

WHEN THE GUN IS MIGHTIER THAN GOD

Purgatory: A Critique

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IT WAS BY PURE COINCIDENCE that one night, zapping through the channels on my TV set, I hit upon a Western that caught my attention. At that time I did not even know its title. Only later, by means of a web search, did I find out that I had seen the German version of *Purgatory*, a film released in 1999 for cable TV. It is directed by Uli Edel and features a cast that may or may not be known to a wider audience, but certainly does not comprise any prominent stars. The screenplay is by a certain Gordon T. Dawson. The amazing thing about the film is that although it never pretends to be more than a run-of-the-mill sample of the Western genre, it comes with an intriguing twist. Because of this, it can be seen as highlighting certain tendencies in popular American culture; and it does so all the more lucidly as no such effect seems to have been intended at its conception. But then it is of course a well-known phenomenon that straight-forward and apparently unsophisticated representations of popular culture may tell us more about the stuff a civilisation is actually made of than more high-brow attempts in literature, in the arts, or in philosophy.

To say that *Purgatory* is a Western may look like giving the game away. After all, the genre has been milked for every conceivable plot including, in later years, every conceivable variation on well-tried plots in order to achieve yet another surprising twist and yet another innovation. In fact, this may be regarded as one of the reasons why the genre has not been particu-

larly fertile of late; although it could be argued with equal justification that the all too naive hero worship at the heart of the genre has also contributed to its demise. Not that hero worship as such had lost its prominent position in American popular culture, of course; but these days, the central characters tend to be so much more brutal and cynical than, say, thirty years ago that they can hardly be imagined in a classic Western. This means, in turn, that writing and producing a Western today meets with considerable difficulties. Not only must the conventions of the genre be adapted to contemporary tastes; we also expect variation, as ever in popular culture, a new spin on an old tale. Quite obviously, such considerations inspired the remarkable twists that characterise the plot of *Purgatory*.

The film starts conventionally enough. Fleeing a posse, a band of outlaws led by a character called Blackjack Britton ride into a small, quiet town called Refuge. The intruders are welcomed warmly and are offered food and accommodation, but at the same time warned not to swear. Refuge appears to be an exceptionally peaceful and civilised place as none of the residents, not even the sheriff, carry any weapons; they all go about their affairs in a strangely sober and determined manner. Gradually, the spectator comes to realise two things: First, that the major characters resemble famous figures out of Western lore, although they appear under different names. Sheriff Forrest, for example, can be identified as Wild Bill Hickok; others carry the features of Doc Holliday, Billy the Kid, or Jesse James.¹ Second, Refuge turns out not to be quite of this world. Indeed, it is a place where the legendary gunfighters – together with the rest of the population – have to spend a ten-year period of trial and purification. Above all, they strictly have to abstain from any form of violence. Those who cannot keep their temper are immediately summoned by an old native American who takes them away on his mule and tosses them into a nearby canyon filled with – exactly – infernal fire.

For the newly arrived outlaws, the town presents itself as an easy prey. The inhabitants have no choice but to bear their insults and humiliations. Inevitably, the situation escalates. Things come to a head when an innocent

¹ cf. “Purgatory (1999 TV),” *IMDb Internet Movie Database* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0158131>, Internet Movie Database Inc.), and “Purgatory (film),” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatory_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatory_(film))).

young maiden attracts the attention of one of the bandits. Eventually, the gunfighters of Refuge have to make a difficult decision: whether to turn their backs on the town and thus earn themselves salvation, or to rid the place of its invaders, at the peril of eternal damnation. This being a Western, they quite predictably opt for the latter. The result is a beautifully choreographed showdown. Needless to stress which side carries the day.

At this point, a viewer might get the impression that the plot could have been designed to convey a religious message or even, more accurately, an anti-religious message. Purgatory, after all, is a theological concept; to be more precise, it forms an integral part of the beliefs Christians hold with regards to the afterlife: final judgement, reward or punishment – in short, their eschatology. This in turn implies that in purgatory, rules of *this* world hardly apply, and certainly not those contingencies that arise out of the free will of human beings. Strictly speaking, there are no ‘human beings’ in purgatory, only souls; and after the final judgement on doomsday, there is no more room for deliberate decisions, just as there is no more opportunity for sinning. All decisions have been made; the sentence has been passed, and for all that we are told by theologians, it will be final; no leave to appeal granted, not the slightest prospect of a reversal.

In deciding to take up the fight, the gunfighters thus consciously break rules that can only have come from God himself. In doing so, one could infer, they revolt against God, but not out of viciousness or hubris, but precisely because they want to act morally. In their moral code, one of the most fundamental rules states that you have to help people in need, and that the weak and defenceless have to be protected. Faced with a conflict between this imperative and a contradicting divine order, the heroes opt for the *human* choice, as opposed to the theological one, as it were. In this sense their attitude could indeed be called ‘humanist’, and to find it propagated in a run-of-the-mill Western would certainly be quite astonishing. True, defiance of divine law for the sake of a better world here and now is a theme that goes back as far as the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus. In a way, it can be seen as one of the concepts that triggered the emancipation from religious dogma that took place, first, in ancient Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE and then again in Renaissance Europe from circa 1500 onwards, eventually spawning the ideas and, even more consequential, the analytical approach of the Enlightenment. Not for nothing has a ‘Prome-

thean' element been identified in the philosophy of Karl Marx.² In the 20th century the concept was taken up, among others, by the French writer Albert Camus, most notably perhaps in his essay *L'homme révolté* (1951). In the last analysis, however, the Promethean revolt must of necessity turn against the idea of a Supreme Being, and certainly of God in the Christian sense. If we cease to believe that God's commandments are, by their very nature, indisputably good; if we feel impelled, therefore, to reserve judgement as to whether these commandments are to be obeyed until we can base our decision on the distinct circumstances of a given situation – if all this applies, we cannot honestly hold on to our belief in God, at least not in the way the Christian faith asks us to see Him: omniscient, omnipotent, and benign. In this sense, any morally motivated revolt against a divine commandment would constitute the first step on the road to atheism, if not an outright confession of atheism in itself.

It is hard to believe that an average Western out of commercial US American production should venture into such hazardous waters. Not surprisingly, the religious outlook prevails in the end. The desperate gun-fighters await their fate by the side of the road outside the town, accompanied by the sympathetic inhabitants of Refuge. But it is not the native American with his mule that comes to meet them; rather, it is a beautiful stagecoach that comes careering down the highway and that they are invited to board, the viewer being left in no doubt whatsoever as to the meaning intended. Although our heroes have *ostensibly* broken God's law, we have to conclude, they have still executed His will in this special case; and thus, not only are they redeemed, but God's order is restored in the end or rather, to be accurate, it turns out that it has never been disturbed in the first place – no need for any religious controversy, no need for conservative Christian groups to start campaigning.

This leaves us with a second, and more conventional motif. It has to do with moral questions, in particular the moral justification of guns. On the face of it one would, of course, expect a Western to contain a fair amount of gun powder, fist fighting and related spectacles; and one would certainly not demand any second thoughts about the morality of all this. Clean fun,

² Leszek Kolakowski, 'Three Motifs in Marxism', *Main Currents of Marxism, Vol. 1: The Founding Fathers* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press Paperback, 1981), pp. 408–416.

one might say; and it is striking indeed how ‘clean’ the violence in Western films is normally depicted – highly stylised, even ritualised, almost like Chinese opera, one is tempted to say. The victims of gun fights can be seen tumbling down or over in the most picturesque ways, bearing witness to a highly developed art form reminiscent, in a way, of the sophistication of ballet dancing; whereas the audience is never allowed to catch a realistic glimpse of open wounds, blood (unless in homeopathic doses), shattered skulls, or abdomen gashed. In real life, bullets would doubtlessly have caused exactly such carnage which, together with at best rudimentary medical treatment, must have made gun fights a gruesome affair.

The sanitised depiction on the screen helps to reinforce an assumption underlying the genre of the Western in general: that violence is virtually ubiquitous and as such, a more or less natural occurrence. This implies that it is morally neutral. The good and the bad (not to speak of the ugly) all use their guns and their fists in the same matter-of-fact way. The question is not whether this is justified; the question is only, who’s winning. In the convention of the Western, these are invariably the ‘goodies’. This in turn presupposes that they are the better fighters.

As we have said, these observations apply to the majority of mainstream samples of the genre, and it is just what the audience expects. Therefore it comes as a surprise to discover that even in films from the classic era of the Western, there is a recurrent motif which gives this reasoning an unexpected twist. We are talking about the type of plot featuring a man who, for whatever reason, has vowed to abstain from violence or at any rate from using a gun; and yet, in the end he is forced to do just that, due to inescapable circumstances. Unfortunately, I have to confess at this point that I find it hard to quote examples for this sub-genre. The reason is that I am not such a keen film pundit. In contrast to my reading experience, I cannot automatically remember the titles and the directors of films that have impressed me. To be sure, I have seen most of the great Western films at some time in my life, but this happened in a rather casual manner – off-hand, one might almost say. As a part-time freelance writer I lack the resources and above all the time to start an elaborate search for exactly those films that I have in mind. In this respect I suppose I owe an apology to the reader. One film that I was able to identify with the help of the web is *The Man That Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), but sadly I cannot remember it vividly although I

must have seen it at one stage. Another film that has impressed me is *The Big Country* (1958) starring Gregory Peck and Charlton Heston. The former plays a sea captain who comes from the east coast and refuses to play according to the rules of the West. In particular, he declines to join in the archaic bragging, duelling and feuding that are the norm in the 'big country'. On the other hand, I can remember a film that highlights the theme we are talking about quite graphically, but whose title I cannot recollect. It features a reformed gun fighter who, disgusted by his former career, has decided to mend his ways and become a preacher. Needless to say, he does not carry a gun and abhors violence altogether. He finds himself, however, in a Western town which is being terrorised, either by bandits or by that other stock figure, the cattle farmer at war with poor sheep rearing settlers. In any case, the plot being what it is, the converted hero eventually finds himself in such a tight corner that he is practically forced to take up his gun once more. The dilemma arises out of moral considerations, it ought to be stressed; it is a matter of conscience. His task completed, he leaves the town.

It is noteworthy that in all these instances, the main characters are by no means depicted as cowards. Even if they appear to be 'soft', this is only at first glance, or in the eyes of unsophisticated ruffians. Gradually, the viewer is brought to admire their humility, their self-discipline and above all, their inner strength. Indeed, these heroes are great individualists in the sense that they take a stand against the generally accepted norm. From a moral point of view, there is no doubt left that 'turning the other cheek' is an admirable stance, although it demands almost superhuman self-denial. In the same vein, the dilemma these characters find themselves in can only be understood in moral terms as the plot is quite elaborately developed in such a way that the only acceptable option they are left with is to resort to the gun and consequently, to hurting and killing human beings. Adhering to their principles, it is insinuated, would betray even more fundamental moral rules, not least the chivalric code of helping the weak and defenceless, especially if they happen to be lovely young maidens. Strictly speaking, the conclusion drawn in these films only holds true for the rather special situation outlined there; but we may assume with some confidence that in the end, the audience is left with the impression of having learned a fundamental lesson of general validity: 'Sometimes you've got to fight to be a man.'

But is this really the whole answer? After all, this message is driven home by any other Western as well, not to speak of scores and scores of action and science-fiction films. Why have producers found it necessary – or profitable – to probe deeper into such moral questions? Why has there always been the desire to base the conventions of the Western, and especially its inherent violence, on sounder foundations? The fact that the motif under discussion has surfaced repeatedly seems to point to a certain self-consciousness at the heart of the ‘you’ve got to fight’ philosophy, to certain reservations at the back of many a mind. It is almost as if the type embodied by and identified with, say, John Wayne had realised somewhere deep down that notwithstanding all his bullish confidence and self-assertiveness, his case is all but certain. Yes, it may be true indeed that *sometimes* you have to fight – but when? In what circumstances? Under what conditions?

In general, I think it can fairly be said that few people will have qualms about accepting the necessity of resorting to violence in certain, well specified cases. Among these cases, self-defence will doubtlessly be the most prominent one; but defending others will also be widely accepted. Strictly abstaining from any violence in such circumstances would require a saintly effort and no matter how people may admire such a stance, at any rate in theory, most of them will be honest enough to concede that they themselves would not be able or willing to submit to a series of grave offences humbly. On a collective level, things may be viewed more sceptically. Again, the justification of national self-defence is only disputed by comparatively few; but general acceptance usually carries the rider that the threat be real and serious, not just a pretext as it has been all too often in the past. The need of coming to the aid of other nations or ethnic groups is treated with even more suspicion; but once more, we may assume that it is not really opposed on principle. The only ones who might object are pacifists. It has to be said, however, that their objections are often directed against a given policy rather than against an abstract rule. The turbulent opposition against American involvement in Vietnam, it may be remembered, drew its vigour primarily from the conviction that it was wrong for the United States to intervene in Indochina by force. As far as I can remember, there was never any suggestion that the Vietcong or the soldiers in the armed forces of the Republic of North Vietnam should lay down their arms true to pacifist principles. Accordingly, hostility against the US forces ceased fairly quickly

once they had been disentangled from the Vietnamese quagmire (and, cynics might add, once the draft had been abandoned). Pacifism pure and simple is a creed that is encountered very rarely indeed; and even then it often turns out that it has never been put to the test. If it is, it can fade surprisingly fast. This was demonstrated by the German Green Party in the late 1990s when they had entered government as junior partners of the Social Democrats. Their figure head, Joschka Fischer, served as Foreign Secretary. Among the international crises he was confronted with was the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo embarked upon by the Serb state. Should the Federal Republic of Germany, for the first time in its history since 1955 and despite the memories of World War II, send troops abroad to prevent mass deportation and possibly even genocide? The Green Party, hitherto one of the most militant pacifist groupings (if the apparent contradiction is excused), were facing a painful dilemma. In the end, and after considerable soul-searching, they finally decided that yes, they would have to accept the moral case for using armed forces, not just in strict self-defence, but even if it is a matter of coming to the rescue of others.

The point I am trying to make is this: If it were true that the underlying principles of a Western like *Purgatory* were really just those of self-defence and the help of others, it would hardly be necessary nor, for that matter, even good business to ram home the argument yet again. If *Purgatory* really wanted to prove that ‘sometimes you’ve got to fight’, it would preach to the converted. As we have seen, pacifism never really posed a serious threat. Neither was the era of the classic Western in the 1950s and early 1960s characterised by manifest pacifist tendencies, nor was there any observable revival in the 1990s when *Purgatory* was shot. On the contrary, both these periods can be said to have been predominantly conservative and hence patriotic in a strictly conventional sense. If there ever was a pacifist threat in the US, it came in the late 1960s and early 1970s, accompanying the Vietnam War. Significantly, this was also the time when the classic Western with its distinctive features of a morality play gave way to the ‘Spaghetti Western’ which shed the last pretence of morality in favour of an uninhibited, although aesthetically refined, celebration of violence. The very fact, I would like to argue, that a film like *Purgatory* has to rely on such an intricate plot simply to arrive, near the end, at the customary showdown, points to a

certain uneasiness on the part of those who otherwise pretend to speak for mainstream America, for the 'silent majority'.

In order to understand this hidden agenda, as it were, it may help to have a second look at the way the plot in *Purgatory* is constructed. The basic arrangement could be said to rely on three layers on top of each other. The bottom one comprises the inhabitants of the Western town of Refuge. They are depicted as completely ordinary people: hard-working, polite, pious, and peaceful. This is exactly why they are utterly helpless when the bandits intrude. Quite obviously, these represent the second layer. At this stage, the film emphasises once more the view that might comes before right. The idyllic town of Refuge falls victim to anarchic violence without any trace of resistance. (In *Purgatory*, it may be noted, the sheriff himself has to refrain from violence according to the nature of the place; in other films of this kind, he is shown as being feeble or corrupt – or both.) The predicament of the good citizens is exacerbated by their being humiliated, quite frequently even in front of their loved ones. There is no knowing how far the situation may yet deteriorate. In the tradition of the Western, this is the point where the star has to make his appearance (the third layer): enter John Wayne. In *Purgatory*, by contrast, the heroes are there from the very beginning and so the turning point comes when they decide to take up their guns, despite the regime they are under. Nevertheless, the denouement is achieved in exactly the same way: by means of superior fighting skills.

Each of the layers can also be understood as carrying a moral message. To begin with, the ordinary life of ordinary people is clearly depicted as 'good', although perhaps somewhat dull. There is no doubt left whatsoever that these are decent people, reliable and steadfast. The problem is just that they are thoroughly defenceless against any violent aggression. According to the conventions of the genre, such occurrences are simply inevitable. In the face of the threat, the 'good' citizens can only try not to get involved, hiding in their houses or, if they have to venture outside, timidly sneaking along the sidewalk. As a consequence, they are equally incapable of helping any of their neighbours who are hapless enough to attract the attention of the bandits scourging the town. The audience is left in no doubt how to judge such behaviour. It is not just cowardly, a deadly sin in itself by the standards of a Western; but saving one's skin, we learn, also leads to sacrificing others – not willingly to be sure, but by necessity. In this sense, a serious flaw is

exposed in the moral fabric of the ‘good’ citizens. More precisely, we have to conclude that although they may *be* ‘good’, they sadly lack the ability to *do* good, most conspicuously so in extraordinary circumstances. It takes a gun-toting hero to put things right.

Such a hero, on the other hand, does by no means have to be totally ‘good’ in order to play his customary role; on the contrary, showing him as a man of rather dubious past and acting out of mixed motives, constitutes another well-tried tradition of the genre, often used to add a trace of complexity to an art form that otherwise relies on highly predictable characters and plots. In addition, it could be said that the shady past is almost a prerequisite for our hero as he has to prove himself superior in the face of formidable enemies. This means that somehow, he must have acquired not just his extraordinary skills, but also an adequate stock of experience. How could he have done so, one is tempted to ask, if he had always and unequivocally been on the side of the law? As it happens, this takes the moral argument yet another step further. The gun, we learn, may be an instrument of evil, to be sure, as amply demonstrated by what we have called the second layer; but overcoming evil takes a gun as well. This may sound like a rather worn out truism; in the Western, however, the argument is pursued with slightly more consequence than usual. It is not just that sometimes, and unfortunately, the use of violence cannot be avoided; rather, violence, and in particular the gun, are also seen as necessary agents for progress: they, and *only* they, promote a state of things that could by any stretch of the imagination be called ‘civilized’. But using a gun quite obviously demands a lot of training, and using it competently will also entail a lot of experience. ‘Being good’ as such, we have to conclude, just is not enough. If you want to achieve anything ‘good’, you must have put yourself in a position of being able to do so in the first place.

In my opinion, this is exactly the message that films like *Purgatory* are intended to get across. As we have seen, the necessity of resorting to violence in certain, rather special circumstances is widely accepted and thus hardly needs driving home yet another time. But apparently this is not quite enough. What has to be demonstrated, again and again, seems to be that contrary to popular belief – and, we may assume, moral instinct – violence actually is ‘good’, a moral category. To put oneself in a position where one is able to fight, most notably of course by buying a gun, has to be seen as a

moral act. It is not just to be accepted, although with great reservations, as something that is unavoidable, even if regrettable; quite the contrary, it should be understood as something to be actively pursued, and to be admired: ‘You wanna be good, son? You get a gun.’

At this point, one begins to wonder if the National Rifle Association may have had a hand in the production of the film. Such dealings, it is reported, are all but extraordinary in the practice of Hollywood, with the Pentagon handing out lavish sums of money to productions that show the armed forces in a favourable light. The suspicion may even be aggravated by another observation worth mentioning here. It concerns an intriguing twist in the plot of *Purgatory* – one is even tempted to say, a gaffe. It comes early in the story when the gang of bandits appear in the town of Refuge. On close inspection, this turn of events could raise further theological questions. As Refuge represents nothing less than purgatory for deceased gun fighters, we have to assume that it has been set up by divine will. If so, it would be unthinkable for human beings to stumble onto a scene which, by definition, is of the other world. We have to remember that according to the Christian tradition, God is held to be both omniscient and omnipotent – there is nothing that can just happen to him, no coincidence and no unforeseen accidents. The only viable explanation would be that the intrusion from the real world has been preconceived from the outset, possibly as the ultimate trial for the gun fighters’ souls. However, there is not the slightest hint in the film that any such concept might have been intended. Without being deprecatory we can fairly assume that it would have been beyond the scope of an ordinary production such as this. The intrusion of the real-world bandits, we have to conclude, is meant to be taken at face value, without any theological overtones. In this, the plot once more follows well-established conventions.

One of the most fundamental assumptions underlying films such as *Purgatory* is not just that violence is totally unavoidable – which may be true up to a point – but that it can never, under no conceivable circumstances, be contained by means of collective action. It is always, as a matter of fact, stronger than any communal effort, not to mention any institutions that may have been put into place in order to protect the average man and woman. Again, that stock figure of Western film convention comes to mind, namely the sheriff that is either too feeble or too corrupt, or both, to

provide effective protection. Not surprisingly, the mere option of acting collectively is hardly ever considered, and if so, hardly seriously. In the tradition of the Western, it could be said, it is not only understood that violence will inevitably intrude into a peaceful community – even if this asks for a considerable suspension of belief as in *Purgatory* – but also that the community will always fall easy prey to any aggressor, reacting very much like the proverbial rabbit under the snake’s debilitating stare.

It is worth bearing in mind that this does not coincide in the least with what most viewers will have experienced in their lives. Even in the United States, we may assume, it is still the norm that public institutions are able to contain acts of violent aggression and to restore peace and security for the general public, although such acts undoubtedly occur more frequently than in many European countries. But then of course it would be no more than stating the obvious to stress the fact that the Western is set in completely unfamiliar locations, namely the ‘West’. The question is only *why* this may be so – why such conventions concerning settings and plots, although fairly improbable, should be repeated over and over again, and why they do not seem to lose their appeal to the viewing public. The answer, we may surmise, will lead us to what is called the ‘frontier experience’ or, to be more precise, to what the film industry chooses to convey as this experience. As there is general agreement on the fact that the frontier has played a significant part in the development of American attitudes, we are also dealing with these: values, outlooks, and expectations widely accepted and shared in American society.

Needless to say, the ‘frontier’ as represented in Western films is an artifice. The real frontier had a long and varied history, constantly moving and thus taking on different regional appearances. The experience resulting from a life at the frontier must therefore have been much more complex than the few standard constellations encountered in Western films would suggest. This is even true if we only take literary representations for a comparison. It is quite interesting to notice, for example, that James Fenimore Cooper’s tales, although undoubtedly dealing with the ‘frontier experience’, by no means fit into the pattern of the Western film. A similar filter of perception has prevented the ‘mountain man’ from being used as a role model on the screen, notwithstanding the fact that he could be regarded as an archetypal frontiersman with at least as much justification as the legen-

dary cowboy. After all, these mountain men embodied nothing less than the vanguard of the white man's civilisation on its march across the American continent. No doubt, the reasons for this highly selective view of the film industry and, consequently, the rigidly stylised art form of the Western have to be traced back to the 'message' that it is designed to convey – a morality play, as we have said, as much as anything else.

There is nothing new in such observations, to be sure. Considering a film like *Purgatory*, however, we are bound to ask the question why there should be such an obsession with such a limited segment of what must have been the 'frontier experience'. Why is it that the convention has been based on certain segments to the exclusion of certain others, and what has been found to be so suitable in the ones that have been chosen? Part of the answer may lie in the fact that the frontier painted in Western films represents a state of transition. What we are invited to witness is, among other things, the perpetually repeated process of establishing the rule of law, of a 'normal', more or less civilised state of affairs which will allow ordinary citizens to carry on their decent (and, according to the Western, rather dull) lives. But this is only hinted at. It is an iron law of the Western tradition that the climatic showdown comes at the very end of the story; after that, we may only see the hero parting from the people he has just saved, sometimes with a hint of regret, but 'moving on' all the same.

This involves two rather implausible assumptions. To begin with, we are asked to believe that although the 'good' ordinary people of the frontier town in question had enough stamina to move out into the wild, settle there, and eventually even build a town, they suddenly lack the courage and the resources to defend themselves. It begs the question how they could have got to where they are in the first place, and how they could have survived long enough for the gun-toting hero to come to their rescue.

Secondly, it is insinuated that after the hero's intervention, everything will be roses. Again, the suspension of disbelief this requires is quite substantial, given the fact that the audience has been impressed by the dangerous and violent nature of the frontier throughout the previous ninety minutes or so. If the community of settlers really were so helpless as the plot suggests, certainly the ephemeral intervention by a roaming gun fighter could hardly make a lasting difference. The moment our solitary hero rides out of town, we have to conclude, the whole story will start all over again. If

the foe that has just been overcome is an unscrupulous rancher with his small army of cowboys, he will easily be able to build up his forces again and continue the campaign. If he has died in the final shootout, any one of his family could step into his place. Even if that had been ruled out somehow, there must be other ranchers around with the same ambitions and resources. If, on the other hand, evil is represented by a gang of bandits, we simply have to take it for granted that the next bunch are already on their way, the frontier being what we are asked to believe it is.

Granted that the 'frontier' was characterised, among other things, by the gradual establishment of what we choose to call 'civilisation', it is remarkable indeed how the Western never seems to pursue the story to its logical conclusion. True, it is well-known that a deep-seated suspicion of life in civilised society forms another rigid convention of the genre. Not that the undeniable progress of civilisation (from a historical point of view, that is) were altogether ignored; and not that its desirability, and in a way even its moral superiority were denied; but the spectator is left in no doubt whatsoever that such a civilized state is unbearably dull, not meriting any interest whatsoever. The moment we have reached its threshold, the credits start to roll.

Reasons for this strangely selective perception are not hard to find. For one thing, the Western tradition has had to stick to its limited scope because in no other way could the moral of the gun as detailed earlier be put forward with equal credibility. This moral, in turn, rests firmly on the creed of individualism, as personified by our gunslinging hero. Again, it takes a completely fictitious setting for such heroes to make a real difference. This is not just true of Westerns, of course, but of about ninety per cent of US American film productions in general – action films, sci-fi, whatever. No doubt the idea that an 'evil empire' out there in space (or in some dystopian future here on earth) can be overthrown by one single American hero – still carrying a gun, it may be remembered, although now worked by some kind of science-fiction wizardry –, or at best by a handful of such heroes, is asking for even more of our credulity than the traditional Western. The underlying problem, it seems to me, is that 'civilisation' – any civilisation – represents a system in which people live together according to certain fixed and thus predictable rules. Naturally, there will always be breaches of these rules, as there will always be cases of crime, even violent crime; but a stable

society is able to cope with such deviations, and most significantly, it is able to do so without having to wait for the emergence of an outstanding, almost superhuman hero. Any ordinary law-enforcing officer will do. In the same vein, ordinary people most definitely are *not* asked to take up a gun in order to defend themselves or others; in any properly functioning society this is done for them. Indeed, it is commonly accepted that acquiring and then jealously guarding its monopoly on the use of force is a distinguishing feature of any modern 'civilised' state. As a huge system, it cannot allow itself to be dependent on any exceptional skills or on exceptional courage in its officials; rather, it has to be designed in such a way that any average human being can fulfil his or her assigned duties satisfactorily and reliably. Not surprisingly, the values cherished in the Western tradition are anything but democratic or egalitarian, contrary to popular belief; rather, they are openly elitist and aristocratic, as demonstrated by the sinister, solitary gun-fighter. In short, we have to come to the conclusion that any 'civilised' society turns out to be a natural enemy of individualism – at any rate of the kind celebrated in popular American films.

Historically speaking, the 'frontier experience' may have culminated in the establishment of more or less civilised communities; but this, by its very nature, brought the frontier to an end. It moved on, as long as there was any open space left. What it left behind, was 'civilisation', or at least its rudimentary beginnings. This sequence is illustrated, for example, in Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, particularly in *The Pioneers*. It also features in many of Mark Twain's works, set as they are in what could be called the wake of the frontier, most notably the fictitious St. Petersburg of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. In *Roughing It*, the same author makes it abundantly clear that any 'civilised' state, coarse as it may be, is preferable to the violent anarchy preceding it.

Western films never carry their plots that far. They simply do not care for the end product. They tell stories, no doubt, but they fail to pursue them to the end. They give the impression of being stuck, not just in highly artificial settings, both historically and geographically, but also in a narrative that never comes to any conclusion. Maybe this is why the story can be – or even has to be – retold over and over again, in a seemingly endless run of the production line. At the same time, the popularity of such productions hardly seems to wane. Audiences, we have to concede, apparently love the

endless retelling of the unfinished story just as much as the producers (and, needless to say, the shareholders). One cannot help but wonder why this may be so, and what consequences it could have. Trying to find suitable answers, however, we will have to watch our step carefully. It is all too easy to blur the line between fiction and reality or, in our case, between pieces of art on the one hand, and works of history or sociology on the other. Even if certain views are disseminated by products of popular culture, and even if this is done regularly, it does not follow automatically that people actually share them. Conversely, just because they pay to see Hollywood films, it would be precipitate to conclude that these films express exactly what they want to hear, and nothing else.

All the same, one may be forgiven for suspecting that over the years, such cultural predilections could have engendered an ambiguous attitude towards 'civilisation' in real life. Huck Finn, in his time, could 'opt out for the territories'; no such exit route is open today. Today's life is predominantly urban: enormous metropolitan agglomerations of masses living in extremely dense spaces, huddled together in high-rise blocks of flats or at best in sprawling suburban estates. This is not just true of Americans, of course, or of the industrialised world. In the 21st century, it is true for a growing number of people all over the world, and the trend continues. In 2008, it has been claimed, more than half of all humanity will be living in conurbations, rather than in the country, for the first time ever.³ One wonders whether a culture which finds it notoriously hard to appreciate the evolution from anarchic wilderness to a stable society will be well suited for such a world. After all, the United States can hardly be said to present a wholly admirable picture as it is. For example, the 'home of the free' can claim the dubious honour of being the country with the biggest prison population in the world, and it is so by a considerable margin.⁴ This, we are tempted to conclude, may exactly be the kind of society you will get if you do not really believe in the merits of 'civilisation'.

³ UNFPA, *State of World Population 2007: Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth* (N.p: UNFPA, 2007).

⁴ Roy Walmsley, *World Prison Population List, Fourth Edition* (London: Home Office, 2003).