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Review

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Johnny Guitar

Produced by Nicholas Ray and Herbert J. Yates; directed by Nicholas Ray; screenplay by Philip Yordan; cinematography by Harry Stradling; edited by Richard L. Van Enger; art direction by James Sullivan; costume design by Sheila O'Brien; original score by Victor Young starring Joan Crawford, Sterling Hayden, Mercedes McCambridge, Scott Brady, Ward Bond, and Tom Carradine. Blu-ray, color, 116 mins. 1954. An Olive Signature release, <http://olivefilms.com>.

Johnny Guitar was shot in the dramatic landscape of Sedona, Arizona, which before this new Blu-ray release featuring the original 1.66:1 aspect ratio could be glimpsed only at the edges of the frame. While the terrain is still mere background to a melodrama of loyalty and desire, the film's coloring and staging make much more sense when complemented by the vista of towering, sculptured red mesas. *Johnny Guitar* (Sterling Hayden) rides into town without a gun, but by the time he leaves he has been revealed as the fastest draw in the West. Robert Warshow noted many years ago that the Western hero is the man who knows when not to shoot. The cowboy with the guitar is thus emblematic of the Westerner who knows how to play the part, but chooses his roles and when to play them. *Johnny Guitar* is all about role playing, but it is a dangerous game with high stakes because it turns out that in 1954 America neither playing the guitar nor making movies was "just entertainment." By the end of the movie, Johnny's guitar has long been abandoned, but he has gained the love of a woman (Joan Crawford) who is introduced to the audience early in the film, in direct address, as "more a man than a woman."

Order is eventually restored over a series of dead bodies, but through its unsettling of gender roles in the surreal landscape of Sedona, Nicholas Ray's film serves as a ballad for a time of deep distrust in Hollywood. "Operatic" is the term that best describes this production, noted for its archetypal figures, dramatic choreography, costume changes, and extraordinary use of color, even if the romantic musical theme, scored by Victor Young, is applied with a light touch. If *Johnny Guitar* has become a cult film for the blacklist era, it is because the drama of naming names and taking sides is set within a *mise en scène* built of fire, water, earth, and air, the latter in the form of dust clouds that often obscure the view.

Olive Films's new Blu-ray of *Johnny Guitar* is packed with special features that provide substantial context for this multilayered film, including analysis from critics Miriam Bale, B. Ruby Rich, Kent Jones, Joe McElhaney, and Larry Ceplair, a commentary by Geoff Andrews, and an essay by Jonathan Rosenbaum. Mark Wannamaker provides some detail on Republic Pictures and owner



Joan Crawford is dressed for Republic Pictures' Trucolor process in Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

Herbert Yates's ambitions in the early 1950s to become a major studio by casting established stars like Crawford, and investing in Trucolor, which was both cheaper and more garish than Technicolor. The psychological Western was gaining traction through the success of Anthony Mann's films, among others, and kingmaker Lew Wasserman brought the *Johnny Guitar* package to Republic with Ray as an independent producer-director along with Crawford and the original script by Ray Chanslor. Credit for the blacklist allegory seems to go mainly to Philip Yordan, who substantially altered Chanslor's story, even though he was a front for many blacklisted screenwriters (the theory that blacklisted writer Ben Maddow

might have written it seems to be largely discredited). Crawford herself forced the issue of her own cross-dressed character by picking a well-publicized fight during the production with Mercedes McCambridge, who plays her nemesis Emma Small in the film. Crawford threatened to quit if Yordan didn't come out to Sedona to rewrite her part so that it would be bigger than Hayden's—even demanding a climactic shootout with McCambridge, with which Yordan obliged her.

As B. Ruby Rich points out, *Johnny Guitar* was embraced as a feminist Western in the 1970s mainly because there were usually so few women with power to be found on or off screen. Crawford's character Vienna is completely uncompromising, and not without maternal instincts, even if she capitulates in the end to the romantic impulse of the genre. When Vienna confronts Emma and her posse who have come to run her out of town, she orders her dealer to stop spinning the roulette wheel. She is in charge. Her saloon, her future, is built on the business of gambling, sex, and booze, but she has carefully scoped out the future that will come with the railway. She even has a tabletop model of the new town in her bar, complete with toy trains, but, as fate would have it, she loses it all to Emma's fiery rage.

In addition to the catfight, *Johnny Guitar* is a continual testing of masculinities, as its title promises. The Dancing Kid (Scott Brady), who the two women are supposedly fighting over, is clearly in love with the young member of his gang called Turkey (Ben Cooper)—and both of them are casualties of the violence that grips the town. Ernest Borgnine as Bart, another member of the Dancing Kid's silver mining gang, and Ward Bond as John McIvers, the mayor of the unnamed (and unseen) town, provide ample bona-fide manhood pumped up as arrogant paternalism. The mayor is accom-



Emma (Mercedes McCambridge) and her posse are blocked for maximum Blacklist symbolism in this scene from *Johnny Guitar* (photo courtesy of Olive Films).

panied by a crowd of funereal apprentices, silently taking up space, while the Kid's gang, besides Turkey and Bart, includes Cory (Royal Dano), a consumptive bookworm. Vienna's loyal dealers and bartenders are all men, whose green visors match the card tables. Her venerable cook (John Carradine) is emasculated in turn through his name of "Old Tom," so it is a complicated, competitive man's world in which Vienna and Emma pitch their battle.

Old Tom inhabits the kitchen, a room off the main saloon with a window that serves to frame various characters and breaks up the space. Miriam Bale describes *Johnny Guitar* as an "indoor Western," referring to its talkiness as well as the distinctive sets. The saloon includes a natural red rock wall, a wagon-wheel chandelier that hoists up to the rafters, a wrought-iron staircase, and a private upstairs room outfitted like a Victorian parlor. Even the landscape has elaborate architectural features, including hidden doors and tunnels, and a house balanced precariously on a hilltop. In fact, although this Western has lots of outdoor action, it is mostly shot at night, or from high angles, so that it seems both labyrinthine and claustrophobic.

The iconic Sedona landscape of towering mesas that surrounds the action is prone to explosions as the railway company is blasting passages through the mountains, loudly announcing the imminent arrival of capital, trapping the characters by cutting off their escape routes on this incredible stage. The careful use of color contrasts and complements the Sedona landscape, with solid blocks of primary color in the costumes, including a particularly striking use of green against brownish red. This creates a highly stylized mise en scène accentuated by the blocking of characters and by the dialogue. Emma Small speaks for the townsmen, who are arranged like a dance troupe that never dances. These are not angry men but a mute symbol of a power block, and thus the HUAC analogy extends visually beyond dialogue and plot.

The dialogue is equally stylized and loaded with doublespeak. In Johnny and Vienna's first love scene, they refuse to confess their love. Johnny says, "Lie to me that all these years you've waited," and Vienna replies, "All these years I've waited." As Jonathan Rosenbaum points out, this exchange was recycled by Godard in *Le Petit Soldat*, and in fact this scene, featuring the indoor kitchen window, has been sampled and copied in countless films, by Godard and others. Maybe this is because *Johnny Guitar* is a great example of Hollywood talking back to itself, drawing on its own resources—even perhaps Sterling Hayden's guilt about naming names before HUAC in 1951—to undercut all effects of realism and "believability" in order to tell a tale about capitalism and its discontents. All the film's movements are choreographed, and every gesture is a statement.

Geoff Andrew's commentary fills in many of the details about the cast and their various journeys through Hollywood, and suggests that the tale of *Johnny Guitar* is also Crawford's own story of a hardworking woman who fights her way to the top of the Pepsi-Cola Corporation. He describes the film several times as a "fairy tale" because of its various improbable plot devices, including a horse that betrays the Dancing Kid's gang, Johnny, and Vienna, by revealing the hidden entrance to their lair behind the waterfall. The magic of the fairy tale makes the film more of a ballad, or like opera, a simple story rich in the telling and its allegorical meanings.

Johnny Guitar may parallel Crawford's story, but I would not call it a feminist Western. That the tale of distrust, betrayal, and vigilantism has to be motivated by the threat of a woman's power should be a clue to its antifeminist stance. Emma Small is Vienna's evil twin, a hysterical appendage that needs to be amputated. McCambridge's intensity and viciousness sets her apart from the townsmen, who cannot bring themselves to lynch Vienna (given her line of work, as Kent Jones remarks, many of these men may have slept with Vienna), and they finally let Emma fight off the gang of outsiders by herself. Mayor McIvers decides it is little more than jealous rage, or women's business, and calls off his men. Vienna then kills her double, along with the excess that she represents, and falls into the arms of the cowboy, now armed and renamed as Johnny Logan.

The discussion of Ray that is littered throughout this Blu-ray's extras stresses his architecture training and his identity as an outsider, and thus his commitment to this completely bizarre film. In *Johnny Guitar*, the silver miners, a wandering troubadour, gangsters, and gays are all outsiders. As an upstart business owner, Vienna is also an outsider, according to Emma, and the railway will just bring more of those that don't belong. The analogy with the blacklist works because this is a Western with no Indians or Mexicans, so there is no racist alibi for social discrimination. As an all-white Western, its psychological metaphors and economic parables are as insular as the locations. The black-coated townsmen with Small as their leader—both witch and witch-hunter, notes Bale—offer a unique image of an ideological, hegemonic force and bear no resemblance at all to the usual folksy depiction of "community" in the Western.

The influence of *Johnny Guitar* on the New Wave *cinéastes* as well as subsequent generations of filmmakers lies precisely in its "larger than life" operatic display. Now that its extravagant color design and evocative mise en scène are on resplendent display in this new Blu-ray release, we can perhaps appreciate anew the impact of a film that took Hollywood genre to a new level, precisely at a time when the film industry needed new myths and fables of its own.

—Catherine Russell

The Chase

Produced by Sam Spiegel; directed by Arthur Penn; screenplay by Lillian Hellman, based on the play and novel *The Chase* by Horton Foote; cinematography by Joseph LaSelle; edited by Gene Milford; music by John Barry; costumes by Donfeld; production design by Richard Day; art direction by Robert Luthardt; set decoration by Frank Tuttle; starring Marlon Brando, Jane Fonda, Robert Redford, James Fox, Robert Duvall, E. G. Marshall, Angie Dickinson, Janice Rule, Miriam Hopkins, Martha Hyer, Diana Hyland, Henry Hull, Jocelyn Brando, and Richard Bradford. Blu-ray, color, 133 min., 1966. A Twilight Time release, www.twilighttimemovies.com.

The Chase looked good on paper—Arthur Penn directing Marlon Brando from a Lillian Hellman screenplay would surely result in filmic fireworks. But there was the matter of the producer, Sam Spiegel. The problem is apparent from the movie's trailer, which is included as an extra on this Twilight Time Blu-ray. Boasting of Spiegel's former glories (*Lawrence of Arabia*, *On the Waterfront*, etc.) and the promise of a risqué good time ("A story of big, brawling, sprawling Texas today...it's rednecks, it's oil barons, it's reckless women, it's restless men!"), the narration doesn't even mention the director or the writer, and inaccurately positions Brando's sheriff character as a stock heroic figure.

Unfair—but not incorrect, and Penn and Hellman were likely relieved. Making his first film four years after *Lawrence*, from material he had been developing for years, Spiegel's career was the only one on the upswing in 1966. Directed by Penn, Hellman's last Broadway hit, *Toys in the Attic*, was six years in the past, and her playwriting career never revived. After the failures of his own, brilliant *One-Eyed Jacks* and the epic *Mutiny on the Bounty*, which sealed his "difficult" reputation, Brando careened from flop to flop in the Sixties, until the renaissance of *The Godfather* (1972). Penn's career, hot following the Tony- and Oscar-winning success of *The Miracle Worker*, had gone cold, especially after his firing off *The Train* (1964) and the catcalls that greeted his idiosyncratic, New Wave-inspired collaboration with Warren Beatty, *Mickey One* (1965). Directing another, much different adaptation of a play, with such distinguished, if weather-beaten, collaborators, Penn might have thought a reversal of fortune was at hand.

It was not to be. Interviewed by *Cineaste* ("The Importance of a Singular, Guiding Vision," *Cineaste*, Vol. XX, No. 2, Winter 1993) about his career, Penn lamented Spiegel's "terrible choices" and "abuses of power" regarding the film, including a "dog's breakfast" of script-tampering (Horton Foote, who had expanded his obscure 1952 play into a novel, was among those engaged, exasperating Hellman); having it shot on the backlot rather than on location

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