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Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
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## Feminism, Freud, and Blacklist Fear in Ray's Cult Western

### JOHNNY GUITAR

Directed by Nicholas Ray  
Paramount  
August 15 through 21  
Film Forum

Before there was Jerry Lewis there was *Johnny Guitar*. Nicholas Ray's 1954 western—a luridly operatic mix of Freudian sexual pathology and political subtext, featuring Joan Crawford's grim, glam gunslinger—was dismissed by American reviewers but embraced by *Cahiers du Cinéma* as an auteurist cause célèbre: "Le cinéma c'est Nicholas Ray," in Jean-Luc Godard's exuberant formulation.

Like all cult films, *Johnny Guitar* (revived for a week in a new 35mm print) is a pop-cultural magpie's nest; conflating *Casablanca*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *The Ox-Bow Incident*—not to mention Jean Cocteau. This blatantly theatrical western immediately confounds the generic imperative with a 40-minute interior scene played by Crawford as



Film Forum

### Commie dearest: Crawford and gang

though it were Shakespeare. The most dogged of stars (the original Demi Moore), Crawford was making her first western since 1928. She demanded the man's role, essentially switching parts with nominal hero Sterling Hayden. "Feminism has gone too far," *The New York Herald-Tribune* began its review.

Packaged by super-agent Lew Wasserman, whose clients included Crawford, Ray, novelist Roy Chanslor, and screenwriter Philip Jordan, *Johnny Guitar* followed the second wave of HUAC's Hollywood hearings. Although saturated in Cold War atmospherics, the movie is less allegory than distillation; its plot turns on vigilante justice, xenophobia, and guilt by association. Ray was a former Communist. So was Hayden, already regretting the "friendly" testimony that saved his career. Jordan fronted for blacklisted writers. Ward Bond, a leader of the right-wing Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, played a wealthy rancher who heads a lynch mob. He and Mercedes McCambridge, as the resident demagogue, are out to burn Crawford's witch.

The on-screen tension between the actresses was exacerbated by McCambridge's marriage to Crawford's ex, and Crawford's star fits drove her director nuts: "The atrocity *Johnny Guitar* is finished and released, to dreadful reviews and great financial success," Ray wrote to a friend. "Nausea was my reward." Sartre could not have put it better. J.H.

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J. HOBBS