Andreas J. Haller

A Typological Construction of the Liminal Outlaw Hero

Review: Rebecca A. Umland. Outlaw Heroes as Liminal Figures of Film and Television. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2016.

In her book *Outlaw Heroes as Liminal Figures of Film and Television*, published in 2016, Rebecca A. Umland traces the fascination with the 'true knight' as a liminal outlaw hero from the late medieval epic *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Thomas Malory through 19th century medievalism to Hollywood cinema, TV shows and modern action films. Because "certain features of this figure persist" (33) and "certain conceptions of knighthood were useful for addressing the conflict between community and the individual, between codified law and that of the solitary figure who remains outside of it" (33), the figure of the liminal outlaw hero was adapted to audiovisual narrations such as *Casablanca*, *Shane*, the Western TV series *The Lone Ranger* and *Have Gun – Will Travel* and movie franchises like *Dirty Harry*, *Death Wish*, *Rambo* and the Batman *Dark Knight* trilogy. Because the liminal outlaw hero retains "a firm hold over the popular imagination" (21) – "despite very pronounced changes in culture and taste" (29) – the central question for Umland is: "how can we explain the continuation of these traits of the true knight from Malory's text to classic Hollywood and the modern cinema?" (21).

According to Umland, Malory's figure of Lancelot "becomes the model of the liminal outlaw hero when he answers a higher moral imperative" (17). Lancelot rejects the social order of loyalty and courtly codes, which enables him to serve the ideal of justice against the social restraints of mere lawfulness. He is the 'true knight' who "can resolve the conflict between his own innate sense of honor, the legal obligations imposed by Arthur's worshipful code, and Gawain's blind adherence to the heroic code of loyalty" (18). To resolve contradictory social principles is the main function of liminal outlaw heroes in society. This kind of hero derives from the 'true knight' rather than from the 'good outlaw' of the Robin Hood-type, because to fulfill their social function, they must "be able to join the common effort of the collective group when called upon to do so, something that a figure who transgressed the law cannot do." (20). The outlaw heroes in this sense must be understood as liminal and not as transgressive, because they have not crossed the line into full lawlessness, but remain in between the community of the law and their individual conscience of justice. When the law proves to be ineffective, corrupted or absent, they can restore justice outside legal constraints and thus defend the values of community with means that are not sanctioned by it – usually extra-legal violence. Although they are never fully excluded, they can never be an integral part of the social order they serve. The heroes must "remain *errant*, solitary figures, free of entanglements that might prevent them from their ardent pursuit of a higher ideal" (60, emphasis in original), including social and domestic bonds.

The core of Umland's study is the exploration of the reiteration of the typology of the liminal outlaw hero in popular culture from the 1940s to the present day. In *Casablanca* (1942), the hero Rick Blaine helps the anti-fascist resistance fighter Victor Laszlo to escape from the Nazis and sacrifices his love for Laszlo's wife, Ilsa. Rick is an American expatriate who runs a café in Morocco. Here, the law is corrupted by the French Vichy regime; thus Rick follows his own conscience and sense of justice by supporting a greater cause instead of pursuing his own happiness. In *Shane* (1953), the titular hero helps homesteaders on the Western frontier in Wyoming against the powerful rancher Ryker. Due to the absence of effective law enforcement, the rancher and his hired gunmen can harass little farmers to drive them off their land without repercussions. Following his conscience, Shane defends the community, restores true justice, and vanishes, leaving behind a farmer's wife he fell in love with. *The Lone Ranger* (1949–1957) also establishes justice on the Western frontier when the law is absent, ineffective or corrupt; thus he defends the community but stays free of domestic bonds. Similarly, the gun-for-hire Paladin in the TV show *Have Gun – Will Travel* (1957–1963) follows his personal code to right the wrongs and help those who cannot help themselves but maintains his solitary existence. As the Western genre declined, the figure of the

92

liminal outlaw hero became an urban character in the *Dirty Harry* (1971–1988) and *Death Wish* (1974–1994) franchises. The films allow the authors to address contemporary social problems in the city like urban violence, organized crime, drug abuse, racism, political terrorism and the inefficiency of modern legal institutions which are concerned with due process and the civil rights of delinquents. While *Dirty Harry* gives the audience a rendition of poetic justice and *Death Wish* imagines a revenge fantasy, both franchises use the figure of the liminal outlaw hero to execute justice against the ineffective procedures of the legal system. The problem gets a slightly different twist in the modern action film, where highly trained warriors like Rambo and Batman have to mediate between an individual ethos and the communal good. Umland describes how the warrior fury of the liminal outlaw hero has to be kept in check by a spiritual quest in the *Rambo* franchise (1982–2008) and the *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005–2012). While the warrior acts according to his own conscience and his belief in justice to fulfill his social function, his violence also threatens the social cohesion. Thus, the liminal outlaw hero, although ready to act on behalf of the community, must remain isolated from it. The hero's solitude is not only needed to pursue justice unencumbered by social bonds, but also to protect the community against the transgressive aspects of the hero's actions.

Even if liminal outlaw heroes cannot be integrated into society – unless they cease to play this role – Umland points out, that society needs them to mediate between conflicting principles. The liminal outlaw hero is the symbolic expression of this need and fulfills that social role, even if this mediation is only imaginary. That the fictive liminal outlaw hero is a way to cope with social contradictions may hold true for all examples from Lancelot to Batman. Although the figures "would seem to have little in common […] they share a few essential features that place them together in a long-standing tradition of a particular typology of hero" (60). All figures bear markers of knighthood, which is most obvious in Paladin's name[1] and the application of a silver chess knight at his holster. They fight for true justice and defend the community from which they must remain separated. They reconcile the contradictions of community and the individual, as well as of law and justice by putting themselves outside of law and community. The heroes' "individual ethical code that transcends community and law and invokes the privileges of the elect" (39), but this privilege comes with responsibilities from which the heroes cannot escape, expressed in Shane's creed: "A man has to be what he is" (52). This sense of election determines the

actions and sacrifices of the heroes beyond their control with the power of fate. The election is often symbolized by a special weapon or gimmick that sets the hero apart from others, like Shane's buckskin attire, the Lone Ranger's and Batman's masks, Harry's Magnum Revolver, or Rambo's knife. In all her examples throughout the book, Umland finds these typological features: the pursuit of an ideal of true justice, the defense of the community, or the rescue of an 'official hero', the necessity to remain in solitude free of domestic bonds and social entanglements, and a sense of election (see 52, 80-81, 106, 114, 121, 135, 150, 153-154, 161-162, 179-181, 186, 201-203, 210, 221, 223, 235, 258).

Because a tradition of the liminal outlaw hero can obviously be traced along typological features through the centuries, *Outlaw Heroes* answers the question of continuity of a certain type of hero with the metahistorical appeal of the mythic figure and ideals of knighthood: "the liminal outlaw hero […] represents the typology that audiences find endlessly rewarding to encounter" (41). Even if the social and historical circumstances change, the conflicts between community and individual, between law and justice, need to be resolved again and again, and "the philosophical question remains the same" (106). Umland points to changing social and political circumstances, which provoke alterations in the expression of the liminal outlaw hero. She knows that every work "reflects the struggles and values" of its own time (27), but concludes that the specific story "transcends the boundaries of history and culture" (21), or respectively: "transcends this historical moment" (43). As the individual sense of justice and the communal legal order are at odds frequently throughout history, the differences evident in these examples appear as arbitrary markers of a different context, but not as fundamental historical differences in the problematic relation of community and individual or law and justice. All the different stories at different times address the same problem by using the same established type of hero to resolve them. The historical context remains strangely external to the story. So, according to Umland, a straight line can be drawn from the medieval myth of chivalry to the myth of the American frontier: "The chivalric ideal embodied in the Arthurian legend and exemplified by the fantasy of the Middle Ages and the American West alike, functions as a means to mediate between the real and ideal" (32). This somewhat odd formulation, that the ideal mediates between the ideal and the real, points to the mythic dimension of the liminal outlaw hero – supposedly it is the myth of chivalry that mediates between its ideal and the real through stories. Umland sees clearly the importance of myth for her topic and even relates myth

to typological analysis when she refers to Will Wright's structuralist study of the Western (41-42). And when Batman is discussed as a "mythopoeic hero", Umland observes that a "rich tradition exists as a heterogeneous set of materials from which individual artists can draw to reinvent and reinterpret the story for new generations, while still remaining true to the essential defining features of the character and story" (222). This seems to echo Hans Blumenberg's notion of myth as a story with a fixed narrative core and the potential for variations (Blumenberg 40). Following Blumenberg, we see that what Umland notices for Batman could be applied to myth in general. Umland describes a set of typological features which form a stable narrative core of the myth of the liminal outlaw hero. There is an affinity between typology and myth in regard to a fixed set of features or narrative elements. The mythic core is defined by what is typical. Focusing on the fixed features of the typology, Umland gives a good description of the narrative tradition of the myth of the liminal outlaw hero, but does not explain all the differences and variations. Contrary to Blumenberg, she misses the problem of variations. The unique relevance of what distinguishes the examples gets lost. But these distinctions and variations are decisive. In this journal Ulrich Bröckling pointed to the heuristic value of a typological approach when it comes to the study of heroic figures – as they become heroes as types, not as individuals –, but also warns against its ahistorical and abstract character (Bröckling 12-13). So while it could make sense to describe a mythic tradition typologically, a typology creates a false sense of continuity. This is the trap Umland gets caught in. By subsuming the concrete phenomena under abstract typological categories, she discovers the continuity she created herself. The continuity of a heroic type is an effect of the typology.

In *Outlaw Heroes* it appears like all variations only conceal the persistent type of hero that is basically the same in all examples. Although Umland gives very detailed descriptions of the examples and refers to the specific historical context, she treats the concrete material as something to work through to reveal what is the same. The detailed descriptions serve as a tool to whittle away the differences. When Umland digs for the essence behind the appearance, the typological construction of the liminal outlaw hero as a timeless figure reproduces the myth. The descriptive immediacy of the material and the abstract typological framework are not mediated through a critical perspective but through identification. From the viewpoint of Critical Theory, the identification of a typological category with an object of research must be criticized as a

reification of thought. *Outlaw Heroes* fails to fully explore the breaks and rifts in the narrative tradition and suppresses the 'non-identical' (Adorno). So the way from Lancelot to Batman seems less a transformation of a medieval figure who addresses a specific problem and more of a transplantation of an eternal archetype who deals with an eternal problem. The medieval hero is merely disguised in new garb (54). The book's major insight is the acknowledgement that the myth of the hero exists to fulfill a social function. The necessity of this function is not questioned at all. When Umland points to the political implications, she says, that the myth of the liminal outlaw hero can "be read as either subversive or conservative propaganda" (220), but does not elaborate on the genuine ideological character of myth.[2]

The flaws of the typological approach are a methodological problem. Umland refers to Beverly Kennedy and Robert Ray for her construction of the typology of the liminal outlaw hero, and many other scholars have used similar frameworks when studying heroic figures. The Collaborative Research Center "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms" has problematized the typological construction of the hero in pointing to the historicity of the process of heroization, emphasizing breaks and changes in the semantics of the heroic in regard to different social systems of meaning ("Sinnsysteme") and different historical eras and spaces of experience ("Zeit- und Erfahrungsräume") (von den Hoff u.a. 7). The constellation of law and justice as well as community and individual in the feudal society that Lancelot represents is very different from the post-modern society of the *Dark Knight* Batman. By reducing all examples to one model, *Outlaw Heroes* confuses medieval and modern societies and their ideologies. The failure of the royal sovereign to uphold justice becomes indistinguishable from the corruption and inefficiency of liberal law. The defense of courtly ideals and the feudal hierarchy seems to be the same as the defense of democratic ideals like liberty and equality. The isolation of the hero obfuscates the difference between the monkish solitude of the medieval knight and the liberal individualism of modern society, which shows itself as libertarian vigilantism and social alienation. The question ought to be not only if there is a continuation of a certain type of hero, but how the specific contradictions of law and justice and community and individual are addressed through the heroization of certain figures at a specific time. This requires asking what kind of law clashes with what ideal of true justice, what kind of society does the hero defend and how does this affect the character of the hero's separation from

94

society.[3] Unfortunately, Umland only scratches the surface of these problems, because description and reflection do not come together to illuminate the larger social problems of heroization, heroism and mythic imagination. *Outlaw Heroes* is not really interested in exploring the heroic; rather it takes the notion of the hero for granted.

The level of theoretical reflections does not evolve beyond typological considerations that are repeated from chapter to chapter. But not only is the typological definition rephrased again and again, there are also identical formulations of sentences and even of whole paragraphs (most notably on pages 2 and 18-19). *Outlaw Heroes* misses the chance to offer deeper insights with a more rigorous critical framing. It is symptomatic that the chapter on *Death Wish* discusses vigilantism without even mentioning seminal works of Ray Abrahams and Richard Maxwell Brown, instead referring solely to the etymology of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary and an anonymous introduction to an eyewitness report on a history website (136-137). Also, when Umland mentions vigilantism on page 67, she points out that this topic will be discussed further in Chapter 5, when in fact the reference is to be found in Chapter 6. There are other examples of sloppy editing, like the fact that the director of the Batman movies is first called "Chris Nolan" (216, 239-240) and later fully named as "Christopher Nolan" (247-248). Thus, the book bears all the markers of academic text production under the pressure to publish or perish. Nevertheless, it is well written and gives very good introductions to the production histories, topics, and plots of the examined narrations and may have some use as a reference book that could serve as a basis for the further exploration of the featured examples. With illustrating photographs and a Batman image used as its cover design, *Outlaw Heroes* might appeal to a broad audience beyond academia.

---

1 A paladin is "[a]ny of the twelve peers of Charlemagne's court", or in a broader sense a "knight renowned for heroism and chivalry". (*Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://en.oxford-dictionaries.com/definition/paladin> 20.4.17).

2 The political ambivalence of the hero is also characteristic of other outlaw myths, like Robin Hood, and can be exploited for various ideological purposes (see Haller).

3 Wright, to whom Umland refers, sees the problem that a study of myth should not only reveal the typological structures but must go further to show how the myth, through its structure, communicates with society (Wright 17).

Works cited

Abrahams, Ray. *Vigilant Citizens. Vigilantism and the State*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1998.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialektik*. (Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 6). Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003.

Blumenberg, Hans. *Arbeit am Mythos*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006.

Bröckling, Ulrich. "Negationen des Heroischen – ein typologischer Versuch." *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen. Faszinosum Antiheld.* 3.1 (2015): 9-13. DOI 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros/2015/01/02.

Brown, Richard Maxwell. *Strain of Violence. Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1975.

Haller, Andreas J. "Der Sozialbandit als Mythos des Widerstands. Von Robin Hood zum Partisanenkampf und zurück." *Protest, Empörung Widerstand. Zur Analyse von Auflehnungsbewegungen*. Ed. Iuditha Balint et al. Konstanz: UVK, 2014: 191-208.

von den Hoff, Ralf et al. "Helden – Heroisierungen – Heroismen. Transformationen und Konjunkturen von der Antike bis zur Moderne. Konzeptionelle Ausgangspunkte des Sonderforschungsbereichs 948." *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen*. 1 (2013): 7-14. DOI 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2013/01/03.

Wright, Will. *Six Guns and Society. A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1977.