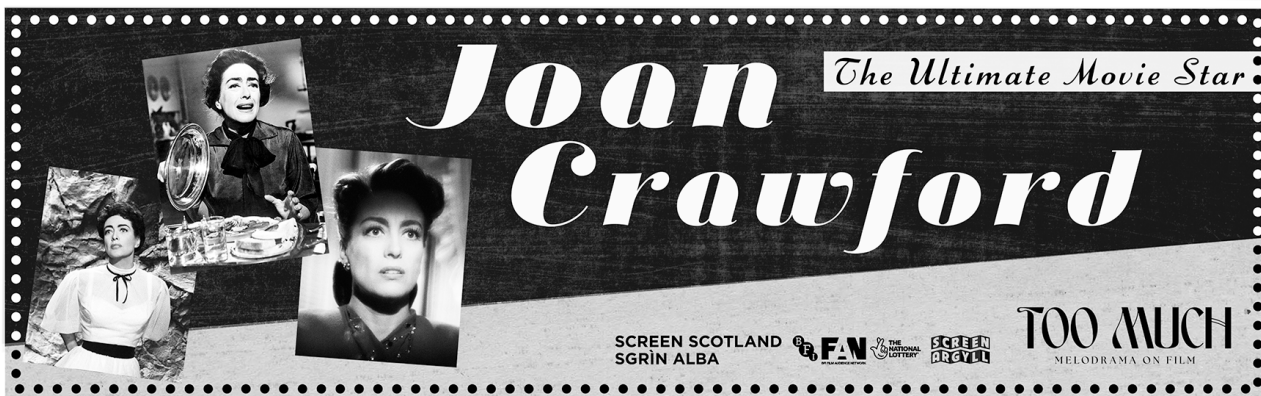




JOHNNY GUITAR

US 1954, directed by Nicholas Ray, written by Philip Yordan

In the early 1950s Hollywood was challenged by two sets of important changes which had a significant effect on how films were made and how they were presented to the public. The first changes were 'institutional' – the major studios were forced to sell their cinema chains, the source of most of their profits. They also found themselves losing control over production now increasingly carried out by smaller independents, though ownership of copyright and funding often remained with the studios. Also, actors and 'creatives' were no longer tied to the studios by long contracts. The agent became an important figure, putting together 'production packages'.

The other changes were technological with increased use of Technicolor and various widescreen processes such as CinemaScope used to compete with the swiftly-growing menace of television. In 1954 Joan Crawford had become a client of MCA the biggest and most influential agency led by Lew Wasserman. She wanted another feature to maintain her presence on cinema screens and Wasserman had three other clients who together could form the basis of an attractive 'package'. The 'property' was a Western novel by Ray Chanslor and director Nicholas Ray and screenwriter Philip Yordan were also MCA clients who could adapt the novel. Ray and Yordan knew each other and both were experienced filmmakers. Ray was known for the melodramas he had made at RKO. Wasserman took the package to Republic, once seen as a 'poverty row' studio which had made its name with 'B' Westerns, many starring John Wayne, but in 1952 it had a major hit with *The Quiet Man* directed by John Ford who won his fourth Oscar. A key feature of the deal with Republic was that studio founder Herbert J. Yates insisted on the use of the company's own colour process, Trucolor as a cheaper and perhaps more 'lurid' alternative to Technicolor and director Ray's colours for costumes became part of the overall melodrama feel of this unusual Western.

Joan Crawford dominates the film as Vienna, the woman with a mysterious background who has built a saloon and gambling hall on the edge of a small Western town in an attempt to profit from the railway that is currently being built through the local hills. As the narrative begins, a lone rider on a ridge oversees a stagecoach hold-up in the valley below. The rider is 'Johnny Guitar' who will arrive at Vienna's a short while before her regular customers, a small group of cowboys. Soon after that a large posse of townspeople arrives claiming the cowboys were responsible for the hold-up and the death of a passenger. Everything is set for a dramatic conflict.

In one sense this is a familiar genre Western but in practice it is much more than that. Crawford's performance, Ray's direction and the plotting by Yordan ensure a visual feast and as a melodrama of emotions and romance it also offers music, dancing and a title song by Peggy Lee. The saloon set has a high mezzanine floor where Vienna's rooms and her piano are located and a staircase from which she can command the room. Primary colours are used for several costumes and the nominal 'baddie' (Vienna) dresses in white while the de facto leader of the posse and sister of the dead man (Mercedes McCambridge) is all in black, effectively reversing the hackneyed phrase about Western heroes. Johnny Guitar (Sterling Hayden) is distinguished by his height and his guitar.

When the film was first released American audiences were not sure what to make of it. They were expecting a standard Western – which was at its height as a genre in the 1950s on both cinema and TV screens and mainly in colour which was still not standard for mainstream 'dramas'. Some audiences laughed at certain scenes but this didn't prevent the film from at least covering its costs and outside the US audiences, especially in France, were very appreciative. Over time, the film has developed critical acclaim and is now recognised as an important melodrama.

Women had starred in Westerns before but not in such a dominant but still vulnerable role as Vienna so when the film was later picked out for praise by filmmakers like Martin Scorsese it began to be seen as a 'feminist Western'. The central conflict is between the two women and it does seem that Crawford and McCambridge really didn't like each other. There are other reasons too why the film has been revived. First, it is now seen as one of the films that represents the impact of the anti-communist 'witch hunt' in Hollywood started by HUAC (House Un-American Committee) and then Sen. Joseph McCarthy with blacklists and condemnations often imposed without evidence. Ray and Yordan escaped blacklisting but here they show the townspeople prepared to hang the cowboys without any trial. The nominal leader of the townspeople is a wealthy rancher played by the hot-headed Ward Bond, one of the most vociferous 'commie hunters' in Hollywood in this period. Sterling Hayden as Johnny Guitar was a war hero and one of the actors forced to 'name names' to HUAC. He regretted his decision for the rest of his career.

Later Johnny Guitar was 'outed' as a cult film celebrated by LGBTQ+ audiences. Crawford was a gay icon and Johnny Guitar became seen as a queer film, a film questioning gender identities and 'excessive' in its visual and aural splendour.

Johnny Guitar is something else. A primary-coloured melodrama with costumes to suit a musical and lines to rival Casablanca, this is also a rule-defying Western where the hero is a bar-running woman and the baddies are the moral majority.

"This is feminism gone mad!" the New York Herald-Tribune apparently said on the film's release. (From the description in a 2006 Lesbian and Gay Film Festival programme)

Roy Stafford 26/10/25