

WOMAN OF THE WEST – GENRE, GENDER, AND POLITICS IN JOHNNY GUITAR

A Mulher do Oeste – Gênero Cinematográfico, Gênero Social e Política em Johnny Guitar

Johnny: A posse isn't people. I've ridden with them and I've ridden against them. A posse is an animal, moves like one and thinks like one.

Vienna: They're men with itchy fingers and a coil of rope around their saddle horns looking for somebody to hang. And after riding a few hours they do not care much who they hang. You haven't told me a thing I don't know.

Johnny: I haven't finished.

Vienna: Finish, but be brief.

Johnny: A posse feels safe because it's big. They only make a big target. I can ride around and pick up a few. The rest of them lose their guts, turn pale, and break up and go home.

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The dialogue above takes place in the last third of the Western *Johnny Guitar* (1954), directed by Nicholas Ray, and clearly portrays the feverish enthusiasm of a posse formed by black-clad people (they have just been to a funeral, hence the black clothes), who are willing to have some bank robbers hanging; not only the bank robbers, in fact, but also Vienna (Joan Crawford), the woman who supposedly protects them. As she has committed no crime, their wish to hang her must be related to their prejudices against her way of living. Vienna is a saloon owner who succeeded in that small town in the middle of nowhere by means which “had nothing to do with luck”, as she sarcastically asserts to a jealous Johnny, who had been her lover five years before and has now been summoned in order to protect her.

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The posse is led by Vienna's rival, Emma (Mercedes McCambridge), whose hatred for the saloon owner seems out of proportion in relation to what she did – in the past, Vienna had a brief love affair with the Dancing Kid (Scott Brady), the object of Emma's affection. The irrational wish to destroy Vienna must have deeper reasons, thus, of which Emma does not seem to be fully aware. The posse is made up of a group of people who pretend to be righteous, but who are in fact led by their prejudices, fascist behavior, disregard for the law, and their own personal interests. The leaders of the posse, Emma and McIvers (Ward Bond), the two most powerful people in town, are cattle raisers who wish to enlarge their domains and are not therefore interested in the construction of the railway, which will inevitably bring farmers to the region.

This is not, of course, the first Western to deal with the collective fury of a group of people against outlaws. Here, however, the posse seems to have a more complex range of meanings. A lot of emphasis is given to the group from the very beginning of the film, so that it does not function only as another element of the plot, but allows for a polarization in ideological terms – on one side, we have the members of the posse, a bunch of irrational, unjust, and prejudiced people, who are only interested in their own well-being; on the other side, we have Vienna, Johnny Guitar, the Dancing Kid and his group, and the men who work for Vienna, who do not easily fit in the conventions of the small community, which marginalizes them. Vienna, however, is a businesswoman with a progressive frame of mind, who is trying to make business with people who can envisage an era of progress for the region.

The posse is a threatening and frightening group of people. Because they have been to the funeral of Emma's brother, a victim of a stagecoach hold-up, they dress in black, and their vulture-like figures contrast with the bright colors of Vienna's men's shirts and her own red scarf. As they have no real motives to condemn Vienna to death, and pursue her relentlessly, they bring to mind a repressive force that existed in the Fifties in the United States during McCarthyism. This force was embodied in the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The investigations of this committee, also called "witch-hunts", aimed at detecting supposedly subversive individuals, that is, individuals that sympathized with the Communist credo. This committee acted according to data given by informers and created an atmosphere of terror – anyone could be accused of trying to overthrow the government and could have their political beliefs recorded. Hollywood was one of the targets of this committee. A group of people involved in film production, "The Hollywood Ten"¹, refused to answer any questions and argued that the First

1 Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Albert Maltz, Adrian Scott, Samuel Ornitz, Dalton Trumbo, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner Jr., John Howard Lawson and Alvah Bessie.

Amendment of the American Constitution gave them the right to do this (FRIED). Ward Bond, however, the actor who plays McIvers in *Johnny Guitar*, was one of the main agents responsible for the spreading of hysteria among the actors, whereas Starling Hayden, who plays the title character, resisted being an informer as much as he could, but finally gave in (VEILLON, 1993, p. 221). These facts show that the Hollywood community was well aware of what was going on and suffered the consequences of the “witch-hunts”; thus, the hysteria of the posse in *Johnny Guitar* could very well metaphorize the hysteria that dominated not only the film community but also the whole country.

My argument is that *Johnny Guitar*, in spite of being a film inserted in the commercial cinema of the Fifties – it was released in 1954 –, being thus subjected to the conditions of the Hollywood mode of production of the times, disrupts the accepted conventions of the Western genre – besides other things, mainly by challenging notions of gender – and by so doing presents, in its own construction, a subtext which condemns obscurantism, ideological control, and fascistic attitudes like the ones performed by the HUAC. In this way, *Johnny Guitar*, a Western, is also a political film, although not a film that overtly deals with politics. I think this distinction can be made more evident if we take into consideration Stephen Prince’s opposition between an instrumental theory of art and a transformative theory of art.

In *The Warrior’s Camera*, Prince says that, “in instrumental theories, art is viewed much as an apparatus that can be ‘taken over’ by groups or classes and used to communicate new agendas” (PRINCE, 1991, p. 157). In cinema, such a political agenda would be placed in the content of the film, so that the audience could more easily grasp it, due to the familiar conventions of the popular form. Then Prince goes on to say that, on the other hand, “in contrast to instrumentalist views that tend to deny the primacy of the form, transformative views of art emphasize this primacy”, in a way that the artwork becomes a “construction that transforms, rather than reflects, the materials of social reality”, for “politics enters the artwork through the structural relations of its materials” (PRINCE, 1991, p. x157-8). Although *Johnny Guitar* cannot be said to be self-reflexive, to the extent that Godard’s films, for instance, are, and belongs to the mode of classical Hollywood film, it is possible to argue that in its mise-en-scène it goes against the conventions of the Western genre and challenges notions of gender. In the process it becomes a film that favors change, freedom, and transgression, not only on the level of content – the coming of the railway, the opposition to the irrational attitudes of the posse – but also in its very construction. From this perspective, it can then be included in the view of art that Prince calls transformative.

Johnny Guitar is not a conventional Western. Its “weirdness” has been accounted for since its release. *The Oxford History of World Cinema* says that “during the 1950s Ray went on to make a number of unorthodox and off-beat genre films – mainly crime films but also Westerns – notable not only for their visual fluidity but for the edgy intensity of their character portrayal and their rejection of the prevailing conformist ethos” (p. 456). David Shipman refers to it as “a bilious Western” (SHIPMAN, 1982, p. 935) and Jeanine Basinger argues that “the sophisticated viewer perceives power and madness in *Johnny Guitar*, a delirious film” (BASINGER, 1984, p. 226). In *Movies of the Fifties*, Peter Howden affirms that “*Johnny Guitar*, possibly the most bizarre Western ever made, concentrates on the psychological and sexual tensions in the relationship between the two main female characters, Vienna (Joan Crawford) and Emma (Mercedes McCambridge)” (HOWDEN, 1982, p. 163). Douglas Brode says, in *The Films of the Fifties*, that “the people who love and hate the film agree on one point: *Johnny Guitar* is the weirdest Western ever made, concluding with a shoot-out between two women as the men stand by helplessly and watch” (BRODE, 1976, p. 129). And Philippe Paraire considers it an avant-garde anti-Western (PARAIRE, 1994, p. 149).

As the quotations above indicate, *Johnny Guitar* challenges the conventions of the Western film. Because this is one of the oldest and most codified genres of the American cinema, its transgression is more evident, for as Jean-Loup Bourget points out, “whenever an art form is highly conventional, the opportunity for subtle irony or distanciation presents itself all the more readily” (MAST, 1992, p. 467). “The traditional western [...] aided the construction of a social reality in which it was believed that males appropriately dominated the public sphere [...]”, say Ryan and Kellner (RYAN; KELLNER, 1988, p. 77). In my opinion, the breaking up of the rules of the genre, including the one mentioned in the quotation above, ultimately stands for a reaction against conservatism, for all genres are essentially willing to maintain the status quo. So, by being a “different” Western, the film’s transgression can be related to the characterization of Vienna and some other characters as transgressors.

Let us now investigate in what ways *Johnny Guitar* manages to deconstruct the conventions of the Western film. First of all, although there are pursuits on horseback and gun fighting, it cannot be called an “action” film, for most of its scenes occur indoors and long stretches of speech are presented, in which psychological contours of the characters and the presentation of their complex relationships are more important than the display of pure action. “In genre films the most obvious focus of interest is neither complex characterization nor intricate visual style, but pure story”,

says Leo Brady in “Genre: the Conventions of Connection” (MAST, 1992, p. 440). In *Johnny Guitar*, however, one of the first elements to call our attention is its visual style, such as the glaring, bright, somewhat saturated colors of some costumes, photographed in the Trucolor system, and the daring setting – Vienna’s saloon seems to have been carved in the rock. Rather than presenting the development of a story, the film seems to be concerned with the tense relationship among the characters and their underlying motives, everything stressed by an expressive and oppressive setting – the already mentioned saloon, the hideout protected by a bucolic waterfall, and the abandoned mine where Vienna strips her white dress and puts on slacks and a red blouse, in an evocation of a strip-tease at a moment when tension is reaching its climax.

But the aspect that seems to be the most relevant in terms of the film’s distancing from the conventions of the genre is the way it deals with the question of gender. The feminine voice has often been repressed in Hollywood films, mostly in two celebrated genres, the gangster film and the Western. In *Johnny Guitar*, however, the two main characters of the film are Vienna and Emma. That they are the focus of the film is made evident by their very names, which can be easily related in terms of sound. The male characters always seem to be overshadowed by them; they are at the fringe of the action. At this point it is interesting to bring forth Robert Warshaw’s comment in “Movie Chronicle: the Westerner”: “Very often [...] the woman the westerner loves is from the East and her failure to understand represents a clash of cultures”. And he goes on to say that “the West, lacking the graces of civilization, is the place ‘where men are men’; in Western movies, men have the deeper wisdom and the women are children” (MAST, 1992, p. 454). But the women in *Johnny Guitar* are the ones who make decisions, the ones who control the situations, and ultimately the ones who, with their determination and presence, make the story unfold.

At first, we are led to infer the film is going to develop like an ordinary Western, for a man on horseback enters a small town and goes directly to a saloon, after having witnessed the dynamiting of a quarry – we will later learn that the work on the construction of the railroad has begun – and a stagecoach hold-up. His entrance brings to mind the familiar story of the rider from afar who comes to a frightened small community to bring justice and order – cf. *Shane* –, and then continues his way. But this expectation is thwarted when we learn that he is not the main character of the story, and that although he saves Vienna from being hanged, she is the one who will have to come face to face with Emma in the final shoot-out. As the poster of the film clearly indicates, and Joan Crawford’s bigger-than-life characterization confirms, Vienna is the heroine of the film – the actress’s

name is the only one that appears before the title of the film in the credits sequence.

And her first appearance is nothing short of impressive. She is on the second floor of her saloon, and she slowly approaches the railing, framed from below, dressed in a black blouse, black pants and a green tie, her legs apart, a defiant look in her face. Although she is past her prime in this film, Joan Crawford embodies a character that resembles the many beautiful women she impersonated in the films she had made so far, the “emotionally unstable but adaptable and determined working girls and tough-talking career women”, determined “to get a piece, if not all, of the American pie” (DAVIS, 1983, p. 91). It is this determined woman that now stands on the upper part of her saloon, both of her hands holding the iron railing. Her figure is framed by a sort of huge triangle, formed by the lateral walls that meet in the center. Her presence is self-assured and she looks towering.

Soon a very startling scene for a Western and for a Hollywood film takes place: Vienna asks Sam, one of the men who work for her, to light a lamp and hang it outside. He argues nobody will come because of the weather, but she very emphatically tells him to do as he was told. He then walks towards the camera and apparently addresses the audience: “Never seen a woman that’s more a man. She thinks like one, acts like one, and sometimes makes me feel like I’m not”. Then there is a cut and in the next shot Tom and Johnny hand Sam the lamp he is supposed to hang outside. Sam was talking to them all the time, but as there was no previous shot showing the men he was addressing, we had the impression he was talking directly to the audience, in a sort of aside. This device makes Sam’s words stand out and reinforces the impression we had already had of reversals of roles. Vienna has a group of men under her orders and we do not see any other woman around. In fact, the only other woman we see in the film is her rival, Emma. Tom, the eldest of her workers, says: “I never believed I’d end my years working for a woman and liking it”.

Emma opposes Vienna from the beginning, and includes herself in what she considers to be the town’s group of decent people, whereas she regards the saloon-keeper as a “railroad tramp”, in a reference to Vienna’s past and to the fact that she favored the construction of the railroad. Emma, representing the reactionary members of the community, does not want things changed, and convinces not only McIvers, a land baron who possesses large properties, but also other “righteous” citizens of the town, to side with her on the attacks on Vienna. In fact, this group of people suspects, without any proofs, that the Dancing Kid and his group are responsible for the hold-up of the stagecoach and the killing of Emma’s brother. Vienna, for being related

to the Dancing Kid's group, is equally considered guilty and sentenced to be hanged.

Emma is supposedly in love with the Dancing Kid, who is in love with Vienna. But the irrational hatred she feels for the other woman verges on an obsession, as if she is trying to tear something away from her own self. When Johnny asks Vienna why Emma hates the Kid, she answers: "He makes her feel like a woman. And that frightens her". It could be that Vienna's masculine attitudes also frighten Emma, for she is then forced to face something she cannot cope with. And so she wants to make Vienna responsible for all the bad deeds that have been going on in town: "There wouldn't have been any bank hold-up, the stage wouldn't have been robbed, my brother wouldn't have been killed. I've been right about that woman ever since she came. I wanted to run her out before she ever got in, but you wouldn't listen, none of you". Emma is vindictive and hysterical most of the time, but her fragile side can be glimpsed in one scene when she does seem totally impotent. After a tense scene in the saloon, Johnny starts playing the guitar and the Kid makes Emma dance with him, unaware of the fact that her brother is lying dead in a corner. Dumbfounded, she just lets herself whirl around the floor, out of breath, as if incapable of taking action. The dance goes on until the Kid sees the corpse and abruptly stops. Emma is confused and her act of covering her face with both hands can be interpreted in different ways: she can be shocked by the fact that she is dancing with the man she suspects killed her brother, who is lying dead near her; she can have enjoyed dancing with the Kid and now repents having enjoyed it; she can have realized it is not his arms, after all, she would like to have around her body.

Emma is the most evil character in the film. The association between women and evil is not alien to cinemagoers. The whole tradition of film noir presents heroines that are alluring, beautiful, sexy, but evil – they most of the time end up by degrading the men they entice. Emma is not a heroine of this sort and her evil side is never disguised – she is base all the time. This association between woman and baseness might be puzzling in a film that challenges stereotypical representations of male and female roles. It is important to note, however, that Emma is representative of this part of society that is reactionary, unimaginative, and conventional. Like the politically incorrect view that women are evildoers, a view that a progressive mind would reject, Emma is a character with whom the film does not comply. She is never shown favorably, and it is hard to imagine any viewer being able to identify with her, however reactionary this viewer may be, simply by the fact that she does not seem to have any solid argument to support the fierce persecution she imposes on Vienna. In a very much nuanced film, this character remains unchanged from beginning to end.

Unlike Emma, Vienna is a character that changes during the film. She is authoritative and bossy until halfway through the picture. In one scene Johnny refuses to go when McIvers summons him in a rude way. But Vienna says, "Don't start anything, go talk to him", and he obeys. When Bart (Ernest Borgnine) and Johnny have a disagreement and go out of the saloon in order to fight in the open, Vienna says, "Bart, leave your guns". Bart leaves them. Johnny does not carry his guns and, in a later scene, Vienna asks him, "Where are your guns?". "In the saddlebag", he answers. "Suppose you leave them there. I'll tell you when to use them". "You're the boss", he answers.

In this first part of the film, not only Vienna's attitudes resemble those of a Western hero, but also her way of dressing and walking make her look like a cowboy. She wears boots and pants, moves about in an assured way and has a sharp tongue. She seems to have a grudge against Johnny, although he is there because she had summoned him up. But little by little, as the film develops, we begin to understand the nature of their relationship. They had been lovers five years before, but Johnny had left Vienna for fear of committing himself. During all this time, however, they have not forgotten each other, and the love they feel is barely hidden by their resentful exchanges. "It was more of a comfort to think that you were waiting for me", he says. "Did you honestly believe after five years I'd still be waiting for you?", she sarcastically asks him. She has become a successful businesswoman, somewhat callous, but he resents her past. As a conventional Western hero, he expects his woman to be "pure". This point is challenged by Vienna, who in an outburst cries: "A man can lie, steal and even kill. But as long as he hangs on to his pride, he's still a man. All a woman has to do is slip once and she's a tramp. It must be a great comfort to you to be a man". It is then that he replies: "It was more of a comfort to think that you were waiting for me".

Both characters change in the course of the film. At the beginning their sexual roles are reversed, in terms of the accepted conventions of the Western. Unlike Vienna, who had adopted masculine airs, and as the film begins, "thinks and acts like a man", Johnny's attitude is clearly passive, for he comes when Vienna calls him to work for her, carries no guns, as a man of the West always does, without a clear reason takes his guitar wherever he goes, and is first seen sporting a pink shirt, a color usually associated with the female sex in Western culture. Besides, due to Sterling Hayden's unimpressive acting abilities, Johnny, as a character, is colorless and secondary. He does not have the moral strength of a Will Kane or the mythic quality of a Shane. But as his love relationship with Vienna begins to take shape again, both characters start to balance standard masculine and feminine

characteristics. Vienna begins to wear women's clothes and Johnny shows his ability with a gun. It is then revealed he had been a famous gunfighter. From now on he will be able to use his gun in a more responsible way, not in a childish way like when he almost kills Turkey accidentally as he decides to show the boy that he, Johnny, is a faster shootist. Ultimately, what he is trying to do is to prove that he is a man.

The development of the sentimental aspects of the film gives it its lyrical quality, another aspect that sets it apart from the Western genre. Although many Westerns present lyrical moments, they are often derived from elements that are characteristic of the genre, not from the careful and detailed portrayal of a love relationship. In John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, for instance, there are many lyrical moments, but they are related to aspects of the frontier life, like the construction of the church – Earp's embarrassment at the dance is a touching moment – , and the operation that Doc, a gunfighter but also a doctor, performs on Chihuahua. In *Johnny Guitar*, however, lyricism is provided by the elaborate dialogue in love scenes, which evinces the repressed feelings between Vienna and Johnny that only little by little come to the surface, and by the careful lighting, soft colors, and subtle camera movements in the scenes between them.

In the first of these scenes the *mise-en-scène* is not very elaborated – all the time we have shot/countershot. The poetic element of the scene lies in the fact that Vienna and Johnny talk about their past love affair as if it had happened to somebody else and also to the fact that Victor Young's haunting title tune is heard throughout the scene. Vienna says: "Five years ago, I loved a man. He wasn't good and he wasn't bad, but I loved him. I wanted to marry him, to work with him, to build something for the future." And she remembers that they broke up because he couldn't see himself tied down to a home, to which Johnny sarcastically retorts, looking around: "Looks like the girl did a smart thing in getting rid of him." Vienna ignores his tone of voice and interprets his sentence in a different way: "She was smart alright. She learned not to love anybody again". Revealing his sexist values, he argues, "Five years is a long time. There must have been quite a few men in between". In a defiant way, she answers, "Enough". As she leaves we can see that she is wearing her black pants, a black blouse, and has a gun in a holster attached to her belt.

The same topic – the men in Vienna's life – comes up again when Johnny is by himself, late at night, trying to drink his blues away. The *mise-en-scène* is more elaborated this time. Vienna arrives, wearing a black cape, and rests her arms on the sill of the window that separates both rooms. She says she could not sleep because she had a bad dream. Very subtle lighting gives intimacy to the scene, for certain parts of the setting are highlighted:

Vienna's face, Johnny in the foreground, and the bottle of whisky on the table between them. "How many men have you forgotten?", he asks her. She leaves the window, comes into the room where he is and answers: "As many women as you've remembered". We can now see that, this time, under the black cape she wears a sexy dark pink gown, which represents a progression in terms of femininity in relation to the scene described in the previous paragraph. Johnny jumps from his chair, approaches her, and the camera frames his back and her face, which is lighted in a way that makes it seem to glow. A tense dialogue, which barely hides their yearning for each other, ensues. All the time the camera shows Vienna as she makes an effort to maintain the Rushmore Mount-like face she has been displaying in the film so far. The dialogue goes on like this:

Johnny: Don't go away.
Vienna: I haven't moved.
Johnny: Tell me something nice.
Vienna: Sure. What do you want to hear?
Johnny: Lie to me. Tell me all these years you've waited..
Vienna: All these years I've waited.
Johnny: Tell me you'd have died if I hadn't come back.
Vienna: I would have died if you hadn't come back.
Johnny: Tell me you still love me like I love you.
Vienna: I still love you like you love me.

Johnny quickly takes his glass of whisky to his mouth and empties it. He then says "Thanks. Thanks a lot". She takes the glass from his hand and angrily throws it away: "Stop feeling so sorry for yourself." She then looks around and as the camera follows her, she says, "For every board and plank and beam in this place...". He interrupts her by saying, "I heard enough". "No, you're going to listen". But he will not: "I told you I didn't want to hear anymore". Then Vienna defiantly looks at him and says: "You can't shut me up, Johnny. Not anymore. Once I would have crawled at your feet to be near you". There is a cut and Vienna is seen in the foreground, facing the camera, as Johnny stands in the background. As they talk, Johnny begins to understand what she has been through, and during this time they do not look at each other.

Vienna: I searched for you in every man I met.
Johnny: Look, Vienna, you just said you had a bad dream. We both had, but it's all over.
Vienna: Not for me.
Johnny: It's just like it was five years ago. Nothing's happened in between.
Vienna: Oh, I wish...

Johnny: Not a thing. You've got nothing to tell me, because it isn't real.

At this point he takes her by her shoulders and makes her face him: "Only you and me; that's real". And then the scene takes a different rhythm. The music – the same title tune – grows, and the camera pans backwards as Johnny enthusiastically takes Vienna by her arm and guides her to another room. All the time he talks in a fast, excited, feverish way: "We're having a drink at the bar at the Aurora Hotel. The band's playing, we're celebrating, 'cause we're getting married, and after the wedding we're going out of this hotel, we're going away. So laugh, Vienna, and be happy, it's your wedding day". She turns to him and the camera frames her ecstatic face as she says, "I've waited for you, Johnny. What took you so long?". They kiss and a fade-out to the chords of the "Johnny Guitar theme" conveniently ends the most romantic sequence of the whole film. I cannot think of any other Western where romantic love has reached such intensity.

These lyrical moments help to stress the transformation, in terms of feminine stereotypes, that Vienna goes through. So, the night the angry town citizens pay a visit to Vienna, she is donned in the most feminine way – she wears a long white gown and a black belt. She is first seen lighting the candles of her saloon, shot in *plongée*. The huge lamp is lowered and she walks around it lighting candle by candle. After her task is completed, she raises the lamp, sits at the piano on a platform near the rough reddish stonewall, and starts playing the same romantic and melancholic chords of the title song. There is an amazing contrast between the Vienna we see for the first time in the saloon, dressed in black pants, and the Vienna that now sits and plays the piano. It is through the *mise-en-scène* that feminine stereotypes are highlighted in this scene – a long white evening gown, candlelight, and romantic piano music.

It is at this moment that the lynch mob arrives. Vienna has an outburst of anger: "I held up no stagecoach, I robbed no bank, but you are here again. [...] I know you know I'm innocent. But you stand there in your funeral clothes, like vultures, waiting for another corpse". There is a striking contrast between the shots in which Vienna dominates the frame, dressed in white, and the shots of the invaders, standing like birds of prey, all dressed in black and led by the hysterical Emma. When they come towards Vienna, they group together and their steps seem to be synchronized, so that they become a massive dark force. The positions the group and Vienna hold are now clearly established, and are represented by the colors of their clothes – white for Vienna and black for the posse, with no intermediate shades. Innocence is being falsely accused by the paranoid mob. Vienna has very

rational explanations for her being at the bank when it was held up – after all she was given twenty-four hours to leave town and she had to pay the men who worked for her. The invasion of her saloon by the posse shows the perversity of the witch-hunt, the arbitrary condemnation of a suspect, where factual evidence seems to have no relevance at all. In a frightening and absurd mock judgment Vienna is condemned to death. It is in fact a condemnation of liberal views, for Vienna not only favors the coming of the railroad – she will build a depot in the place where the saloon now stands – but also intends to have the men who work for her as her partners, sharing the profits, on a communal basis, instead of simply having them work for her.

It is in the sequence of the hanging that Johnny has his chance to act like a Western hero, confirming my hypothesis that, like Vienna, the experiences he goes through in the film make him change in relation to stereotypical gender expectations. From the amorphous, indifferent man of the beginning of the film, he evolves to the more nuanced man of the final scenes. In the hanging sequence, specifically, he performs a stereotypical Western scene, by rescuing Vienna at the last moment, when Emma strikes the other woman's horse so that she will hang. Johnny, unseen by the others, had untied the rope and he now swiftly rides past Vienna and takes her in his arms. The last minute rescue is a staple scene in many action films, but in this “weirdest” of Westerns it works exactly because it has become a cliché. Johnny, a colorless character, has had his heroic moment, which is fair enough, considering that the last great confrontation of the film is the one between Emma and Vienna. That sequence takes place in the Dancing Kid's hideout. It is there that Vienna, in another step forward in her transformation process, fries some eggs for a hungry Johnny. It is also there that, lying on the floor, she shoots Emma with her left hand, making the black-attired body of her rival fly over the railing of the staircase of the hideout and roll down the grassy slope like a heavy bundle. Transgression has won over conformism.

Let me pull all the threads of my argument together now, as I try to connect the political issue and the questions of genre and gender in *Johnny Guitar*. What I have tried to show in this essay is that the film ideologically sides with some of its characters, mainly Vienna and her associates, but not only in terms of its storyline. By deliberately breaking the accepted conventions of the Western film, *Johnny Guitar* shows in its mise-en-scène its rebellious and transgressive views, and by so doing takes a firm position against right-wing attitudes like the ones adopted by McCarthyists at the time the film was released, which can be transposed to any place where intolerance and prejudice prevail.

In this way, as I argued at the beginning of this article, *Johnny Guitar* becomes a political film, in the sense in which Stephen Prince uses the expression when he refers to the transformative mode of art. According to this view, a political film must have the marks of its agenda in its very construction. Of all the conventions of the Western genre that the film could break, it chose the one that was most firmly established and which was, to a certain extent, the “raison d’être” of the genre – the question of gender. After all, in the West, as most of the films show, men are men, and the women are either pure angels to be protected by them or are prostitutes meant to entertain them. By challenging this notion and consequently transcending generic limitations, the film could operate on a very different level, highlighting the romantic elements of the fable. At the end of the film, the dark forces of injustice and bigotry, represented by Emma, are destroyed. Johnny and Vienna can finally have their long awaited embrace and kiss by an idyllic waterfall – both of them wearing pants. In a demonstration of the mingling of feminine and masculine traits, she sports a yellow blouse, in fact Johnny’s yellow shirt that she had borrowed some time before. But the red scarf around her neck, a token of her femininity, is hers all right.

RESUMO

A trama de Johnny Guitar questiona muitas das convenções do gênero western. Meu propósito é mostrar que o filme é também transgressor em sua própria construção. Sua mise-en-scène – em que os papéis sexuais são discutidos – metáforiza as forças da repressão existentes na época em que o filme foi produzido.

Palavras-chave: relações de gênero; gênero cinematográfico; macartismo.

ABSTRACT

Johnny Guitar's plot challenges many of the conventions of the Western genre. My aim is to show that the film is also transgressive in its very construction. Its mise-en-scène – in which sexual roles are discussed – metaphorizes the repressive forces at work at the time of its production.

Keywords: gender relations; film genre; McCarthyism.

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