

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

First Look Festival

January 9–24, 2016

JOHNNY GUITAR

Saturday, January 9, 4:00 p.m.

1954, 110 mins. 35mm. Source: Swank Motion Pictures.

Directed by Nicholas Ray. Written by Ray and Ben Maddow (credited to Philip Jordan). Based on the novel by Roy Chanslor. Produced by Ray and Herbert J. Yates. Edited by Richard L. Van Enger. Photographed by Harry Stradling Sr. Art direction by James W. Sullivan. Set decoration by Edward G. Boyle and John McCarthy Jr. Music by Peggy Lee and Victor Young. Principal Cast: Joan Crawford (as Vienna), Sterling Hayden (Johnny Guitar), Mercedes McCambridge (Emma Small), Scott Brady (The Dancin' Kid), Ward Bond (John McIvers), Ben Cooper (Turkey Ralston), Ernest Borgnine (Bart Lonergan), John Carradine (Old Tom), Royal Dano (Corey), Frank Ferguson (Marshal Williams), Paul Fix (Eddie), Rhys Williams (Mr. Andrews), Ian MacDonald (Pete).

Essay by João Bénard da Costa. Translation: Moira Difelice

It was inevitable. It had to happen. If I write about "the films of my life", how could "the film of my life", *my Johnny Guitar*, be left out? Only who really doesn't know me could suppose that one of these days – sooner or later – *Johnny Guitar* would not fill this page.

One of the tales that go around about me – just as saying I knew the Larousse by heart at the age of seven – is that I've watched *Johnny Guitar* hundreds of times. Both cases are exaggerated. I only watched *Johnny Guitar* 68 times between 1957 and 1988. Can you know it by heart? You never know *Johnny Guitar* by heart. Each time is a new time.

In terms of genre, it is considered to be a western. It was premiered in America on 27 May 1954, under the Gemini sign. It is a film by Nicholas Ray, who was 42 years, 9 months and 20 days old on the night of the premiere. It is opus 9 in the director's filmography, which begins in 1948. 13 feature films followed until he died, "lightning over water," in a film directed by Wim Wenders in 1979.

Johnny Guitar was made for a little company – Republic – and cost little money. American critics bashed it ("the silliest film of the year") but the public, without anyone being able to explain why, filled cinemas for months on end. Herbert J. Yates, the producer, filled his pockets. When the film reached Europe – in 1955 – critics took extreme and completely opposite stands. Some – few – caught the bug I have cherished for over thirty years. Most thought that only seriously disturbed or seriously illiterate people could like it. Or the blind, deaf, dumb, paralytics and retards. Me, and a few others, went through embarrassing situations when the controversy reached Portugal. Our delirium provoked people. Those who provoke majorities or

common sense always end up taking more than they give.

However, in the case of *Johnny Guitar*, I've lived long enough to see the world change. When, in 1981, I included the film in a programme of American cinema from the 1950s at Gulbenkian, the crowd was such that it had to be screened a second time. Then, each time the film is shown at Cinemateca (and I have programmed it reasonably often), the cinema is bursting at the seams. Thousands of Portuguese cinema-goers still go today because of Nick Ray. The same happened everywhere. "La Belle et la Bête du western," as Truffaut wrote at the time, became the very definition of cult movie.

Nick Ray, who also lived long enough to witness this change, one day put forth a few reasons to explain this phenomenon: 1) it was the first time that, in a western, women were the main protagonists and the main antagonists; 2) it is a film full of light and heat, which went against the "noir cinema" that predominated at the time; 3) it is a film where colour is valued, owing to a skilful architectural structure; 4) it was the first film to use colour in all its potential; 5) it used the set and the landscape to enhance the image as much as possible.

I won't be the one denying this but many of those things were at the time among the ones that most served to attack the film. They hated the women (Joan Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge) and thought the colour (a process called trucolor) was of unbearably bad taste, gaudy and too exaggerated. For me, there is no point in trying to explain it. I can only talk about *Johnny Guitar* in a state of delirium. God and so many others – friends and enemies – know what it's like when they let me be...

It was said, for example, that it was the film with the most beautiful dialogue in the history of cinema (at least I said so). Some were convinced and I remember programmes of film clubs or articles in

magazines that published the famous sequence of questions and answers between Guitar (Sterling Hayden) and Vienna (Joan Crawford) when they start to recall the past on the night Johnny arrives at Vienna's saloon. It's when he asks her to come in and say "something nice", when he asks her to lie to him. "Tell me you love me like I love you." However, if we boil the writing down, the dialogue is embarrassingly trivial. If people keep such a memory of it, it is because of the concert of voices heard in the film – Crawford's scratchy voice, Hayden's manly voice – and their association with the fabulous score by Victor Young. It is because of the way the camera and the bodies move *throughout*, because of the contrast between the reds, greens and browns. Because of the prodigious presence of that cave-like set, dizzyingly baroque, at once a mausoleum and a house of spells.

I heard the soundtrack of *Johnny Guitar* many times without seeing the images. It brings everything back, the entire memory of the film is repopulated. However, for that to happen, there has to be a memory, we must have watched the film. If it is true that *Johnny Guitar* is also an opera, it is no less true that it depends on that unique and irreducible *mise en scène*.

To revisit the images (or sounds) of *Johnny Guitar* is to revisit our memory of them. For whoever watches it for the first time, it is still about revisiting. Because all the characters – the twelve main actors, each one of them essential – do no more.

When the film starts – on the afternoon they killed the brother of Emma (Mercedes McCambridge) – Johnny Logan, who will be called Johnny Guitar, goes back to Vienna, from whom he got separated five years before. Why did they get separated? Why

did she ask for him to be called? Why does he come back? Never, in the film, are we given answers to these questions. We also never get to know what happened with each one of them during those five years that they didn't see each other, between an afternoon at the Aurora Hotel (about that hotel the film does speak) and the afternoon when Johnny comes back. However, during those five years, the dominant feeling of each of the protagonists came into being: Vienna's bitterness, Johnny's tiredness, Emma's hate, or that blond boy's love for Vienna, the boy who ends up with a torn neck, on the horse and on the scaffold, asking them to keep the promise they had made to save him.

Is *Johnny Guitar* a film built in flash-back on an immense ellipse? Or is it an immense ellipse built on a flash that cannot come back? Or is this all the same thing?

I will not carry on. Just as with very big things, you do not explain *Johnny Guitar*. You tell it (see it) again, again and again, like stories are told to children, until everything is known by heart and you learn that everything in them is right. It is *The Imitation of Christ* of cinephiles. You can open it anywhere and you'll find the right sentence. You can watch it for the sixty-eighth time and you'll find the right answer to what you are living.

When Emma's gang comes in Vienna's saloon to arrest her, the mysterious croupiers stop the roulettes. Facing Emma with her terrible look, Vienna, without taking her eyes off her, gives a cold order: "Keep the wheel spinning, Ed. I like to hear it spin." Every time I finish watching *Johnny Guitar*, I just feel like telling the projectionists: "Keep the film spinning. I like to see it spin." I really do.

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