suspense out of a montage of images which speak for themselves

without the need for narrative. However the above scenes do just the opposite and provide very little style but a lot of narrative which explains why they were not discussed in detail.

At this moment another scene begins where the body is buried immediately following the conversational scenes. The camera speaks because it closes this scene with a bird's eye view. This suggests vulnerability in their actions as it signifies error in this particular scene. A bird's eye view shot is usually associated with the coming of death in a character, but Hitchcock uses it in this scene of death as an irony of error. In fact the irony is played out in the next scene when in fact the Captain discovers how he may not be responsible for the death and thus leads them to unbury the body for the first time.

The absurdity in this editing is the way the celebration of scenes of life is inter-cut, through the use of montage, with scenes of death. The issue at hand suggests that death be used to build relationships because when one reflects, Harry's dead body is what brings everybody together. Every time the couples meet either together or separately, the scene is immediately followed by a burial and digging up of Harry. Therefore the montage makes it itself felt from scene to scene as oppose to just within any given scene. The juxtaposition of whole scenes one next to the other raises meaning that maybe important to the narrative.

The following scene opens on a longshot of landscape as Gravelly and the captain leave the lakeside and enter the captain's house. The couple discussed and got more acquainted as Gravelly acknowledges that she may have killed Harry. This scene thus leads to another digging out of Harry as to verify this claim. Upon finishing the burying Gravelly and the Captain returned to Roger's house where all four people come to the conclusion that Roger's life will be public property and stands to lose everything if they don't dig him up again. Once again the reunification of the couples is dependant upon Harry's death which is illustrated by the montages links from conversations between couples to the burying and digging out of Harry's body.

However the scene does present two odd happenings which the camera focuses on. Twice the closet door opens for no apparent reason but attention was focused on the opening of this door. I have suspicion to believe that the camera's focus indicates that the door has significance, perhaps the same significance as only seeing Harry's legs and never his face. The opening door signifies that information is missing are simply not given parallel to Harry's face never being shown. There is nothing in the closet that points to objects of importance leaving only an opening for symbolism. In addition this scene is the only place in the film where the scene fades into another scene as opposed to fading to black. In itself the focus of the camera is totally absurd and makes no sense just like only seeing Harry legs. This serves to confuse the audience thus literally creating an artificial sense of suspense thus underlining the absurdity in this film. It works somehow!

When Harry is now buried for the third time all four people that are now pulled into association with Harry are seen from a distance when a woman comes running indicating that the millionaire has returned to buy all of his pictures. The scene is shot from a low

angle making the four people look like gold diggers except they were digging and burying a body. Ironically after the image emphasizes the images of diggers a woman comes running announcing that a “millionaire” thus making a metaphor between digging for gold/bodies and making real money through artistry. The camera placement provides a stark image of figures in the dark, which provided a basis for this interpretation.

The next scene provides a digression because we find Marlowe playing “mother Theresa” as he grants everybody one wish. However what is important in the scene is Calvin’s discovery of the picture which adds another person’s involvement in Harry’s situation. It adds another person because from this point on Calvin takes a more active role in discovering Harry while the other four participants collaborate to cover him up. The camera provides the clues to Calvin’s involvement by cutting from the picture to his stare. In essence this scene provides a gathering of all the people who have come closer together as a direct result of Harry’s body.

The next scene picks up on the pattern, which was discussed before as the two couples go home and come to the conclusion that Harry has to be dug up again in order for Rogers and Marlowe to get legally married. Oddly enough when Harry is dug out the four characters are placed with women on one side and men on the other enabling the camera to cut side to side to females and males. This groups the four characters into two categories those that have associations with Harry and those that have never met him. The women have had physical encounters with Harry whereas the men were literally pulled into Harry’s life by accident.

Both women met Harry in his living while the men met him as a body and nothing more. Both women new conclusive facts on Harry while the men had to investigate thus getting them both involved. This essentially led them closer to the women and into a relationship. The scene thus demonstrates this through the use of montage, cutting from two people to two people. The scene also reintroduces the person who trips over the body twice before, as he turns out to be the doctor. As he’s walking through the woods he stumbles onto the grave where his assistance is asked in determining the cause of death of the body.

Finally the last scene takes place in Roger’s home where Calvin comes close to discovering Harry’s body. The scene is centered on the door, which captures most of the camera’s attention. The camera cuts from everyday house chores as everybody is washing clothes, to angles, which always focus on the door. The first occasion where the door sparks an interest occurs when the Captain is sleeping and is suddenly awakened by the door’s opening. It scared him for no apparent reason thinking that it is Harry. Hitchcock uses the symbolism of the door for no particular reason other than letting its symbolism open to interpretation. The camera angle points in that direction leaving us no choice but to focus on the door. In essence Hitchcock uses the door to build suspense out of nothing. The story is almost resolved and yet Hitchcock finds a new device to add suspense till the very end. Even while Calvin is interrogating, Marlowe seems to be resisting as he stands by the door to keep it shut. All the more revealing when the door does open as there is nothing inside the closet other than a close rack which hits the floor. The door does retain a lot of the attention because the camera stops moving and

focuses not on Marlowe but to take our curiosity towards the importance of the door. It's totally absurd when we think about it because Harry's face is never seen which retains a lot of our curiosity, and the door appears of four different occasions which also retains a lot of our attention but has no real significance in the resolution of the plot. Oddly enough the door may reflect the four times in which Harry is dug up but then again what an odd way of reflecting the burying and unburying of Harry's body by the opening and closing of the door.

The final scenes are comical because the montage sequence managed to sum up every important element in the film. Absurdity is central to this film analysis therefore it's only normal that the climax of the film begin with the door which slams open with a clothes drawer falling on the floor. Then the camera cuts to Calvin who was on his way. Immediately following the camera cuts to the little boy who screams "whose that man in our tub as the camera cuts to Harry's feet (sticking out of the bathtub). If that was not enough the doctor then arrived and seemingly understood the situation before asking where's the body as he was directed to the bathroom. This all occurs after Marlowe purposely destroyed Harry's picture. Meanwhile the captain is ringing Calvin's car horn to get him out of the house, and manages to steal Harry's shoes from Calvin's possession.

As disjointed as the above description of the film's ending may sound the camera images and montage of these images are arranged in such a way as to illustrate how absurd the narrative really is. The montage is essentially used to increase, not tension in the last scenes, but comedy as everything unfolds to nothing. Hitchcock has no choice towards the end but to turn this narrative into farce, because the story ends the same way that it started as the boy rediscovers the body for the first time again, while four adults look on.

In conclusion The Trouble with Harry provided an illustration of how absurdity can be manipulated into suspense in a quiet country landscape. This essay attempted to analyze, from start to finish, how the style, in terms of camera movement and montage, reflected the narrative's absurdity. In doing so the essay was organized in the same light as the film and tried to be as absurd, while keeping the main focus on camera movement and montage. The articles were researched so as to assure that nothing as absurd as this essay has been written on this film. In closing this essay is as absurd as The Trouble with Harry and now the trouble with both "Harry" and the "end of session" are now over!

By Pierre Hobson