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**Vienna and the others “because it’s not real”: the Logic of Seduction in Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar***

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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.”<sup>1</sup> **(2)**<sup>2</sup>

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.

Undecidable<sup>3</sup> 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 (3)**, 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 Baudrillard.<sup>4</sup> 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?

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Bitsch, Claude Chabrol, “Entretien avec Anthony Mann,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, n° 69, mars 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Bold numbers are to be related to the powerpoint slideshow attached.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Oliver. *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy’s Relation to the “Feminine”* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> *De la Seduction* (Paris: Galilée, 1979), p. 17. If not otherwise indicated, all translations of French texts are mine.

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 nights<sup>5</sup>; at Vienna's, Johnny has swapped the gun for the guitar, morphed the gunslinger into the troubadour, much more in tune with enchantment.

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 immemorially purveyed by that reason which is one, as it proceeds from God, the father and the lordly man—what Derrida calls “phallogocentrism”.<sup>6</sup>

**Going to meet the woman (4)** 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-climactic effect—an “antilogos weapon,” Hélène Cixous might have called it (880).<sup>7</sup>

He is Johnny Guitar, as the title has just told us, and like the title, revealed and veiled.<sup>8</sup> 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:

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<sup>5</sup> And not only Turkey, so is the aptly-named Dancing Kid, without forgetting Johnny Guitar himself (31.49). “The cowboy promised men they need never grow old ; they could be boys forever, leaving behind the cares and duties of ordinary folk and riding off into a land without end.” (Brian W. Dippie. “The Visual West”. *The Oxford History of the American West*, Clyde A. Milner II, O'Connor, Sandweiss Eds. (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 695) And we won't fail to mention what Truffaut said about Ray's hero being “invariably a man lashing out, weak, a child-man when he is not simply a child.” (‘L'Admirable Certitude’, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, n°46, avril 1955, written under the pseudonym Robert Lachenay)

<sup>6</sup> *La Carte Postale* (Paris : Flammarion, 1980), pp. 501-510 .

<sup>7</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”. 1975. Trans. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen. *Signs*, (The University of Chicago Press : Vol. 1, No. 4, Summer, 1976), p. 880.

<sup>8</sup> A title which, for that matter, turns out to be less thematic than rhematic (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.

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. (5) And that’s what he will be, an instrument:<sup>9</sup> 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 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 (6) under Johnny’s mocking eyes (7), 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<sup>10</sup> 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<sup>11</sup>: 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 (8) is to be found on the left, (9) which more than an ellipsis may signify a discordance in the treatment of time<sup>12</sup>, as well as in the treatment of space, when from one

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<sup>9</sup> Or a “ficelle”, a “function”, “an artful expedient for mere consistency of form,” to use Henry James’s terms in his Preface to *The Ambassadors*.

<sup>10</sup> Thinking of Magritte’s *The Treason of Images*...

<sup>11</sup> Much too gross not to make sense, though we have in mind Truffaut, considering the editing “deplorable.” (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, n°46)

<sup>12</sup> 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

shot to the next, Johnny is unexpectedly caught in a storm. To say nothing of the subjective shot on Vienna's saloon (10), 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 (11)** 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."<sup>13</sup> 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 setting<sup>14</sup>, 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"<sup>15</sup>, 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 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

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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)

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Gilles Deleuze in *L'Image-Temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 296.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze 1985, 232

last-month paper “to know,” says he, “what’s happening outside,’ (12) 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 (13)**, 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. (3) He’s just stumbled his way in, helped out of the reeling and blinding dust of the storm by Old Tom.<sup>16</sup>

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,<sup>17</sup> 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,<sup>18</sup> 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 diegetic structure, which the economy of the shot establishes, thrives on the necessity of chance and the untimely purposes

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<sup>16</sup> Who dies like an actor on stage: “Look, everybody’s looking at me. It’s the first time I ever felt important.” (1.15.51)

<sup>17</sup> *Put at stake* which is the unsatisfactory translation of Derrida’s use of the phrase *mettre en jeu* which also can take on the sense of introducing looseness or play as in mechanism. See “Ellipse”, in *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p.432.

<sup>18</sup> Rushing past what we know to be the scale model of the city between the pillars. That city which has raised the wrath of male Emma and McIvers, bodying forth the cattle barons, represented in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962) by Major Cassius Starbuckle for whom voting against the open range and for “the builders of cities” would be “fly[ing] [...] in the face of Heaven’s handiwork.” (1.43.11) The city was founded as a challenge to God, from Babel to Victor Hugo’s “La conscience”: Alors Tubalcaïn, père des forgerons, / Construisit une ville énorme et surhumaine. [...] Sur la porte on grava : “Défense à Dieu d’entrer.”

of representation. 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 paradigms, 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.”<sup>19</sup> Especially when the saloon she’s built up looks like a cave and so does the mineshaft **(14)**, or the lair<sup>20</sup> **(15)** she’ll lead Johnny to. As if, of these two places, the saloon were the matrix and as such no less theatrical.<sup>21</sup>

Because Vienna’s cave **(3)** 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.”<sup>22</sup>

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 wall<sup>23</sup>, to turn our heads round. For Vienna is neither the sun nor God, but the light of the place<sup>24</sup>, 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.

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<sup>19</sup> Cixous 1975, 887

<sup>20</sup> Though on top of a hill, it is reached out of a passageway burrowed through the ridge and hidden by the waterfall.

<sup>21</sup> 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-betweenness (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 privileged spectators.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Un si funeste désir* (Paris : Gallimard, 1963), p. 193.

<sup>23</sup> Particularly remarkable is that croupier who is not only looking at us, like the one spinning the wheel as we get in with Johnny, but who is addressing 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 sometimes makes me feel that I’m not.” **(16)**

<sup>24</sup> And Emma is not fooled, who shoots at the large candelabrum. (1.17.28) And Vienna, after her most unlikely escape from lynching towards the mineshaft, will be advised by Johnny to change that impeccable, luminously white dress which in the night is “like carrying a lantern.” (1.22.31) And Sam, as seen above, will break the fourth wall after Vienna has asked him to “light a lamp and hang it outside.” (00.05.49)

**She is Vienna only**, without any proper name, not because she is “the name of names”<sup>25</sup> but because the woman with many dresses (see n. 10) is many names in one, signifying the movement of the eponymous city<sup>26</sup> 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<sup>27</sup>, or in our own words, the distance meant by and made woman.

That’s Vienna on the stage (**17**) 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<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

That’s where Vienna appears, in the stead of the logos.<sup>30</sup> (**18**) She literally has invested that locus, which, as such is none—“an operative simulacrum” Louis Marin calls it<sup>31</sup>—

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> One may wonder whether set on the column in her apartment upstairs is not a plaster-of-Paris bust of Beethoven; he who moved to Vienna at 22 and lived there until his death.

<sup>27</sup> *Eperons: Les styles de Nietzsche* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Like Renoir’s *Woman at the Piano* (1876) for the whiteness of the dress, or Vermeer’s *Lady Standing at the Virginal* (ca. 1670-1673) for the card upheld by a Cupid, in the tradition of and no doubt referring to 17<sup>th</sup> century books of emblems, portrayed in that painting within the painting hanged on the wall in the background, disproportionately large in size and figuring perhaps, through the continuity of the line delineating the face of the lady and of Cupid’s right leg, what the lady has or ought to have in mind, i.e. Otto Van Veen’s motto, *Perfectus Amor Est Nisi ad Unum*, worded and illustrated in an engraving where a Cupid brandishes a card with **I** inscribed. (*Amoris Divini Emblemata*, Antwerp, 1615) Many cards for Vienna and “enough” men to know in five years...

<sup>29</sup> *L’Annonciation italienne* (Paris : Hazan, 1999), p. 52.

<sup>30</sup> The logos which has branded woman with the infamous mark of that Genesiac pleasure to her eyes, which discovers while it collapses, that here lies the only truth, and woman is truth for that reason only which dismisses reason: “this non-truth is the “truth” and [Vienna] is one name for that non-truth of truth.” (Derrida 1978, 39)

<sup>31</sup> “Logiques du secret” in *Le Secret*. Traverses/30-31 (Paris : Centre G. Pompidou, mars 1984), p.64. “An infinite point,” Marin argues on, “by definition out of the plane though it is one of the necessary and determined elements of the perspectival construction.” It is that point which, having in sight religious horizons, becomes according to Pascal, to whom Marin refers, that “exact point which is the true locus” (*Pensées*, sect.vi, 381)

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 "pro-duced"<sup>32</sup> into the visible, is conjured away in the mirage of an illegitimate diegesis which has se-duced 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.<sup>33</sup> (19)

**Under the waterfall**, oblivious of the dust and sand and destruction of the beginning<sup>34</sup>, to gather by the forest stream in the humid and the fluid (20) 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"<sup>35</sup> where seduction reigns supreme.<sup>36</sup>

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which it falls to God to assign. (see Hubert Damish, *L'origine de la perspective* (Paris: Champs/Flammarion, 1987), p.77) And so is Vienna at some point, operative and distant, woven into the fabric of the film, "a non-identity, a non-figure, a simulacrum." (Derrida, 38)

<sup>32</sup> A term I borrow from Daniel Arasse in « L'entre-deux des figures. À propos de trois *Annonciations* toscanes » Tavola Rotonda : Urbino, 1993.

<sup>33</sup> 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 (20), 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 gunfight ... 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.

<sup>34</sup> 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")

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface for the second Edition, Genoa, fall 1886.

<sup>36</sup> 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)