5.1 Introduction

This chapter traces a trajectory within a genre, the Western, whose doubling is almost invariably implicit, to the point at which explicit doubling dawns – arguably, in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962). Subsequently, the ‘final frontier’ of American consciousness moves to outer space, from legends with a real-world origin to an unabashedly fantastic base possibly chosen to preserve them from the real-world disconfirmation and critique the Western suffered in the 1960s. As the prototypical American story migrates from Monument Valley to the cosmos, it recovers the links to a 3-D aesthetic originally implicit in the Western, as the shot fired out of the screen in The Great Train Robbery (1903) violently connected screen-space with that of the auditorium; and so in Gravity (2013) the auditorium itself is populated in part by fragments of space-junk. Each genre, of course, is a story of impressive distances and their traversal, but the supplanting of the Western by science fiction may have occurred to render possible the explicit invocation of 3-D, whose glasses are a primitive form of the technology it privileges, rendering audiences themselves extensions of the film-machine. Although the appearance in 2011 of a Western entitled Cowboys and Aliens marked the genres’ unlikely and somewhat outré hybridization, it merely drew conclusions from the compatibility of the Western and science fiction demonstrated by Star Wars (1977); from those genres’ shared commitment to the idea of frontiers (one immune to closure); and perhaps even from the presence
of Harrison Ford. After all, the Western edge of the known world saw Dante’s Ulysses take his final voyage to destruction, as if falling away from a medieval space station earth. Moreover, science fiction’s ostentatiously simulated command of the heights of technology may make it as much the postmodern generic face of American cinema as the Western was in the modernity of ‘the American century’. Like the story of Ulysses, both genres locate themselves at the dangerous edge of things, as the challenges and temptations of the unknown threaten a moral compass originating elsewhere, and may cause the self to fissure. The cowboy may become alien to himself. Such a split may then be projected onto the new environment’s ‘natives’, whose reality’s persistence beneath the projection causes their reading as ‘double’ in the sense of duplicitous. In the Western, the colonist’s technological superiority prompts suspicions that any counter-attacks may be indirect, concealment being favoured by distance from self-proclaimed civilization, in the desert central both to the Western and science fiction’s UFO-landings: thus the original Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) unfolds well away from major US cities. In SF, meanwhile, cryptically reacting to Soviet rivalry and to an Otherness (real-otherworld rather than real-world…) sublimely resistant to appropriation, the fear is more often one of the illusoriness of the strength of vaunted technology.

In The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, the fears include one of self-traduction of national identity, as Liberty is the name of the villain. Ford’s late film may be unusual in the explicitness with which it expounds double identity, but it haunts the other films considered here, a sense of American exceptionalism prompting subconscious suspicion that a country of immigrants might essentially be one of outcasts, justifiably fearful of the scapegoating discussed at the end of this chapter. Ulysses may be less Joyce’s Leopold Bloom than Dante’s Westerner courting death, or at least disappearance beyond the brink of his first-known world.

5.2 The Revenger’s tragedy: doubling and the Western

In the Western, as in mainstream American cinema in general, doubling is usually at most implicit, rarely explicit. As such pioneering analyses of the Western as those of Peter Wollen (1969) and Will Wright (1975) suggested long ago, the binary oppositions of the