

Lesbian Investigations: Encoded Detective Films in the Late Twentieth-Century USA

DOI 10.18422/62-03

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The last twenty years have seen an unexpected eruption of interest in lesbian narratives or stories with lesbian protagonists, with films such as *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013), or *Carol* (2015), making an impact on general audiences and pointing to a certain mainstreaming in transcending the lesbian-interest label. In an archaeology of lesbian representation in film, it is, however, useful to consider other relevant films aimed at the general public that bridge the encoded pre-Stonewall narratives and the current, unconcealed lesbian characters and stories. The present essay looks at two closely-related mainstream dramas from the 1980s and 1990s which, despite having received little critical attention, bridge that gap because they are poised on the historical line between encoded and uncoded films amenable to lesbian readings: *Black Widow* directed by Bob Rafelson (1987) and *Hit and Run* directed by Dan Lerner (1999).

- 1 Focusing on filmic narrative strategies rather than purely formal strategies, this essay gives particular import to three areas negotiated in these detective films: selfhood, gendering, and enlistment. Firstly, both films are concerned with a police investigation that solves a crime and uncovers non-normative knowledges. I will explore how these films suggest that lesbian identity is part of an accessible and immutable self, a notion which goes against the grain of much current thinking. Secondly, both films present women-centered narratives and are structured around a woman's chase of another, thus resisting stereotypes of film history and resulting in the simultaneous reinscription and destabilization of gendered tropes. Finally, and contrary to comparable films which enlist general audiences to adopt an explicit point of view, these two examples require the viewer to become a 'detector' in an unofficial story line. Availing of the work of [Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick](#), Ellen Brinks, [Sally Munt](#), Sally O'Driscoll, Valerie Traub, and others, the present essay discusses *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* as relevant contributions to the articulation of lesbian representation in film history.
- 2 Both *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* signal that more is at stake in their stories than solving crime; they deploy "outlaw" as a metaphor and explore the valence of gender markers in ways that link the detective plot to the "very equivocal privacy" of the closet (Sedgwick *Epistemology* 71). Furthermore, they share several plot elements: a woman performing a stereotypical role comes in contact with a non-normative woman who exposes her as an outlaw over the course of the film; the detective solves the case half way through the film; and the audience knows from the start that the suspects in both movies have committed the crimes imputed to them. After laying out the ostensibly essentialist agenda of both films, I will consider structure, characterization, and specific scenes to review the role of the viewer as investigator of the subtext.^[1] I will tap into generic conventions, keep historical contexts within sight, and throughout the essay I will sketch out an alternative historical line for what we could call "a cinema of queer inquiry"; however, I will primarily focus on the films themselves, expounding their narrative strategies and querying the implications of those strategies.

The Stories

- 3 *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* are two mainstream films which articulate non-normative identities and desires. They are both thrillers and detective films—although *Hit and Run* has been marketed as drama—and, given their encoding of lesbian longings, they can both also be seen as narratives of frustrated romance. While I will not be focusing on a discussion of genre, it is important to mention these two films' adjustments to generic conventions, which were in place in the specific historical period I am considering. Scholars have noted the ubiquity of "female heroism" in "the post-1980s thriller, particularly

in more 'masculine' genres such as [...] the police story" (Cobley 194). Such a development in film matches the much-studied explosion of popular lesbian feminist detective fiction in the late 1980s. As Sally Munt has shown, many such novels were "as much concerned with the process of becoming a lesbian as with the solution of a mystery," in stories in which "lesbianism is described as an inner natural state lying dormant and waiting to be discovered" (122).

- 4 Discussing *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* side by side is particularly useful because their comparable storylines are complementary: their protagonists are respectively an investigator and a criminal—both of whom break the rules and achieve self-knowledge. The term "outlaw" was suggested by the critic Sally O'Driscoll in 1996 to refer to identities, desires, and critiques outside the established Western norms of sexuality and is a useful concept to analyze "sexual transgression, without being confined to any particular practice" (35–36).^[2] The equivalent term which proved to have an unshakeable hold on scholarship was "queer," thus O'Driscoll's intervention has been relegated to the vaults of history of critical terminology; however, it is useful to invoke her outlaw theory here because the identifications I will discuss are explicitly framed by criminality. Before further exploring the ways in which outlaw theory can be applied to *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*, here is a summary of the films:
- 5 *Black Widow* opens with a glamorous and assertive woman who has remorselessly killed her wealthy husband, making his death appear to be from natural causes by means of an undetectable poison. Shortly after, we see that the woman has completely transformed herself, adopting a different name and even a different accent, and is now married to another wealthy man. We are then introduced to Alexandra "Alex" Barnes, a federal agent in the New York police department, the only woman in her team. She is unconventional: androgynous, careless about her appearance, a workaholic who spurns the sexual advances of male colleagues; she is also the best investigator in the department. Alex is convinced that there is a link between a series of deaths of wealthy men, and has become obsessed with a hypothetical woman who Alex believes is the culprit. Given the lack of evidence, Alex's superior demands that she drop the case, but Alex refuses and leaves her post on unpaid indefinite leave to pursue her suspect. While working undercover at an expensive holiday resort, Alex meets the suspect, now a widow by the name of Renee, who has transformed herself yet again. Renee is amused by the fascination she exerts on the dowdy and insecure Alex and they become friends. Renee admits to being attracted to a handsome wealthy bachelor at the resort, Paul, whom Alex also finds attractive. After Renee discovers that Alex is a federal agent, she contrives a date between Paul and the sexually inexperienced Alex, in order to precipitate her own seduction of Paul—the plan appears to succeed and Renee marries him shortly after. At the wedding reception, there is a confrontation between Renee and Alex, with the detective revealing that she knows Renee is a killer. Renee responds by violently kissing Alex on the mouth. Shortly after that, Paul dies and Renee frames Alex for the murder. Renee then visits Alex in prison and speaks candidly about her killings, only to discover that she has been framed by Alex and that Paul is actually alive. The film ends with Alex, in rather feminine clothes, walking out of prison.
- 6 In *Hit and Run*, the protagonist Mrs. Kendall is a housewife in an elegant suburb of an American town, married to a wealthy man, with two children of school-going age, and little to occupy herself with other than organizing parties and attending social events. She is unhappy and considers returning to work, but ultimately lacks the confidence. When the film opens, Mrs. Kendall is running errands for a big party she is organizing in her house that evening. Driving her car in the rain, she briefly takes her eyes off the road to rummage in her handbag and hits a girl who has wandered off onto the road. Mrs. Kendall tends to the injured child, who is unconscious, and rushes to a public phone to call an ambulance. When she returns to the site, a police patrol is assisting the victim, and rather than speaking to the police she drives by. Distressed, Mrs. Kendall returns home and decides not to mention the incident. Later, she finds out that the child has survived but is lying in hospital in a coma, and Mrs. Kendall is consumed by guilt. We are then introduced to detective Rico, an assertive Latina woman from an underprivileged background. Rico is determined to get pregnant and we meet her at a short rendezvous with a man she does not live with; the rendezvous is timed to match her ovulation cycle. Rico cuts her meeting short after receiving a call with an assignment to investigate the car accident, which is mistakenly believed to be a hit and run incident. Meanwhile, a rumor spreads that the culprit may belong to the affluent community Mrs. Kendall

belongs to. The unknown driver is branded as a monster by all of Mrs. Kendall's acquaintances, including her best friend Sally. As the investigation proceeds, Rico begins to suspect Mrs. Kendall, who feels that her composure is disintegrating as days go by. Sally notices that something is wrong with her friend and suggests as much to Rico, who increases her pressure on Mrs. Kendall and tells her she is just waiting for the culprit to confess. Meanwhile, the child wakes from the coma. Mrs. Kendall tells the truth to her husband, who is repulsed. Confronted by the horrified mother of the victim, Mrs. Kendall admits to her involvement, and then walks into the police station, where she is welcomed by a non-judgmental Rico. In an epilogue, some months later, a pregnant Rico goes to visit Mrs. Kendall, who has now separated from her husband and is living alone in a tiny apartment. We learn that Mrs. Kendall was legally punished for her negligence with a lenient temporary withdrawal of her driving license, but that she was socially punished by her former community by being ostracized. Mrs. Kendall, now Joanna, has not seen her children since the incident, afraid they will reject her. Rico persuades her to speak to the children, and when they are reunited the kids embrace Joanna. The film ends with her walking away across the road with them.

- 7 *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* are two mainstream films made around 1990, thus coinciding with the development of queer theory as an academic discipline.^[3] The films offer two complementary approaches to the non-normative potential of the detective-and-suspect dyad, in which detection is an allegory for coming out. According to this reading, in *Black Widow* the female detective Alex investigates her own lesbian sexuality and in *Hit and Run* the criminal Mrs. Kendall is a closeted lesbian threatened by exposure. The films present two encoded coming out narratives in the guise of two criminal investigations. It has been claimed that “[k]nowledge is not [...] itself power, though it is in the magnetic field of power” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 4), but for the protagonists of *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*, self-knowledge and the knowledge of others are at first a source of danger, and finally of power. The inner transformation is externalized too: By the end of the films, Joanna Kendall will abandon some of the traditional markers of femininity, while Alexandra Barnes will adopt some. The quests of Mrs. Kendall and Alex, as un-meshings of deceptions and paranoia, end with the reward of a different, new-found identity. The ideologically conservative essentialist implications are unmistakable, but Mrs. Kendall's and Alex's transformations can also be interpreted as a temporal repositioning which assumes that the self is always “beyond itself” (Butler, “Longing” 150). These women are not coming out *as*, they are coming out *of*—out of a heteronormative way of looking at the world which is no longer of use to them.
- 8 “[T]he woman who kills is exactly what she is supposed *not* to be,” Beatrix Campbell has pointed out (qtd. in Edge 175). In film, the man-hating lesbian is a stereotype often conflated with that of the psychotic, murderous queer woman. At the time of the release of *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* this stereotype had reached such a worrying degree of normalization that it prompted a tide-turning, anti-homophobic activist campaign calling for a boycott of *Basic Instinct* (1992), a film about a male detective's involvement with a psycho-killer queer woman. Renee's serial killing of men in *Black Widow* may be considered a stereotypical sign of the character's lesbianism, an identity which is kept hidden until the detective confronts her and reveals Renee's secret to the world. Renee may display this stereotypical lesbian marker, but *Black Widow* successfully plays with the viewers' expectations because after all Renee may not be a lesbian. In one possible reading, she is not and even though the impetus for the detective's quest is misplaced, Alex's initial error of judgment will eventually lead her to the real purpose of her investigation, which is the discovery of another lesbian: herself. If we were to consider *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* as romance narratives, they are disparaging, showing the uselessness of following clues, if clues are meant to inexorably drive an individual to the perfect partner in crime. That is, as romance narratives, the two films may follow a model of pursuer-pursued, with seduction as a key element—the staple of romantic films—but while detective and suspect may have found their match in each other, no relationship between them is feasible beyond the outing of the suspect or the detective.
- 9 Most importantly, the films succeed as queer Trojan horses, infiltrating mainstream cinema, which is associated with upholding normative values. The films succeed by enlisting audiences and activating a lesbian reading position which challenges accepted norms. Sally O'Driscoll's proposal of the word “outlaw” as a pliable term for the non-normative, takes account of the fact that “what is lawful is not itself

a static category” and that “[th]e line of the law shifts continually” (36).^[4] In the case of the films discussed here, the crimes are murder and manslaughter, and as such not historically-bound, in the sense that killing is a key prohibition in societies across historical periods. However, the detective embraces deception in *Black Widow* and there is a grossly unfair demonization of the criminal in *Hit and Run*, which exemplifies the lack of moral clarity associated with noir and neo-noir detective film. Also, for the once-repressed protagonists in the two movies, there are no obvious heroic rebirths as queer icons, no flaunting of unequivocally transgressive new identities. I argue that this very ambiguity, mirroring the ambiguities of the closet as a system, is what activates the lesbian/outlaw reading capabilities of the audience (regardless of their orientation), thus enabling queer visibility in a mainstream context.

- 10 Policing and social control play a part in both films. In *Black Widow* male colleagues of detective Barnes test her sexual availability, and in *Hit and Run* neighbors of Mrs. Kendall hover like vultures after a misdemeanor. An obvious lens to consider this aspect of the films is Foucault’s discussion of the entanglement of legal discourse with the creation of homosexuality as an identity category, which has been a leverage point for critical theory. Foucault identified an ongoing change in the operation of the methods of power, claiming that “the judiciary is increasingly incapable of coding power, of serving as its system of representation,” so that this operation is now produced “not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, [...] beyond the state and its apparatus” (89). If the law is everywhere at once in the shape of normalization, then abiding by these social rules is as inevitable as breaching them. By the end of both films, the Alex of *Black Widow* and the Mrs. Kendall of *Hit and Run* have respectively transformed into Miss Barnes and Joanna, by which I that, after an eventful journey, both women have achieved a truer self. That is, the non-normative, androgynous Alex has become feminized as Miss Barnes, while the self-negating Mrs. Kendall has gained her autonomy as Joanna. Alex and Mrs. Kendall have found their truth through lawlessness and deception. This suggests that the door between the closet and the outside is not clearly demarcated as a boundary, that it rather resembles a revolving door, simultaneous hindrance and facilitator. If the closet is fundamentally “equivocal” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 71) so are *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*.

Two Female-Centered Narratives

- 11 I will take a closer look at the characterization of the investigators first and will then consider the criminals in detail. It is interesting to note that while most critical analyses of detective narratives focuses on the figure of the investigator as hero or anti-hero, in these two films that focus would be misplaced, as the criminals are either as important (*Black Widow*) or more important (*Hit and Run*) than the detectives.

(a) The Investigators

- 12 In *Black Widow*, a detective obsessed with a murder suspect gives up her job to follow the case. In *Hit and Run*, a car accident turns a respectable housewife into a criminal being trailed by a detective. In order to succeed or survive, detectives and criminals in both films must think like their counterpart. This is taken to extremes, so that the investigation becomes a physical transformation in parallel with gradual self-realization. In lesbian narratives, “tropes of likeness” are commonplace (Vanita 102). There is a range of films concerned with bonds which can be read as lesbian and in which the story is organized around “mimetic identification” (Brinks 3). Examples would include *All About Eve* (1950), *Persona* (1966), *3 Women* (1977), or *Single White Female* (1992). In the West the pursuer-pursued dichotomy has traditionally been associated with gendered identities, because archetypal Western masculinity is linked to self-assertion and agency, while archetypal femininity is linked to passivity. In both *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*, against the grain of the history of cinema, a woman pursues another, and a replication of gender binaries seems underway when, in both films, the narratives open with a masculine police woman in pursuit of a feminine woman suspect. As the plots unfold, however, the gendered identities of the co-protagonists begin to shift, undercutting the classic masculine-pursuing-feminine scenario. In *Hit and Run* the suspect abandons her stereotypical femininity, and in *Black Widow* the detective embraces it. This is a remarkable outcome in two stories premised, as we will see, on the differences between a law enforcer and an outlaw.

- 13 In two early films about female investigators, *Eleanor's Catch* (1916) and *The Evidence of the Film* (1913), the woman's competence is linked to her status as a professional worker, in the first example in direct opposition to her domestic role. In *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*, the detectives' competence is exercised by professional women working in a traditionally male environment. This unfeminine association makes the detectives contrast with the suspects, who are loving, model housewives concealing a violent, heartless, masculine-coded self. Both investigators are portrayed as assertive, sometimes even more than the males around them. In fact they both display hyper-masculine traits when they resort to bullying or even adopt the masculine names Alex and Rico.^[5] In the case of Rico in *Hit and Run*, race is another element that emphasizes her outsider status, since she is a Latina woman investigating a white community, so that her non-normative gender is supplemented by her ethnicity. Furthermore, both detectives are not only marked as non-normative females, but also are under pressure to become "real" women: Rico is obsessed with having a baby, while the single Alex in *Black Widow* is told that she must get a—by implication male—date. That is, they are not "real" women in the terms set up by the theorist [Monique Wittig](#), who famously claimed that given that the category *woman* is normatively defined within the parameters of procreative heterosexuality, it follows that "lesbians are not women" (32).
- 14 Class is also relevant, as both investigators are clearly marked as working-class women in contrast to their suspects. In *Black Widow*, Alex's suspect is referred to by a colleague as "your bourgeois lady" (00:38:47), which could equally apply to Rico's suspect in *Hit and Run*. The class difference is reflected in the characters' look and choice of clothing. The detectives mimic the appearance and the body language of the males around them: when they are at ease it is not markedly feminine (Rico) or is it unkempt (Alex). In *Black Widow*, when Renee invites Alex to a party, the detective tells her that she has nothing to wear, claiming that "I left my designer stuff back in Chicago" (01:09:19). On her part, *Hit and Run*'s Rico is unambiguous about the difference between herself and the upper middle-class community—a suburban enclave known as Eden—at the center of her investigation: "Welcome to the lives of the rich and restless. Maybe I should wear my Gucci uniform!" (00:16:29). The fact that the (masculine gendered) word 'rico' is Spanish for 'rich' adds to the irony.
- 15 In fact, both detectives must pretend they are affluent in order to pursue their investigations. Despite Rico's dismissive attitude in *Hit and Run*, she manages to look rather elegant for her interrogations, while in *Black Widow*, jobless, homeless Alex meets the suspect Renee at a luxury Hawaiian resort and later borrows Renee's clothes as well as her hairdresser. The investigators' class-cross-dressing suggests a desire "to be, to be like, or to become" the other woman (Brinks 3). Inevitably, this is translated into an ostensible feminization of both detectives' appearance, since upper class women are traditionally required to dress in gender-specific clothing: elegant dresses and finely tailored suits, complemented by carefully made up hair and makeup. Paradoxically, the detectives' dressing-up disguise is used by them to gain access to suspects who are themselves in disguise. In spite of the appearance of Mrs. Kendall and Renee, these women do not endorse the values their appearance suggests: they are impostors in a world in which decorative, passive femaleness is taken for granted. The gender markers of the impoverished/working class, masculine/androgynous investigators are established by their actions, while the hyper-feminine suspects are explicitly enacting a gender performance of affluent respectability. All four illustrate the notion that "gender is always a doing," in the words of [Judith Butler](#), because "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender" (*Gender Trouble* 25). As is also the case with the detectives Rico and Alex, gender only exists in the act of being produced and it is only validated by the tacit endorsement of a participant-witness.

(b) The Suspects

- 16 *Hit and Run* is based on [Henrik Ibsen](#)'s feminist play *A Doll's House*, of 1879. Mrs. Kendall's friend Nancy alerts the viewers to the connection when she mentions that their reading group has chosen this work for their next session. In a rare humorous touch in the otherwise relentless script, Mrs. Kendall, ostensibly a dull, bored housewife, admits that she cannot find time to read Ibsen's call for female liberation. Joanna Kendall reprises the role of Nora in the original text, a woman guilty of forging the

document that saved her husband's life. In the late twentieth century scenario of *Hit and Run*, the demonization of Mrs. Kendall and the often melodramatic language are outrageously disproportionate to the offense. After the accident Mrs. Kendall is absolutely consumed by guilt, even though it was obviously an accident, and as her community launches a hunt on the monster who perpetrated the deed, this brings about her mental collapse. Both the public reaction and the personal guilt spiral out of control to an extent bordering on the implausible. It is in interpreting the film as an allegory for an outing and the ensuing homophobia, that the characters' behavior can be seen as a realistic exploration of one woman's life-changing drama. The film is unquestionably interested in feminist issues but it is the lesbian narrative which provides the coherence that makes the plot developments believable in full, something that has also been argued of *Black Widow* (cf. Taub).

- 17 The introduction of the suspects shows their commitment to deception. Both women embody the dependence on the closet as the only way to articulate lawlessness. "Hiding in plain sight," their elaborate normalcy is in fact a clue that the detectives and the audiences are meant to follow. In *Hit and Run*, the viewer first meets the would-be criminal Mrs. Kendall when she dyes her hair black and hides what she is doing from her husband when he arrives at home unexpectedly. In *Black Widow*, psycho-killer Renee is first seen applying eyeliner and putting on dark glasses as she begins the hunt for her next husband. Both actions point to the performative, "fabricated" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 136) nature of normative heterosexual marriage in a patriarchal society, sustained through laborious and repetitive acts of dissimulation. In the case of Mrs. Kendall, whose actions after an accident are in fact misconstrued as criminality, both the witch-hunt that ensues and the ostracism she is subjected to after confessing are totally out of proportion. The demonization of the suspect and her own agony are in fact more important to the narrative than the actual unraveling of the police investigation. Mrs. Kendall's "crime" can be read as an error of judgement, and by using a non-crime as the pivot to this crime drama, *Hit and Run* shifts the notion of criminality onto the social system that forces a woman to enact normative respectability and femininity in order to be socially accepted (even before her "crime" is committed).
- 18 In the case of the shape-shifting killer Renee in *Black Widow*, the performance of stereotypical femininity—including selfless love as one of its traits—is the only constant through this woman's transformations. The implication in the characterization of the suspects in both films, underlined by introducing the characters as they put on their gender "masks," is that there is an inherent falsehood in feminine appearance and behavior, that it is always part of an act. Thus, womanliness and "the masquerade" of womanliness, as [Joan Riviere](#) put it in an essay of 1929 often revisited by queer theorists, are actually "the same thing" (306). Riviere claimed further that, in her practice as a psychoanalyst, she had observed that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men" (303). That is, their appearance was the yin to their inner yang.
- 19 If the suspect in *Black Widow*, Renee, and the suspect in *Hit and Run*, Mrs. Kendall, share a hyperactive "auto-feminization" of the sort I refer to above, these suspects are crucially different in one respect: motivation. Mrs. Kendall has none, but given her dissatisfaction, an accident is waiting to happen. Before the incident that triggers the plot, Mrs. Kendall tells her best friend Nancy that she is thinking of getting a job but that she feels she lacks the confidence, and Nancy responds by telling her she does not need a job:

Nancy: Joanna you have nothing to prove. You have terrific kids, you've got a great house, a fabulous husband—your life is perfect.

Mrs. Kendall: Come on. Nothing is perfect.

(00:06:12)

At one point in *Black Widow*, Renee says of marriage: "I used to think of it as my job. Making myself appealing. I was a professional." As "professional" wives, both suspects devote their lives to their

husbands, but whereas Mrs. Kendall strives to make hers happy, Renee's goal is murder. Both films suggest a view of heterosexual marriage not just as a dress or even as an accessory, but as a full-time disguise. The crimes committed are used to disclose a hidden truth about these women. For Mrs. Kendall in *Hit and Run*, the car accident that throws her life off-course brings about a shift in perspective that has been gaining momentum, as she tentatively articulates in a conversation with her friend Nancy.

Mrs. Kendall: I haven't been sleeping very well lately.

Nancy: No?

Mrs. Kendall: [hesitating] I've been trying to figure some things—some things out. [...] You know I wanted to tell you—you looked great at the party the other night.

(00:41:58)

- 20 Similarly, before the investigation jump-starts in *Black Widow*, the suspect has long been on the course towards some unfathomable destination. By the time the film opens, the suspect, “black widow” Renee, has accumulated more than enough money to live in luxury for the rest of her life. With money being no longer an issue, one motive for her ongoing killings (at least three to-date), may be a murderous hatred of men. In the course of *Black Widow*, we learn of Renee's meticulous researches and calculated advances as she targets every new victim, and all her preparations suggest that she greatly enjoys what she does. It is interesting that the lack of a murder motive in *Black Widow* puzzled or aggravated reviewers—who sometimes felt compelled to declare that [Alfred Hitchcock](#) would have done a better job with the same material (cf. Kapsis). The very reaction of these reviewers is proof that a literal reading of the films as whodunits is missing half of the story. This inability to register the films' investigation of selfhood in turn suggests both the potential for growth and the crippling effect of the closet—in this case, the “closet” of the detective genre. In their common disregard of motive, both *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* contest essentialism in genre as well as gender.
- 21 There is much at stake for these women, whose femininity is generated and maintained by a forceful social construction which can only be terminated by way of a violent severance. Indeed, their starting point is the murder of the internalized “angel in the house” (an emblem of submissive femininity), a ritual sacrifice famously proposed by [Virginia Woolf](#) as a psychic necessity. “My excuse,” Woolf explained, “if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her, she would have killed me” (103). Proper, normative women, socialized into self-obliteration, “must charm, they must conciliate, they must—to put it bluntly—tell lies if they are to succeed” (103). In a sense, *Hit and Run's* “villain” Mrs. Kendall prefigures the psychopath in *Black Widow*. Mrs. Kendall, as *Hit and Run* establishes from the beginning of the film, is leading a monotonous existence without any outlet to her individuality, so “black widow” Renee can be seen as an enlightened housewife who gets promoted from victim of society to sociopath, as a woman who discovers that her femininity is not innate but nurtured, and blindly bites the hand that force-fed her.

Viewer Detectors

- 22 Close readings, “an unearthing of [...] ambivalences at first invisible to the naked eye,” are crucial to feminist inquiry, as Judith Mayne pointed out in a discussion of so-called women's films (42). Close readings are also required to detect lesbian desire in a heteronormative context, because the communicability of desire depends on a social reader who is receptive to its codes. In terms of encrypted lesbian films, it is important to point out here that, as [Lillian Faderman](#) put it in a discussion of lesbian literature, “encoding and obfuscation [are] not necessarily devices of the trickster, the liar, of the determined survivor,” because they can also be an ideological or aesthetic choice (446). In the case of detective films, enlisting the viewer into reading between the lines is embedded in the genre itself. *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* may be said to be masked dances, given that, as we will see, the films

themselves refer directly to the importance of decoding.

- 23 In *Black Widow*, Alex's job is literally to read carefully, as her boss Bruce reminds her when she requests to be allowed to pursue her suspect outside of office hours: "Data analysis is what we do here, and the best work in this shop is yours. The best. It's the job you were born to do" (00:25:34). Alex's investigation is a quest for a [Rosetta Stone](#) that will make it possible for the detective to decipher the text of her own unhappiness. At another level, viewers are also expected to decode clues in the film. In at least one case, the viewer is invited to retrieve intertextual information to join the dots of the lesbian narrative, when the suspect stops her frantic search of the investigator's apartment to take one of Alex's handkerchiefs out of a drawer to longingly inhale its scent and to brush the silk against her cheek (01:31:36). This is a reference to Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rebecca* (1940), based on Daphne du Maurier's 1938 lesbian thriller novel of the same title.
- 24 In *Hit and Run*, Rico and Mrs. Kendall are presented as dedicated book readers. When Rico is trying to force her confession, the detective claims to know the psychology of the criminal she is pursuing:

Rico: I'm sure she never though she'd be in this situation. After all, I mean, "we believe no evil—

Mrs. Kendall:—until it is done" [half smiles]

(00:55:59)

Here, Mrs. Kendall has finished Rico's rare quotation (from a fable of 1668 about unheeded warnings by [Jean de la Fontaine](#), although this information is not supplied in the film). This shared specialized knowledge surprises and delights them both. Not only does it prove that the two women are proficient at close readings, but also that they are matched as readers, since they can finish each other's sentences. Alex and Renee also finish each other's sentences during their last conversation in jail. This is a significant detail which has been read as a lesbian marker in other contexts: Actress Susan Sarandon, for example, interpreted finishing each other's sentences as a signal of lesbian attachment in the script of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and introduced a kiss during the filming of the final scene to support that interpretation (*Celluloid Closet*).

- 25 Both *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* are fruitful sites of "interpretations and appropriations", as Valerie Traub proposed of *Black Widow* (309). The reason may lie in a constituent ambiguity in plot and characterization. Perhaps lesbian readings of *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* are "paranoid readings", and the product of a "hermeneutics of suspicion and exposure" (Sedgwick, "Paranoid" 140) that is indebted to a tradition of coded Hollywood mainstream films.^[6] Or perhaps the lesbian content of these films is indicative of post-identitarian queer politics, and the films call upon audiences to reread, and thus rewrite, gender as masquerade and sexuality as investigative process.
- 26 While it is obvious that mainstream and popular film and literature dealing with lesbian issues have historically been of interest to a general public not self-defined as lesbian, as Meredith Miller has pointed out the discussion of "the agency of readers and viewers" is still missing from most analyses (56). It is my argument that these two films actually invest in enlisting viewers to activate lesbian representability. Enlistment "align[s]" audiences "both rationally and emotionally" (Taylor 228),^[7] and for the viewer of these films, that may mean a theoretical support of gay rights and an empathy with lesbian desire. O'Driscoll describes a lesbian reader as "the construct of a reader who will recognize the lesbian possibilities of the text" (45–46); as such the reader could belong to a mainstream audience with the potential to see lesbianly and to position itself as a lesbian investigator. I would like to signal here, however, that the enlistment of the viewer is not the same in both cases. *Black Widow* is hard to navigate without a lesbian compass. In *Hit and Run*, however, the plot, dialogue, and characterization invite a lesbian reading, whereas the direction, performances, and editing do not.

27 For example, in *Hit and Run* detective Rico picks up a toy from the floor that the suspect accidentally drops in a shop, then carries the suspect's bags for her, and then opens the door of the suspect's car to let her in. This string of interventions is traditionally associated with male gallantry, but in the overall direction it registers as the detective's over-eagerness to talk to the suspect, when a single flourish underlying the gallant element would unambiguously signal a lesbian mock-seduction. In another example, when the distressed Mrs. Kendall seems about to confide in her best friend, Nancy, and, after telling her that she is trying to "figure some things out," hesitatingly declares that Nancy "looked great" the night before (00:41:58), a slightly nuanced performance would have pointed to the possibility that Mrs. Kendall is attracted to Nancy. In the context of the investigation, there is no reason whatsoever for the inclusion of these elements—i.e. the detective's gallantry and the suspect's appreciation of another woman's beauty—but the film direction aligns the first to eagerness and the second to nervousness. In the journey from script to screen, these moments in *Hit and Run* register as odd rather than meaningful. By contrast, as we will see, *Black Widow* is not demanding on the viewer, featuring a kiss and a mock-kiss between the female protagonists, and including explicit comments about one woman's obsession with another, so that viewers are clearly invited to read the story in a lesbian context. Other mainstream films which activate lesbian positionality and are part of a bigger family tree of films with a penchant for narrative ambiguity reach from early thrillers such as *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) and *Anna and Elizabeth* (1933) to TV movies such as *Hostage* (1988) and "Carmilla" (1989).

Lesbian Moments and Referents

28 In both films character development and plot are imbued with traditional lesbian markers, however, the word lesbian is not mentioned in either. Nor are there any instances that can be incontrovertibly described as lesbian other than a kiss in *Black Widow*, which is meant to upset the woman receiving it. However, the films include several moments and references that can be read as lesbian. In this section, I will describe several of these to show how they encode lesbianism as a secret that must be investigated, aligning crime and sexual-outlaw status, and moving towards an essentializing reading of sexual orientation.

29 In *Hit and Run*, in one of such moments of queer readability, we are presented with an unofficial interrogation which is reminiscent of a seduction-game, something incongruous in a film without an explicit lesbian narrative. The scene unfolds when Detective Rico insists on getting into Mrs. Kendall's car to talk. While the suspect holds fast to the wheel of her parked car, Rico slowly advances towards the nervous woman as she speaks, placing her arm assertively on the back of Mrs. Kendall's seat. Her movements have all the connotations of a sexual menace and, as Rico recites flattering remarks to weaken Mrs. Kendall's aloofness, the scene progressively takes the form of a mock-seduction intended to get her target to lower her defenses.

Rico: [Puts an arm behind Mrs. Kendall's shoulders] I think that it would be in her best interest to come forward now [pause]. I bet it'd be a big relief to her [pause]. I'm sure she never thought she'd be in this situation.

(00:56:54)

If the verbs Rico chooses—"I think [...] I bet [...] I'm sure"—mirror her body language, her physical performance also invites the woman to "come forward" to obtain the "relief" she needs but "never thought" she would seek.

30 In another interesting moment, we learn that the suspect had assumed that detective Rico was queer or non-normative in terms of her sex-gender identity. Towards the end of the film, after Joanna Kendall has been outed as a criminal and convicted of her crime, there is a kind of epilogue in which the audience discovers that Mrs. Kendall has broken with her past life: She is financially independent and living on her own, she has adopted a simpler lifestyle and a less hyper-feminine look, and, crucially, contrasting with

the opening scene, she has stopped dying her hair and displays a streak of grey hair, a symbol of her commitment to truth. The scene shows the detective visiting her in the small apartment that she is renting. When she opens the door, Joanna stares in disbelief at Rico's heavily pregnant state, but without commenting on it. There is no reason whatsoever for Joanna Kendall to be surprised unless this is a disconcerting development that clashes with her assumptions about the detective, in the context of pregnancy as traditional marker of heterosexuality.

- 31 Apart from these moments, the story incorporates literary references which queer the narrative. For example, during the investigation Rico's only clue as to the identity of the suspect is a unique footprint at the crime scene, matching a 7.5 size 'Replay' running shoe. The emphasis on the shoe as proof (a shoe which Rico is explicitly trying to match to a local woman, and a shoe which Mrs. Kendall unsuccessfully attempts to eliminate) is of course an echo of Cinderella, a fairy tale in which the shoe of a fallen-from-grace princess in disguise, accidentally left behind, helps the prince find the woman he has fallen in love with. In the film, the tale is translated into a female investigator on a quest to find a female suspect in which the fairy tale element underlines the potential for a subtextual reading of the narrative as lesbian quest. The witty reversal of the central class divide in the original story, here involving a rich Cinderella and a low-salaried detective Prince Charming, sidelines the rags-to-riches theme in favor of a romance story of disclosure and authenticity which resonates with the trials of the closet.
- 32 In another literary reference, *Hit and Run* opens with Mrs. Kendall beginning the day-long preparations for a big party she is throwing that evening in her elegant home, preparations which include collecting bunches of flowers at the florist rather than having them delivered. This matches the memorable opening of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel with a remarkable subtext of "homoerotic feelings" (Bradshaw xxxvi). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the woman of the title has chosen a life of stability with a dull husband in order to resist the pull of the unconventional which she had felt in her youth and which included her falling in love with her friend Sally Seton—who once kissed her under the stars. Mrs. Dalloway has a doppelganger in the novel, a shell-shocked ex-soldier obsessed by his memories of a comrade whom he loved. Mrs. Dalloway, who feels trapped in an unsatisfactory life, is "at once homicidal and suicidal" (Bradshaw xx). In *Hit and Run*, Mrs. Kendall is as dissatisfied with her settled, predictable, and heteronormative life as Mrs. Dalloway was with hers. Furthermore, the dynamic between Mrs. Kendall and her friend Nancy (as well as their very names), echoes Mrs. Dalloway and Sally's. In Woolf's novel, a crisis point is reached in the suicide of the co-protagonist; whereas in the film, the crisis is brought about by a car accident. These climaxes result in a new lease of life for Mrs. Dalloway and for Mrs. Kendall, who had once been simply Clarissa and Joanna. In *Hit and Run*, the victim of the car accident is ostensibly a young girl, who falls into a coma from which she eventually awakens, but the girl also operates as a doppelganger, given that Mrs. Kendall, after a long period of self-suppression, will now wake to her own needs as a person.
- 33 In *Black Widow* lesbian readability is explicitly referred to in several instances. It becomes more pronounced after investigator Alex and black widow Renee meet. Alex has given up her job in order to pursue the suspect, who she has located in a luxury spa. Under a false name, the detective succeeds in getting close to the suspect. Alex begins the investigation both into crime and sexuality by entering the realm of the closet and by embracing deception in this morally ambiguous world. Going undercover offers literally a cloak of invisibility under which anything becomes possible, including reciprocated lesbian desire. In one scene, marking the first encounter between Alex and Renee, the two women are attending a scuba-diving course and practice mouth to mouth resuscitation with each other, when the detective briefly interrupts the exercise:

Alex: You're not taking this personally, are you?

Renee: [laughs] Don't worry.

Alex: OK.

(01:06:45)

If one of the characters had been male, this apparently gratuitous scene would be read as erotically charged. Alex's joke about that very reading simultaneously deflects and underlines the sexual connotations of the kiss. In a heterosexual scenario, no other reading would be possible. We refer to heteronormativity when the social norms we associate with heterosexuality become naturalized, when certain expectations of heterosexual behavior frame our understanding of relationships between the sexes. In the heteronormative model, a passive woman is paired with a sexually assertive man, and the feminine love object must sacrifice herself and prioritize the needs of the masculine subject. For black widow Renee, heterosexual marriage is literally a site of violence, a compulsive and senseless devouring which never satiates. In this non-kiss scene, murderous heterosexuality is symbolically inverted as the investigator shows the killer (and vice versa) that she can be a life-giver to her. Later, the women share a drink and Alex's eyes linger on Renee's body.

Renee: What are you looking at?

Alex: Oh, I'm sorry. We've spent the whole day in the pool and [pause] you came out looking like *that*, and I just come out looking like *this* and [pause] I just wondered why that is [laughs].

Renee: You don't look bad.

(01:07:35)

Because it is the detective who prompts the lesbian readings in Renee (and the audience), we are invited to understand her discrete advances as strategic steps in her self-appointed mission to out Renee as a murderer. In these scenes, then, in addition to the reading of Alex as a closeted lesbian, the film simultaneously supports another possibility: the detective may be *pretending* to be sexually attracted to Renee in order to manipulate the suspect by appearing vulnerable.

³⁴ Unknown to Renee and to the audience until the last scene, the closets have been multiplying in a Russian doll fashion—as indeed is the nature of the closet to pull other people into it. In a key scene in *Black Widow*, Alex arrives at Renee's wedding and angrily confronts the suspect for using her. During the heterosexual courtship between the killer and her male victim, Renee had contrived for the dowdy Alex to have sex with the man-of-the-world whom she planned to be her groom and next victim. Renee declares to Alex that facilitating this sexual encounter was meant as an “exchange of gifts” with her. Prompted by this comment, Alex gives the bride the gift she is carrying, a brooch in the shape of a black widow, signaling that she knows Renee is a murderer (01:42:42). It is a rash gesture, and to both Renee and the audience it shows the detective impulsively blowing her cover. Renee is momentarily paralyzed in surprise, but then she responds to the challenge by forcefully pulling Alex towards her and kissing her; pressing her mouth on the detective's for a few seconds and disregarding the people around them. Renee had read Alex's anger as jealousy and frustration not about the groom but about herself, the bride. The kiss is not erotic and is clearly meant to upset Alex, as it indicates that Renee knows an equally shocking secret about Alex that she is prepared to expose. The cards are on the table: Renee is a murderer, Alex is a lesbian, and neither of them can go on pretending to be anything else now that they have met and found each other out.

³⁵ This lesbian moment is a parody of the cultural significance of “women as gifts,” which was hypothesized as a generalized and crucial practice in pre-industrial societies by [Claude Lévi-Strauss](#) (22), and adapted in turn by feminist anthropologist [Gayle Rubin](#) to illustrate what she refers to as the modern “sex/gender system” (159). Rubin's work is itself part of the conceptual archaeology of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's enormously influential application of the term homosocial. The homosocial, used in

sociology to refer to socially-endorsed same-sex bonding, was adapted by Adrienne Rich in her concept of the Lesbian Continuum, reconfiguring the adjective *lesbian* to refer to any strong bond (whether affective, erotic, or political) between women.^[8] Sedgwick focused on men, and resolutely brought the homosocial “into the orbit of desire, of the potentially erotic,” by using it to refer to a continuum between same-sex social bonding and homosexual sexuality (*Between Men* 1). Because of the influence of Sedgwick’s analysis of triangulation, homosociality in literature and film is most often approached as a relational pattern in which two *men* ensure their closeness to each other by engaging with the same woman. In the film *Black Widow*, we find a comparable triad between the detective, the suspect, and the suspect’s male love interest/intended victim. The two women use this man as a “gift” to get closer to each other. The film thus expresses a commodification of the male body, which is used, in Valerie Traub’s word, as a “courier” between Alex and Renee (323), or, one may say, as a form of lesbian currency.

Detecting Essentialism

- 36 As mainstream films, *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* may be generally assumed to endorse normative values but, as I have argued, they are Trojan horses hosting lesbian stories. Other encoded mainstream films such as *Cat People* (1942), *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), or *The Haunting* (1963) allowed discerning audiences to read the lesbian subtext that ran parallel to the ostensible narrative. In these three films, panthers, jazz, and haunted houses respectively functioned as vectors for same-sex desire. In *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*, as we have seen, a quest resulting in a declaration of sexual independence is articulated by way of the metaphor of the closeted lesbian as criminal/detective. While art-house, experimental, horror, and exploitation films concerned with lesbian representation—from the radical collage films of [Barbara Hammer](#) to the golden age of lesbian vampire films in the 1970s—were aimed at very specific audiences, *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* fill a gap in the history of queer cinema because they offer lesbian representation in films designed for a general audience.
- 37 The detective genre works on the basis of certain truths being immutable and accessible, as well as on the assumption that human actions spring from human temperament in a fan-like chain of causality. Detecting presupposes facts and therefore belongs to a peculiar scientific mindset which abhors the uncertain and the yet-to-be. This applies even to noir detective films with their shading of moral certainties, because cases are steadily solved, even while lives remain stubbornly messy. Viewer expectations for the detective genre include that the film hinge on a breach that must be ascertained or a secret that must be uncovered; thus, it is particularly instructive to consider the intersection between detective films and what Sedgwick once described as “the open secret” (*Epistemology* 22), homosexuality. From the plot of blackmail of a gifted musician in *Different from the Others* (1919) to the narrative thrust of the deadly secret in *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953) to the political conspiracy cloaked as homophobia in *The Detective* (1968), popular films before the launch of the modern gay rights movement have attested to the power of the closet to thrill and enlighten audiences.
- 38 *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*, made in the USA in the late twentieth century, encode, as I have discussed, stories of lesbian detection. Writing in the USA around the same time, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, referred to “a culture where same-sex desire is still structured by its distinctive public/private status, at once private and central” (22). In the same book, Sedgwick famously contended that the closet was “the defining structure for gay oppression” in the twentieth century (71). As I have shown, the closet can be simultaneously facilitator and consequence of essentialized approaches to identity in an area privileged for its supposed link to selfhood—sexuality. An early scene of *Black Widow* shows detective Alex Barnes being denied permission to pursue her suspect Renee, and shouting at her boss that she is tired of being in “this goddam government office with green windows!” (a literal closet); her boss advises Alex to stay where she is and get a date instead, and when she reacts angrily to this, he declares: “You are not happy. You are not a happy person. And you deserve to be happy, that’s all” (00:25:51). Michel Foucault, in his analysis of mandatory disclosure as a form of social control, claimed that “the West has placed a never-ending demand for truth” in sexual matters, so that “it is up to sex to tell us our truth, since sex is what holds it in darkness” (77). Alex is unintelligible as

a person because of her apparent lack of heterosexuality. Of course, the social demand for a stable and immutable self can't be readily met, and most contemporary critics of sexuality, including O'Driscoll, assume "the impossibility of positing a transhistorical or transcultural Lesbian Self" (37).

39 As coming-out narratives, *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run* appear to be markedly essentialist, and perhaps this is because ideologically they are situated on the brink of historical change. Since the 1860s,^[9] the gay rights movement had made strategic use of essentialism to lobby for equal legislation, but in the 1980s this tactic began to be contested—and queer theory and queer activism largely emerged from the resulting debates. Considering the "flexibility and adaptability of genre through periods of social change" (Cobley 194), *Black Widow* and *Hit and Run*, two detective thrillers about detecting lesbianhood or about confessing to it, facilitated the expression of queer identities and desires at a time of transition. The strategies deployed by these two films are anachronistic today, in the context of the supposedly post-identitarian 2010s.

Notes

[1] *Black Widow's* status as lesbian cult movie (cf. Traub 322) and the investment of lesbian audiences in the actresses playing the investigators in both films (Debra Winger and Lisa Vidal) will not be considered here.

[2] Her aim in proposing the term was the softening—rather than severing—of the too often inevitable connection between the emerging queer theory and gay and lesbian studies and activism.

[3] The year was marked by key events and publications by Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

[4] O'Driscoll is specifically referring to the differences between USA states up to 1996.

[5] The deliberate gender neutrality in the name of the investigator in *Hit and Run* is evident when, for just one second in the entire film, we are made aware of her full name, which flashes in a news broadcast on a TV screen, at Mrs. Kendall's house, though unseen by her: "Detective Meredith Rico."

[6] This was briefly reinvigorated in the politically conservative 1980s after a decade of liberalisation in Western cinematic representations of sexual difference.

[7] I am borrowing from Lib Taylor's discussion of audience enlistment but I do not use the term in the more strictly political sense she applies to it.

[8] I explored the archaeology of Sedgwick's use of the term in "A New Picture: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men*."

[9] With German activist [Karl Heinrich Ulrichs](#)'s development of the concept of Uranian identity. See Hubert C. Kennedy.

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Suggested Citation

Mentxaka, Aintzane Legarreta. "Lesbian Investigations: Encoded Detective Films in the Late Twentieth-Century USA." *American Studies Journal* 62 (2017). Web. 15 July 2017. DOI 10.18422/62-03.



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