

Johnny Guitar

(1954, Nicholas Ray, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL) Component 1 : American Film (AS)

Core Study Areas: Key Elements of Film Form Meaning and Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area: Auteur (AL)

Rationale for study

Johnny Guitar can be described as several things: a product of Republic Pictures, a Hollywood Western with the genre's expected indicators and clichés - costume, setting, robberies of stage coaches, gunfights - besides being a "political allegory" made in Hollywood during the McCarthy era. It is a film that sits firmly in the style of its director Nicholas Ray, transforming a traditionally masculine genre into a stylised flamboyant melodrama with its two female antagonists and its "Freudian" subtext.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

"Lie to me" Vienna reveals her past and her love 0:40:02 - 0:44:28

Forced confessions "Was Vienna one of them?" 1:09:18 - 1: 18:31

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Photographed by Harry Stradling in Trucolor - a colour process owned by a division of Republic Pictures who used it mostly for its Westerns in the 1940s and early 1950s. The "unreal"

heightened colour is used in an expressionistic way, the colour blue is suppressed.

- High level shots of opening as Johnny Guitar looks down and observes the stage coach robbery. Low level angles of Vienna delineating the "upstairs" private space and the downstairs public space of her saloon. In the intimate "lie to me" sequence Vienna's face is mainly in shadow, except for the embrace.
- High contrast between the interiors, lamplight dark walls and the exteriors with the red Sedona landscape, the waterfall, open spaces.

Mise-en-Scène

- James Sullivan's flamboyant baroque stylized interiors of the saloon bar built into the cliff but there are no customers. As in Ray's other films contrasting spaces with the downstairs "public space" dominated by a huge chandelier.
- Emphasis on the elements: air (Johnny rides to Vienna's in a ferocious dust storm), earth (red rock of the country forms the inner wall of the saloon), water (the gang ride through the waterfall to their hideout), fire (Vienna's is set ablaze).
- Vienna begins the film in black, dressed like a cowboy complete with six-shooter. At night she and Johnny discuss their past and she is wearing a magenta dress reminiscent of her sexual availability as a prostitute. The following morning they go into town, she is wearing grey and brown sombre and conventional colours for a businesswoman. When the mob break into her saloon she is seated at the piano in a long white dress, the very model of purity set against the funeral black of the lynch mob. Escaping the mob she changes into a yellow shirt for the final shoot-out.

Editing

- The intimate "How many men have you forgotten?" sequence is shot in close up, with single POV shots cut with two shots. The shadowy embrace is followed by a fade to black and the next shot is the following

morning. The rekindling of Vienna and Johnny's love affair is established.

- The interrogation of Turkey "Was Vienna one of them?" cuts between single long shots of Vienna and the townsfolk/Sheriff/Emma in on the other side of the room.
- As Vienna and Johnny ride into town after their night together their conversations in 2 shot with little deviation.

Sound

- The Hispanic inspired theme tune by Victor Young plays throughout. Johnny plays the tune on his guitar. At the end it is given words sung by Peggy Lee.
- The sound of the wind that blows men into the saloon underlines the emotional tensions that exist between the characters.
- When Vienna is sitting on her horse with a noose around her neck there is some reluctance to carry out the execution. Emma's "I'll give 100 dollars for someone" echoes round the space.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning and Response

Representations

- Women have taken over a "masculine genre". At the beginning of the film Vienna has become a man, in dress, in fire power (she carries and uses a six shooter) and in her control as an astute businesswoman. She reveals that her money came from prostituting herself. Emma is in contrast out of control and seething with repressed desire for the Dancing Kid, but her extreme antagonism for Vienna could suggest a more complex sexuality.
- The actions of the men in the film are dictated by the two women which is an unusual, if not to say unique, gender balance for the 1950s and certainly for the Western. Vienna and Emma are both tough and the men feminised - Johnny a cowboy armed with only a guitar who appears in one sequence holding a delicate bone china cup of tea rather than a gun. The leader of the gang has the distinctly un-macho name of the Dancing Kid. One of the Kid's band, Corey, is shown reading a book.
- The West has the understood signifiers of the landscape and the town, but the characters do not conform to the accepted stereotypes. The law enforcers are the villains.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Ray's directorial style is often one of extravagance, theatrical artifice, stylised use of colour, often poetic dialogue.
- Emphasis on the geometrical relationship between spaces. In the opening sequence Johnny looks down on the stagecoach robbery, Vienna comes down from her space upstairs and the kitchen hatch frames characters within the scene.
- Relationships of characters one of the key themes embittered by love and suppressed desire: Vienna/Johnny, Emma/Dancing Kid/Vienna.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- The 1950s in the USA was a decade of contrasts. Post war prosperity and growth meant that consumer goods were available to more people than ever before, goods that were advertised and on display in films and on the expanding medium of TV. At the same time the era was also one of division and conflict - the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement and the involvement of the USA in the Korean War. The USA consolidated its position as the world's strongest military power with its nuclear weapons but at home there was paranoia with the "Red Scare".

Historical

- The Cold War and fears concerning Communist infiltration into the American way of life formed the background to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Hollywood, that had produced pro-Soviet films during the Second World War when the USSR and the USA were allies, was seen to be the foremost place from which subversive Communist propaganda was disseminated by left wing intellectuals. HUAC led by Senator Eugene McCarthy had the remit of seeking out alleged Communists and forcing them to "name names" and by doing so they could themselves gain immunity from prosecution.

Political

- Because of the Red Scare personnel those who were thought to be Communist sympathisers were blacklisted and forbidden to work in the industry and some, such as screenwriter Dalton Trumbo (the writer of *Spartacus*),

went to jail. The screenplay for *Johnny Guitar* was credited to Philip Yordan who, whilst being a prolific screenwriter also served as a “front” for other writers who were boycotted. One of these was Ben Maddow, sometimes credited with a part in the screenplay.

Technological

- Trucolor, developed by Republic Pictures, is a limited colour process, resulting in a saturated image.

Institutional

- Republic Pictures was a production and distribution studio founded by Herbert Yates and specialising in Westerns. They originated with a collection of “Poverty Row” studios, so called because they produced the low budget ‘B’ pictures and serials that acted as filler to the main ‘A’ pictures produced by the “Big Five”. Republic however made films with substantial budgets.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA Auteur - STARTING POINTS

- Nicholas Ray became a cult director lauded by the writers and critics of *Cahiers du Cinema*, his films distinguished by their dramatic intensity and flamboyant *mise-en-scène*. For Jean-Luc Godard “Cinema is Nicholas Ray”; Francois Truffaut praised his operatic style calling *Johnny Guitar* “a fairy tale, a hallucinatory Western” and Ray himself “the poet of nightfall”. Ray insisted that cinema was primarily a visual medium “It was never all in the script. If it was, why make the movie?”
- Ray’s portrayal of outsiders is one of his distinguishing characteristics as seen in *In a Lonely Place* (1950), *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), *Bigger than Life* (1956). Outside the bank Johnny observes “I’m a stranger here myself” and this became Ray’s personal watchword.
- He studied for a few months under the architect Frank Lloyd Wright. He also worked in the left wing Theatre of Action in New York before becoming a director.