Vienna and the others "because it's not real": the Logic of Seduction in Nicholas Ray's Johnny Guitar

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Abstract
In Nicholas Ray's Johnny Guitar (1954), the hero has swapped his gun for a guitar and takes refuge in the saloon, unexpectedly caught in the ominous fury of a whirlwind the wrath of which has no effect inside and is not even heard. Vienna is talking from the balcony, all dressed in dark attires, addressing one of her croupiers downstairs. He must spin the wheel instead of reading the news of the world outside. For the world is inside, where cards are sold and action unfolds. Chance has obfuscated the real or changed it into a stage. The real or what it is supposed to have been in its coherence and consistence, that which, through likelihood in fiction, maintains some relation to truth, that truth made woman, coming out of the well or of the cave or from under the waterfall. But "what does woman have to do with truth," Nietzsche exclaims. Nothing. Only as a game of semblance and sense, where seduction starts.

Key words: Editing. Fiction. Metafiction. Seduction. Phallogocentrism.

Vienna y los otros “porque no es real”: la Lógica de la Seducción en Johnny Guitar de Nicholas Ray

Resumen
En Johnny Guitar de Nicholas Ray (1954) el héroe lleva una guitarra en vez de un revólver y se refugia en el saloon, preso, en contra de lo que se esperaba de una inoportuna tempestad cuya furia ni tiene efectos en el interior ni se oye. Vienna habla desde el balcón. Vestida con ropa oscura, se dirige a uno de los croupiers. Tiene que lanzar la ruleta en vez de leer las noticias del mundo. Porque el mundo no está afuera sino aquí mismo, aquí dentro, donde Vienna reparte las cartas y donde se desarrolla la acción. El azar ha oscurecido lo real o lo ha cambiado en teatro. Lo real o lo que se da como tal, en su coherencia y su consistencia; lo que, por la verosimilitud de la ficción, mantiene cierta relación con la verdad, esta verdad hecha mujer, saliendo del pozo, o de la caverna o de un salto de agua. Pero "¿qué tiene que ver la mujer con la verdad?", exclama Nietzsche. Nada. Excepto como juego de las apariencias y del sentido, allí donde comienza la seducción.


Vienna is the main character in Nicholas Ray's 1954 movie Johnny Guitar. A titular usurpation that may have deceived Anthony Mann who, in a 1957 interview, assumes that “maybe someone will make a western some day with a woman as the main character (F1).”

1 Charles BITSCH, Claude CHABROL, "Entretien avec Anthony Mann", Cahiers du cinéma, n° 69, mars 1957.
No doubt Vienna is: the woman of the western and the star. The star of a western which is hers, spurred on by a movement which is hers, overflowing tight frames and fixed forms for a story in between at once within and without the genre, as gender expectations have collapsed and sense with it.

Undecidable2 is the story then, in its principle, which is the principle of the feminine, served by Ray against Mann. For it generates what can only be read as what appears, the appearance of reality within the fiction which happens to be the reality of appearance –its truth– the only truth retrievable which is the truth, always far, of seduction in Johnny Guitar, unveiled by Vienna, the woman with many dresses, in that western where Johnny leads us to.

To that place of silence inside (F2), where the fury of the storm outside rages past, unheard. As if at Vienna’s were not simply a shelter against howling and whirling dust, but the shadow of absolute distance, the distance meant by and made woman, because “the feminine is elsewhere,” says Baudrillard3. In another world, seemingly same but different and for which Johnny is called and in which he’s now ready to dwell.

Ready, not simply because, as he tells Vienna, “a man’s got to stop somewhere” (35:10), but because, to paraphrase Nietzsche, he may think that there with the woman “dwells his better self.” (Gay Science, aph. 60)

What could be then Johnny’s better self that would be part of Vienna’s world?

And what could be that world where he is ready to dwell, now that he’s realised he may have always longed for and belonged to it? Should it be the expected world of motherhood or mother-nature? Or the no less expected world of enchantment men are supposed to be lured into? Both, maybe: at Vienna’s, there’ve been kids on Friday nights4; at Vienna’s, Johnny has swapped the gun for the guitar, morphed the gunslinger into the troubadour, much more in tune with enchantment.
Vienna and the others "because it's not real"

Maybe. Provided these role functions of mother and/or enchantress immemorially assigned to the woman be read in the perspective of the woman only and that movie which can’t be but hers in its economy and poetics, and be reconsidered from that notion of distance introduced from the start –the distance made woman–, right from the first word –the name of the title– right from the first shots –Johnny looking around: the distance of a point of view which convokes and contests sense immemo-
rially purveyed by that reason which is one, as it proceeds from God, the father and the lordly man– what Derrida calls “phallogocentrism”.

Going to meet the woman (F3) without knowing she’s already there in the facts and forms of that incipit; that’s Johnny and his self if any, riding along the canyon, down to that valley where is nested Vienna’s saloon. He’s covered an undefined distance which, despite the machine blasting its way across the landscape, is not the measure of the man expected in a western, of the real man, of the hero who is introduced on top of the hill, shot up from below, aesthetically dominant and powerful, lordly should we say, were it not the guitar and its anti-cli-
mactic effect –an “antilogos weapon,” Hélène Cixous might have called it (880).6

He is Johnny Guitar, as the title has just told us, and like the title, revealed and veiled7. In the shadow. For lurking beneath, is not so much Logan as Vienna and her story about to be told, the story of a woman which has already started, which doesn’t mean presence but pretense first and last. Twice pretending:

First, the name happens to actually refer to a characteristic –guitar– at the expense of the character, the player going out and the instrument coming in (F4). And that’s what he will be, an instrument8: the incidental hero for the purpose of the plot (1.22.17).

Second, the name reveals itself as a mask behind which there is yet another, or, boiling down to the same, a “hollow” as the onomastics of “Logan” teaches us. Hollowed out, as he is, of the expected properties of western manliness because the declared gunslinger will be played out from the expected

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7 A title which, for that matter, turns out to be less thematic than thematic (cf. G. GENETTE. Seuils. Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1987) since it insists-its duplicity being granted-on how the theme will be dealt with more than on the theme itself. The question is therefore aesthetic, from the start.
final duel, hollowed out and filled in from the start by the sense of Vienna –his better self to be found by Vienna. “Follow me,” she says. To the mineshaft (1.21.50), to another sense.

It is the sense of what has none, logically, in that it loiters away from the logos and looms large when its potency –the Word of God, the stance of man– has run out. Or when, because of a guitar and also maybe of pants tucked into boots (00.15.59), the full presence of Johnny is deflated into a mere semblance. In the inchoative shadow of his name and appearance is initiated therefore a series of images and forms in the stead of a succession of facts and connections for want of a settled and substantial beginning which would have shaped and showed the supposedly prime and proper way.

Hence, this stagecoach attack (F5) under Johnny’s mocking eyes (F6), which represents much less some catalytic event setting the plot in motion –who cares who did it? it’s just another pretense– than a compulsory topos of the western, and, in that sense serving the genre more than the plot and as such to be regarded as a self-reflexive, metafilmic moment which not only blows up verisimilitude but ushers in the treason of a genre left down there in the bottom of the canyon, and the idea that back up here on top of the cliff might be just a western of sort.

Hence these jump cuts which, were it not Nicolas Ray shooting, would be gross, preposterous editing blunders: across the canyon a mine has exploded and Johnny is looking down while, in all logics, he should have looked up. A straight cut and the shadow of the rider on the right (F7) is to be found on the left, (F8) which more than an ellipsis may signify a discordance in the treatment of time, as well as in the treatment of
space, when from one shot to the next, Johnny is unexpectedly caught in a storm. To say nothing of the subjective shot on Vienna’s saloon (F9), just as fake, since Johnny can’t possibly be within view of Vienna’s from where he stands, as attested by the next shots.

And yet, something does need to be said (F10) about this alleged subjective shot which gets wedged in what could have been one shot on Johnny at a stop, looking and clearly seeing nothing but a whirl of dust infolding Vienna’s saloon. More than an internal focalisation in which what is presented escapes the focalizer, this long shot on Vienna’s saloon might well be conjured up by an “external ocularizing” as François Jost calls it, as “it seems to come from outside or be autonomous”12. In that respect, it might be some off-the-field image.

Leaving aside the de-realising effect within the fiction of its exact repetition 15 seconds later –its first occurrence signifying the emptiness of a setting13, diegetically reinserted when Johnny rides in. Or the obvious break in some idealized mimetic continuity –in that case a flashforward which can’t possibly be generated by the character and, as such, uncovers the fabric of the fiction. Leaving aside then these two readings, without discarding them, one enticing alternative or next step would be to regard this most irrational shot as that which signifies the outside like the ellipsis in a jump cut, that which has been left outside –the sense of time– and yet has never ceased to work from within the chain of images. With this irrational shot, it is as if the outside –what Deleuze calls “the interstice”14, i.e. within a sequence, a white or black screen the vacancy of which signifies a direct presentation of time– had been filled in or rather staked out. So that not only would the diegetic continuity be broken up by this sudden and autonomous incoming shot, but so would be the sense of the outside, the sense of time.

Time, in its chronological and meteorological movements (where’s that storm coming from?) that time of beginnings and ends, of hierarchical celestial orders, would find itself eclipsed by and endowed with a new sense: the sense of an assemblage consisting in non-chronological

11 In that case there’s a lot in Johnny Guitar. See the straight cut among many others between the scene on the bridge at dusk (55.54) after her arrival from the bank, (55.53). Or that dissolve in which what seems to be the afternoon at the lair, Dancing Kid, outside, brooding over the valley, fades out (40.57) for Vienna to fade in walking down the stairs of her saloon late in the evening. (40.58).


13 And so will be the inside of the saloon, and even the credits whose lyrics at the end can be said to give sense to the music of the beginning.

14 DELEUZE, 1985, 232.
time relationships, as such, entailing a causality of some sort, less substantial than simulated, less ethic than aesthetic. A new sense of the outside in the name of Vienna, i.e. nothing but a subdivision of the inside, a time on her side: To one of her croupiers reading last-month paper “to know,” says he, “what’s happening outside,” (F11) she snaps back: “There will be plenty going on here soon. Just worry about that.” (06.15) If anything is to be known then, it won’t be pursued and purveyed out there, outside, but in here, inside, drawn and dealt by Vienna only.

Behold the woman (F12), shot up from below, aesthetically dominant and powerful, lordly should we say, looking upon that world in her own image, downstairs, where she “sell[s] whisky and cards.” (14.01) That’s the place Johnny opens his eyes on. He’s just stumbled his way in, helped out of the reeling and blinding dust of the storm by Old Tom. A subjective shot, this time right, of where the story starts, jingled into action by a croupier who starts spinning the wheel no sooner has he seen Johnny… and us. Strange for a first shot of a saloon, to have left the bar out of the field. Strange and significant in its obliquity as its composition originates in a decentered point of view or, as it puts the center at stake, aesthetically and thematically: at the center is the roulette –game at the expense of whisky.

And then, following the straight economy of the perspectival construction, our eyes glide along the orthogonals drawn by the edge of the gaming tables in the foreground and the alignment of the pillars supporting the beam on the right, pushing on towards the rock face of the cliff in the background, the basis of which seems to have been smoothed out into a stage where a virginal stands: its vanishing point.

If the vanishing point conditions the sense of perspective, the sense of the shot is to be looked for then in the background, in the paradoxical consistence of that contrast between the rock face and the stage –both conjuring up a sense of reality vanishing away in appearances and signs.

Because with the gaming tables leading to the stage, the diege-
tic structure, which the economy of the shot establishes, thrives on the necessity of chance and the untimely purposes of representa-
tion. In other words, the game presided over by Vienna, that the
croupier invites us to look on, consists in an interplay of letters
and numbers, disburdened of the tyranny of things and para-
digms, of their substance and truth. And how could it be otherwise when, with Cixous, we know the woman to “take pleasure in
[...] emptying structures and turning propriety upside down”18.
Especially when the saloon she’s built up looks like a cave and so
does the mineshaft (F13), or the lair9 (F14) she’ll lead Johnny to.
As if, of these two places, the saloon were the matrix and as such
no less theatrical20.

Because Vienna’s cave has dispossessed Socrates of his myth to
empty it out and turn it upside down. On the rough wall of the
saloon are coming and going shadows of a western which have all
been endowed with the power to affirm the false, not as opposed
to truth, but as the only truth possible–and the movie may be that
ideal locus to reveal it– “that the world as such is a fable”21.

Because, from this cave which is the movie theater where we
watch moving shadows cast on the wall playing the myth of the
West cast on the wall of the saloon, there is no reason for us and
for them who keep breaking the fourth wall22, to turn our heads
round. For Vienna is neither the sun nor God, but the light
of the place23, and the master of downstairs destiny, dealing
cards, providing but never partaking, standing outside
in her inside: the privileged instance in these regions of
immanence.

18 CIXOUS, 1975, 887.

19 Though on top of a hill, it is
reached out of a passageway
burrowed through the ridge and
hidden by the waterfall.

20 In the mineshaft, Johnny
though incidentally, represents
himself as a hero and Vienna
changes costume for another role. From
the bride to the outlaw, after she
impersonated the boss, the lady
and the lover, she epitomizes what
Cixous names “a chaosmos of the
‘personal’ overturning the sense of
the person (of being as opposed to
that “becoming” she thrills in.) in
her multiplicity and in-between-
ness (CIXOUS, 1975, 888-883-893).
As for the lair, it is the setting for
the final duel between the two
women to take place, on the stage-
like deck of the cabin, with down
below the posse and Johnny as pri-
vileged spectators.

21 Pierre KLOSSOWSKI, Un si
funeste désir (Paris: Gallimard,

22 Particularly remarkable is
that croupier who is not only loo-
king at us, like the one spinning
the wheel as we get in with
Johnny, but who is adressing us
before we understand he is in fact
speaking to Johnny and Tom
through the serving hatch. To tell
them what they already know, at
least Tom, and we, viewers, don’t,
i.e. that Vienna’s in-betweenness
induces changes among men. Or
to use Cixous’s words, that it is
from that in-betweenness that
“woman takes her forms (and
man, in his turn; but that’s his
other history).” (883) So to us/them
Sam says: “Never seen a woman
who was more a man. She thinks
like one, acts like one. It someti-
mes makes me feel that I’m not
(F15).”

23 And Emma is not fooled,
who shoots at the large candelab-
rum. (1.17.28) And Vienna, after
her most unlikely escape from lyn-
ching towards the mineshaft, will
be advised by Johnny to change
that impeccable, luminously white
dress which in the night is "like
She is Vienna only, without any proper name, not because she is “the name of names” but because the woman with many dresses (see n. 10) is many names in one, signifying the movement of the eponymous city and the forest stream of its etymology. Which is the movement of names when they are improper, i.e. when they do not refer to presence, to the innate univocity of absolute subjectivity, and therefore, joyfully drift along the lines and lure of point of view inevitably changed into a vanishing point: “the abyss of distance,” to borrow Derrida’s phrase, or in our own words, the distance meant by and made woman.

That’s Vienna on the stage (F16) in front of the wall, playing the musical theme of Johnny Guitar. In the role of the young maiden at the virginal; a genre scene which, unsurprisingly, is distorted –not so young, not so maidenly. But if, as the saying goes, “clothes don’t make the man”, they do make the woman and she, the woman of many dresses, is properly dressed for the topos: only a form, im-personated, for a story of style.

Now, please allow me a return towards the clarity of the tercento and quattrocento where geometry conflates with theology in the fecund correspondence between the legitimate perspective and the Annunciation. Subtended by Bernardino of Siena commenting the Annunciation as, among a number of oxymora, the moment when “immensity comes in measurement, the unfigurable in the figure, the invisible in vision…” Daniel Arasse sees in the vanishing point that where the concealed is revealed as concealed, and the advent of the unfigurable figuration of the logos.

That’s where Vienna appears, in the stead of the logos (F17). She literally has in-vested that locus, which, as such is none—an operative simulacrum” Louis Marin calls it—where converge the orthogonals of Johnny’s point of view. So, by Vienna, is the
vanishing point figured, as the interstice was in Johnny’s sequence just before. With the dramatic effect that the miracle of the legitimate construction, where the invisible was “produced” into the visible, conjures away in the mirage of an illegitimate diegesis which has seduced the visible into the invisible, beyond the cave into another cave the crack on the wall intimates, pushed forward by that potent movement of fiction within the fiction, towards another fiction beyond, of another genre, in the undecidability of that in-between where the western will have morphed into a romance (F18).

Under the waterfall, oblivious of the dust and sand and destruction of the beginning, to gather by the forest stream in the humid and the fluid (F19) which has been the locus of the feminine from *The Waves* of Virginia Woolf to Cixous’s “luminous torrents” via that “V-shaped section of earth” in Faulkner’s *Delta Autumn*.

Yes, they said under the waterfall, rejoicing to have been led astray towards that region of the poetic and to have got the Nietzschean faith in “forms, and tones and words, as in the whole Olympus of appearance” where seduction reigns supreme.

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32 For Johnny has found “his better self” and his words suddenly turn the saloon into the Aurora Hotel where a band celebrates their wedding. What happened during their five-year separation in which one could hear the seaward whispers of *The Great Gatsby’s* “unreality of reality” has been conjured away. “Because it’s not real,” Johnny exclaims, while earlier in the evening he had shrugged off at what would have meant their staying together, i.e. the formulaic “they should have lived happily ever after.” (35.47). “Only you and me. That’s real.” (43.36): Vienna’s flashy colored shirts, Vienna at the virginal, Vienna’s portrait of a lady at the serving hatch (F20), Vienna in black with boots and gun, Vienna beyond the storm, Vienna beyond the river… the making of woman. And not the rest: the stagecoach attack, the bank robbery, the chase, the lynching, the gunfire… And the woman in love, waiting, just a foil for the rest for the brave, reflecting the sense of the hero in a genre riding for the making of man.
The saloon had to be burnt down then, for it would capitalize on that conspiracy against mother nature worked out by "devil-may-care men who have taken / to railroading / out of sheer lust of adventure." (William Carlos Williams, "To Elsie").


For "there is no hope left for sense. And without doubt it's all for the better: sense is mortal. But that on which it has imposed its ephemeral reign, what it expected to liquidate in order to impose the reign of Enlightenment, namely appearance, that is immortal, invulnerable to the nihilism of sense or of nonsense itself. And that is where seduction starts." (Jean Baudrillard, Simulacres et simulations (Paris: Galilée, 1981), last sentence).

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