

## **The Queer Female Action Spy Hero in Post-Millennial American Cinema**

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### **Abstract:**

This chapter focuses on spy action as a way to answer the question: where can we find queer female action heroes? The chapter will identify three films – *D.E.B.S.* (Angela Robinson, 2004), *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017) and *The Spy Who Dumped Me* (Susanna Fogel, 2018) – worth attention to highlight the potential and problems of the queer female hero in spy action. This chapter examines how each of these spy action films contributes to the ongoing yet uneven development of the female hero as a queer figure in post-millennial action cinema. The chapter will consider to what extent these queer female-led action films may pose a challenge to some of the dominant standards and conventions associated with the action hero, gender roles, and the representation of sexuality, but also reinforce others. Some comparisons will be made to James Bond in recognition that the Bond franchise has played an important role in the spy action genre.

**Keywords:** spy action, female hero, queer, sexuality, James Bond, gender roles

## The Queer Female Action Spy Hero in Post-Millennial American Cinema

Given the well-documented rise in the popularity of the female action hero after the turn of the millennium, some queer viewers have taken to the internet to ask a related question: where are the queer female action heroes? To this enquiry further questions might be added, such as how do issues of sexuality intersect with gender in representations of the post-millennial female action hero? These questions might well be framed by enthusiastic claims about the evolution of representation in the action genre that can conceal as much as they reveal at times, since most developments are far from straightforwardly linear, though trends are undoubtedly evident.

Previously, in cinema and in scholarship, the action genre was closely associated with masculinity and the heterosexual hero. In the groundbreaking 1993 study Yvonne Tasker fittingly describes the 1980s action genre as ‘an almost exclusively masculine space, in which issues to do with sexuality and gendered identity can be worked out over the male body’ (p.17). When significant female action heroes of films like *Aliens* (1986) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) emerged they also displayed ‘muscularity’ (Tasker, 1998, pp.146-150). The tough female hero or ‘warrior woman’ of the 1980s and 1990s is considered to be a positive development in the action genre, but the films (struggled to) contain the women’s independence to some extent using strategies that restore traditional gender roles and (re)establish their heterosexuality (Tasker, 1998, pp.69-70).

More recently, action cinema of the early 2000s extended the approach to these and other areas of representation, yet some trends continued into the new millennium. In Lisa Purse’s (2011) study of the genre during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the representation of homosexuality is identified as ‘both a presence and an absence in contemporary action cinema’ (p.132). Purse rightly comments that whereas some other popular genres had already ‘placed gay men and occasionally lesbians at the center of their narratives and enjoyed box-office success’, by contrast queer representation was still largely omitted in the action cinema for the most part (Purse, 2011, p.132). The relative absence of lesbian action heroes causes Purse to consider ‘invisibility as well as visibility as a form of representation’, taking inspiration from Andrea Weiss’s (1992) observation about the representation of lesbian characters on screen (Purse, 2011, p.132).

However, to return to the evocation of a queer audience and the action genre, a brief example is illustrative. According to one self-identifying queer woman and fan of female-led

action films writing on the community platform *them*, as problematic as the action genre is for queer female viewers looking for representation and visibility, it is also in some ways rich in potential. Thinking back to those iconic action women of past eras, the writer quotes lesbian film critic and editor Trish Bendix who considers that

Sarah Connor from *Terminator 2* and Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* were huge lesbian icons because they were tough and they didn't take shit from men. Also, romance wasn't on their minds. So, even if they weren't romancing or sleeping with women, their not being interested in men helped solidify them queer enough for us to latch onto (Gutowitz, 2019).

On a side note, Tasker (1998) offers a similar reading of these characters when she considers that for example, 'the butch/androgynous/tomboy action heroine brings with her associations of same-sex desire, suggesting a lesbian body' (p.71). Other action scholars register the female action hero's potential as a queer figure, being 'an easily co-opted symbol of polymorphous sexuality' (Brown, 2011, p.17).

For the contributor to *them*, the more recent release of *Atomic Blonde* (2017) was another, more directly queer, reason to watch action cinema; 'seeing Charlize Theron play a bisexual spy in *Atomic Blonde* nearly made my heart stop' (Gutowitz, 2019). Given the demand being voiced online by this fan and many others for other such female-led action films to enjoy, this chapter is a starting point for investigating that in post-millennial American cinema it is in espionage action that this might happen. The chapter explores that one answer to the opening question about queer female action heroes can be found in some recent spy action films, which occasionally feature queer characters in leading action roles. This chapter uses the term 'queer' to encompass a broad spectrum of sexualities, but also 'lesbian', 'bisexual' and 'LGBTQ' where applicable.

The chapter will focus on three films – *D.E.B.S.* (2004), *Atomic Blonde* and *The Spy Who Dumped Me* (2018) – that are worthy of attention to highlight the potential and problems of the queer female action hero in the spy action canon in particular. *D.E.B.S.* and *The Spy Who Dumped Me* are both spy action parodies written and directed by women that appeal to different audiences than most blockbuster action films, but nevertheless require a familiarity with the genre's expected codes and conventions. Whereas *D.E.B.S.* is a rare lesbian spy action comedy, *The Spy Who Dumped Me* is less explicitly queer, based instead on coding. When in development Theron reportedly thought that it was important that her spy character in *Atomic Blonde* was bisexual in order to bring a queer element to the screen version of this

female action hero, since she was frustrated by a lack of LGBTQ representation (Setoodeh, 2017).

This chapter argues that each of these films contributes to the ongoing yet uneven development of the female hero as a queer figure in post-millennial American action cinema. This chapter will also discuss to what extent these queer female-led spy action films may pose a challenge to some of the dominant standards and conventions associated with the action hero, gender roles, and the representation of sexuality, but also reinforce others.

### **Sexuality and the Female Spy in Action**

Existing scholarship on espionage action and the female spy provides a useful way to focus in on spy action. More generally, debates around the representation of action women in the twenty-first century, postfeminist ‘action babe’ imagery, and the tensions around eroticization and agency that have long accompanied the female action hero in film and television, are also relevant to this chapter. These wider tensions will be introduced when discussing *D.E.B.S.*, which was released when ‘action babe’ cinema was emergent.

In *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film Tasker* (2015) identifies that ‘espionage action – which sits in the broad terrain of the spy thriller’ clearly demonstrates the ‘lack of fixity’ of the action genre (p.165). Tasker observes that ‘like the action cinema more broadly, espionage action spans a continuum from light-hearted to intense violence’ (p.167), and the thematic concerns include deceit and double-crossing, questions of identity, surveillance, conspiracy and paranoia. Spy action has traditionally been dominated by men, but these observations are nonetheless also true of the range of the spy action film examples that place women as the main characters analyzed in this chapter.

There are however some significant differences between how male and female spies are represented in popular culture. When focusing specifically on the female spy in espionage action, Tasker (2015) begins by commenting that ‘Women in espionage movies are typically both improbable and mysterious creatures. Their talents as spies have long been linked to sexuality rather than action’ (p.174). This association between female sexuality and espionage is, as Tasker comments, encapsulated in the image of the Dutch exotic dancer executed for spying during WW1, Mata Hari (Ibid.). Similarly, for Rosie White (2010), ‘The popular mythology that constructs Mata Hari as a classic *femme fatale* has produced a

stereotype of the woman in espionage that rests on pejorative accounts of female sexuality and betrayal' (p.72).

The book *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture* (White, 2007) examines in detail the ways in which female spies have been represented. White's introduction to her study on women spies in fiction, television and film sets up the book's main concerns and these are worth quoting, since they are also significant to this chapter. She explains that her book is 'concerned with how the fictional female spy-protagonist reflects upon...modern and postmodern unease, particularly at those moments marked by changes in gender roles' (White, 2007, p.1). She also observes that 'Spying is an appropriate trope when discussing gender, as femininity, like masculinity, is always undercover – a covert operation with powerful far-reaching effects. Women spies are violent femmes because they expose some of the contradictions embedded in those covert operations' (White, 2007, p.1). She adds: 'In particular women spies in fiction, film and television are licensed to be violent agents and, thus, confound the western binary understanding of gender that aligns femininity with objectified passivity' (White, 2007, p.1). White further claims:

In many popular narratives, women spies cross the boundaries of femininity and are shepherded back to it by visual codes of beauty, whiteness and heterosexuality. They both break out and are contained, becoming an amphibious combination of radical and reactionary. In this way, the woman as spy in popular culture tests the bounds of gender and is encrypted both as a cipher of social change and of resistance to change. (2007, p.4)

Like White's study, this chapter has sought film examples where women are the protagonists, rather than appearing as marginal. In what follows, the chapter considers to what extent the queer female spy in these post-millennial films might test or conform to the limits of conventional approaches to the action hero at a time of social change signified, for example, by increased LGBTQ visibility across media, and equality rights such as same-sex marriage in England, Wales and America (in 2013 and 2015 respectively).

The importance of the James Bond films both to spy action, and to investigating the intersection between gender and sexuality in the spy thriller should also be emphasized in this section before proceeding. Although Bond is by no means the only blockbuster spy hero, the character's longevity and function as a 'mobile signifier' (Bennett and Woollacott, 1987) does mark him out as definitive, and a spy hero against which others inevitably get judged and measured. The Bond films began in the 1960s, when action was established as an important element of the formula, and the Bond character was depicted as icon of

heterosexual masculinity, where gadgetry and women serve to accessorize the superspy hero. Over the years female spies have at times appeared in a supporting role in the Bond films, but the 'Bond girl' image, mainly emphasizing the women's physical appearance and status as sexual companions for James Bond, remains predominant. Outside of the Bond franchise, female spy protagonists may well get compared to both the traditional Bond girl and the Bond spy hero to be referred to as a 'female James Bond' figure, and films might either directly or indirectly borrow from, parody, reference or make an intervention into the spy action formula established by the Bond franchise.

The remainder of the chapter will present the three case study films to reflect on post-millennial American cinema's different approaches to representing queer female action spy characters. While each film undoubtedly merits detailed analysis of their respective politics of gender representation, this chapter considers that taken together they might shed further light on the association between gender, sexuality and the spy action hero.

### ***D.E.B.S.***

*D.E.B.S.* is lesbian writer and director Angela Robinson's first feature, funded by a Sony-owned studio and based on the concept of the 2003 short film of the same name, which had previously won awards at some film festivals. This section will discuss how the feature-length version of Robinson's spy comedy action film knowingly and playfully places women in the primary roles as the heroes and villain in order to foreground a lesbian relationship between government spy-in-training Amy Bradshaw and criminal mastermind Lucy Diamond, whilst also providing a happy 'girl-gets-girl' ending.

It is worth considering that when *D.E.B.S.* was released the queer press responded positively to the film as part of a wider breakthrough. *The Advocate* (2005), for example, ran a 'Queer Cinema is Back' cover story that reflected on the emergence of the original independent New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s and its mainstreaming, and included *D.E.B.S.* as a legacy queer film that similarly delivers gay content to audiences. *The Advocate* (2005) positioned *D.E.B.S.* as part of a cycle of 'gay and \_\_\_' films, a label which uses the blank space to register the shift toward genre films, and the move away from a standard coming-out narrative. It was however recognized that this kind of commercial move is not without problems. Critic and scholar B. Ruby Rich is quoted in the article voicing the concern that these mainstream films cannot provide the same kind of aesthetic or thematic

challenge as New Queer Cinema, and warning 'gay and lesbian audiences cannot subsist on popcorn alone'. Nevertheless, Rich (2013) has spoken out as a 'rabid fan' of *D.E.B.S.*, describing this 'smart and silly' action film as Robinson's 'lesbian version of James Bond [with] posesses of female spies, one hot villainess in hot pursuit, and a love story for the ages' (p.266).

*D.E.B.S.* is also recognized by action scholars as significant in the development of the female action hero. Whilst otherwise observing with some dismay those limitations placed on the representation of homosexuality in contemporary action cinema, Purse (2011) briefly acknowledges that by contrast *D.E.B.S.* stands out as a film that pokes fun at the mainstream tendency to present lesbians either as supporting characters or as sexualized spectacles (p.147). The four main *D.E.B.S.* Academy spy girls may superficially epitomize problematic aspects of the 'action babe' defined by scholar Marc O'Day (2004) as young, slim, and excessively feminized, but this is best understood as a deliberate engagement with objectification and gender stereotyping. *D.E.B.S.*'s tongue-in-cheek tagline describes them as 'crime-fighting hotties with killer bodies': they are introduced wearing 'sexy' school-girl type uniforms, and slow motion is used to mimic the (already parodic) fetishized presentation of action babe bodies in some films of the era like *Charlie's Angels* (2000).

The positive connotations of the action babe, of physical activity and female agency, are similarly apparent in the status of the *D.E.B.S.* as active subjects of the film's narrative. By falling in love with Lucy Diamond, Amy Bradshaw in particular directly realizes the queer potential of the action babe hero on screen (O'Day, 2004, p.204). As Jeffrey A. Brown (2011) rightly points out, 'the film does suggest that action heroines as a character type can be adapted to alternative sexual desires, and that the struggles between heroines and villains, or villainesses, can be tantamount to sexual tension' (p.203). Moreover, this aspect of *D.E.B.S.* both disrupts the ideological relations between Bond and the villain used in the Bond formula and spoofs the trope of the bad and 'evil' lesbian. In some respects, Lucy Diamond can be read as a James Bondian figure able to 'convert' her enemy, but in doing so her villainy is also reformed through this seduction, since to win Amy Bradshaw over she returns everything she has previously stolen because 'Being bad doesn't feel good anymore' (Horn, 2017, pp.88-90).

In exploring the forbidden relationship between the female spy hero and the lesbian criminal mastermind *D.E.B.S.* further combines spy action with teen romantic comedy. Amy

Bradshaw begins the film nicknamed ‘the perfect score’: this denotes that she is the ‘perfect spy’ in training, so-called because when she took the secret test that led her to join D.E.B.S. the questions revealed that she was the perfect liar. However, when Lucy Diamond falls in love with Amy Bradshaw her status as star pupil is increasingly questioned, and to maintain this image the national spy Academy attempts to keep them apart. Although Amy Bradshaw’s aptitude for lying is essential to her position as the perfect D.E.B.S. spy girl, this information also leads her to realize the truth of her feelings for Lucy Diamond. As a result, the film closes with Amy Bradshaw’s empowerment to prioritize her own feelings and her dreams of attending art school over both heteronormativity and the crime-fighting reputation of the D.E.B.S..

The use of camp is especially important to the challenges that *D.E.B.S.* makes to the heteronormative codes and conventions of spy action. The visual excesses that are offered in the guns and the gadgets are, for example, further exaggerated by the film. The weapons of choice used by the four D.E.B.S. are either exaggeratedly small or over-sized and ridiculous, and when Lucy Diamond infiltrates the D.E.B.S. house using suction cups to scale the outside wall they make silly cartoonish sounds. For Katrin Horn (2017) these and other camp strategies, like the retro use of transitions and the cheap-looking CGI effects, contribute to the film’s ‘anti-realist aesthetics’ and a deliberate celebration of trash culture (p.86). In this way *D.E.B.S.* makes a strong statement about the female action hero as a queer figure, the (guilty) pleasures of spy action and teen romantic comedy and is intentionally playful with the secret identity trope.

### ***Atomic Blonde***

The style and intensely violent content of *Atomic Blonde* is very different from *D.E.B.S.*, which is generally light-hearted. In *Atomic Blonde* Theron plays spy protagonist Lorraine Broughton, in a Cold War spy action thriller set in 1989 mainly in Berlin. Based on the graphic novel *The Coldest City* (2012), the film follows Lorraine Broughton as she is tasked with recovering a missing list of every CIA and MI6 operative working undercover. This section of the chapter considers that some useful comparisons can be made between the representation of Lorraine Broughton and both gender in the Bond franchise and another landmark ‘Jane Bond’ character, the eponymous superspy in *Salt* (2010). However, *Atomic Blonde* differs from both in the portrayal of Lorraine Broughton’s sexuality.

Lorraine Broughton is a superspy similar in some ways to Evelyn Salt, a character who has been labelled ‘the closest thing to a female Bond’ (Brown, 2015, pp.224-225). In *Salt*, Angelina Jolie is the spy protagonist, playing a role that was widely reported to be originally written for a man, Tom Cruise in particular. It is argued that for *Salt* this change of gender meant that some key Bond conventions had to be reconfigured, and importantly ‘the action sequences in the film present Salt as an equal to the likes of Bond’ (Brown, 2015, p.226). Equivalent claims can be made for Theron’s Broughton, and her lethal abilities as a spy action hero, though she was not created as a male character. Like Jolie’s *Salt*, throughout *Atomic Blonde*’s action sequences Lorraine Broughton ‘demonstrates her professionalism and capacity for violence’ (Tasker, 2015, p.178). The film’s first action sequence features her defensively fighting two armed men in a moving car and eventually crashing it at speed to escape the vehicle. A later, extended action sequence takes place in an apartment building, when she must protect the life of a defecting Stasi officer by fighting more male assailants. During a breathtaking fight sequence on a stairwell, Lorraine Broughton is violently punched, kicked, and thrown to become increasingly bloodied as she physically battles her two male assailants, but determinedly fights on to beat them. In an otherwise stylized version of Berlin, the action sequences in *Atomic Blonde* bring an authenticity to the movie, and these scenes convincingly demonstrate that Lorraine Broughton is a highly skilled and resolute fighter.

Another way that Lorraine Broughton can be compared to Evelyn Salt relates to the wider unease that accompanies the way that sexuality and female spy are tackled. As Brown (2015) explains: ‘Female spies are almost always depicted as suspicious and unknowable. The stereotypical fear of female sexuality as untrustworthy takes on far greater importance in fictional espionage’ (p.229). In *Salt* her loyalty to America and the CIA is called into question since she is revealed to be a Russian sleeper spy agent. In *Atomic Blonde* doubt is also cast on Lorraine Broughton’s allegiances through the film’s use of flashback, and the sometimes confusing way that the narrative of treachery and double agents unfolds. The ending of *Atomic Blonde* reveals that Lorraine Broughton is a CIA agent who has posed as a MI6 agent and a KGB double agent, meaning she is even more ‘over-determined’ (Brown, 2015, p.229) than Evelyn Salt is by the uncertainty of her spy identity.

Further overdetermined significance might be attached to Lorraine Broughton’s representation as a bisexual superspy, since this was not part of the original graphic novel. In this regard Lorraine Broughton differs from Evelyn Salt, who is safely contained within the film narrative by her marriage to her husband, and although attractive she never appears

overtly eroticized. By contrast, Lorraine Broughton is sexualized, and during the mission she engages in a sexual relationship with another female spy, having previously been close to a male agent according to her narrative backstory. The film attracted attention in the media and from audiences for the portrayal of Lorraine Broughton's sexuality. For some commentators the film appeared to be progressive since Broughton's sexuality is made visible, and bisexuality is not often portrayed on screen (Fallon, 2017). For others though, the motivations behind Broughton's relationship with Delphine Lasalle and the style of the sex scenes between the two women make this representation problematic (Wilson, 2017). Though overly simplistic in some respects it is difficult not to discuss the sex scenes between them as tailored to the 'male gaze' which fetishizes their bodies and their sexual relationship.

The tensions and contradictions of Lorraine Broughton's relationship with Delphine Lasalle and her presentation as a queer female superspy may be illuminated by a comparative look at role traditionally played by the Bond girl in relationship to the Bond character. Delphine Lasalle is introduced in the film as a young and inexperienced French agent on her first mission. If Lorraine Broughton is a James Bond equivalent in the sense that she is a violent, elite, and unemotional superspy action hero, by contrast Delphine Lasalle fulfils the gender-traditional expectations of the Bond girl. As Katharina Hagen (2018) points out, in *Atomic Blonde* Lorraine Broughton's 'tough brand of femininity is augmented all the more because she is given...someone that she is charged with protecting and saving, and someone in whom she takes pleasure'. When viewed in this way 'Broughton really does become a "Jane Bond", a female action figure who is constrained by the mythic archetype of Bond, and who seemingly flouts conventions at the same time as she is forcibly consigned to a role long occupied by Bond's traditional brand of hyper-masculinity' (Hagen, 2018, p.4).

Such tensions and contradictions cannot easily be resolved. Whereas in the Bond films the relationship between James Bond and the Bond girl is traditionally used to confirm James Bond's reputation as a figure associated with heterosexuality, in *Atomic Blonde* the relations between Lorraine Broughton and Delphine Lasalle might provide a challenge to the patriarchal sexual order. That Delphine Lasalle is later killed off is problematic however, especially as an example of the widely used and widely criticized 'bury your gays' trope in popular culture where queer characters are treated as expendable.

***The Spy Who Dumped Me***

*The Spy Who Dumped Me* is another spy action parody. The film's title, an obvious play on the 1977 Bond film *The Spy Who Loved Me*, directly relates to the premise that informs this buddy comedy starring Mila Kunis and Kate McKinnon about two best friends who end up on a chaotic international spy action adventure. The coupling of comic scenarios with some scenes of intense violence, the use of the secret identity trope and a mission to safeguard secret data, means this film borrows from both ends of the espionage action continuum. Reactions to the particular combination of action and comedy were varied, but before making a comparison to the Bond spy action formula this section first considers how some critics highlighted the queer potential of this film for an audience.

*The Spy Who Dumped Me* is different from both *D.E.B.S.* and *Atomic Blonde* in that it doesn't have any explicitly queer characters. However, a look at commentary on this film suggests that it does not take much to read McKinnon's character Morgan Freeman (there's a joke in the name, of course) queerly. The practice of queer reading is widely accepted and uses strategies that enable multiple interpretations at all levels (textual, sub-textual, extra-textual and inter-textual) of mainstream film and popular genres including action. This is evidenced by the queer reading of past female action heroes, despite any attempt at disavowal, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This reading is a way to resist invisibility, often through attention to sub-text or connotation, and though the practice is not without some limitations, there are opportunities to challenge heteronormativity (Doty, 2000).

Interviewed for the release of *The Spy Who Dumped Me* by *The Advocate*, writer-director Susanna Fogel invited a reading attuned to the film's queer potential by discussing the casting of openly gay actor McKinnon as Morgan Freeman, and highlighting the decision not to give her character a romantic interest (Sobel, 2018). In the film it is Kunis' character Audrey Stockman who is dumped and discovers that her ex-boyfriend is a spy, and she also has another male romantic interest later. During the film's narrative the women are shown to have discovered new identities and supported one another. The final credits play to the Russian punk group Pussy Riot's song 'Bad girls' with the especially notable lyric 'God is a woman and she's tough and she's queer'. These credits are preceded by an epilogue set one year later in Tokyo, where they are revealed to be jointly operating as professional spies on a mission (still being underestimated by nearly everyone however) which gives the film an ending that prioritizes female friendship over heterosexual romance and fulfilment.

Besides the deliberate lack of a romantic subplot for Morgan Freeman, Fogel describes that she and co-writer David Iserson scripted lines for her that were ‘rejecting men that were interested in her and her disgust with sleazy men, and how she kind of generally doesn’t like the patriarchy’ (Sobel, 2018). These moments in the film, such as when she coolly responds to harassment from a guy at a bar by first calling out his behaviour and later attempting to teach him about the concept of feminism, contribute to this characterization, and the film’s feminist credentials also discussed by critics. Fogel explains that in the film most attention is instead paid to the supportive friendship between the women, rather than a conflict-driven female buddy dynamic (Ibid.). Morgan Freeman has complete faith in Audrey Stockman’s abilities throughout the movie. They take over from a male agent, and despite the film’s title the women are not defined by the role of sex or love object, as might be expected of female characters in espionage action.

Fogel told *The Advocate* that, ‘It’s sort of obvious to most people that [Morgan Freeman] is not straight-identifying” (Sobel, 2018). Fogel’s claim would seem to be borne out since the film instantly drew some queer readings, including some acknowledgement in the mainstream media. In these reviews, one of the most commented on aspects of the film is Freeman’s reaction to MI6 chief Wendy, played by Gillian Anderson. Reviewing *The Spy Who Dumped Me* for the British newspaper the *Evening Standard*, Charlotte O’Sullivan (2018) observes that ‘it’s pretty obvious which way Morgan swings. She gets the hots for Gillian Anderson’s stern MI6 boss’. Similarly, in a *Vanity Fair* review, K. Austin Collins (2018) remarks that ‘McKinnon brings a delightful queer vibe to her role, which, for her fans, is a hilarious bit of meta-text. She practically drools over Gillian Anderson, who plays an M.I.6 boss and appears here like a lightning bolt, all chic, blonde, and irreproachably tailored’. Both refer to the scene in which Freeman first encounters Anderson’s character at the intelligence headquarters. She looks at her appreciatively, proclaims her a ‘real life Judi Dench in our midst’ and declares that ‘I have so much respect for you that it’s circled around into objectification’, regardless of the MI6 chief’s icy indifference. These and other reviews and commentaries read this as a scene that especially foregrounds the film’s use of queer coding.

Anderson’s tough-yet-feminine MI6 chief in *The Spy Who Dumped Me* is evidently and self-consciously modelled on Dench’s version of M in the Bond films. Like the villain and the Bond girl, M plays a significant role in the ideological codes of Bond. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott (1987) discuss the ‘phallic code’ that informs James Bond’s

relationship with his superior: in the novels James Bond ‘derives his power and authority – his ‘license to kill’, and his gun – from M’ (p.132). Although in the Bond films the introduction of a female M played by Dench offered some revision of this character in the Pierce Brosnan era, during the following tenure of Daniel Craig as Bond the transformation is limited, and tensions emerge in the approach to female authority and the James Bond-M relationship (Boyce, 2015). This makes it all the more important that when *The Spy Who Dumped Me* spoofs this, the relationship between the MI6 chief and would-be-spy Morgan Freeman takes on a queer significance, perhaps gesturing toward a challenge to the heteronormative, patriarchal logic of the spy action film.

## **Conclusion**

Taken together the three spy action films discussed in this chapter demonstrate different approaches to the female action hero’s potential as a queer figure, and the representation of women as spies in popular culture. Despite (or because of) mixed reviews and poor box-office at the time of release, *D.E.B.S.* has now achieved something of a cult reputation. *D.E.B.S.* has equally received some positive scholarly attention for the way that it challenges norms and stereotypes. In fact, for Jeffrey Brown (2011) the film stands out from other action cinema for this reason. He states that ‘*D.E.B.S.* is in many regards one of the most progressive films to come out of Hollywood in recent years’ (p.157). By contrast most responses to *Atomic Blonde* recognize the film’s progressive possibilities but also some troubling regressive elements. This chapter has further explored that some aspects of the characterization and comedic tone of *The Spy Who Dumped Me* might invite and even assume an audience to read queerly, yet it should be noted that this does not directly tackle the issue of invisibility. All three of the films portray strong female characters. The violent action scenes in *Atomic Blonde* and *The Spy Who Dumped Me* are particularly intense, though whereas Lorraine Broughton’s talent as a superspy is closely linked to her fighting skills and her sexuality, in *The Spy Who Dumped Me* the emphasis is on female friendship where the women start out as amateurish accidental agents. It must be said that the characters are decidedly white in both films, however the *D.E.B.S.* are a more diverse group. In another study there would be much more to say about the female spies in these films as feminist figures.

One dominant recurrence across the films is that gender and sexuality in James Bond is a common point of (media/self-)reference. Throughout this chapter some comparisons have been made to elements of the Bond formula and relationships – the villain, the Bond girl and M – to attempt to understand how key Bond conventions are reconfigured. On the one hand, such comparisons might be considered to affirm James Bond’s continued dominance in spy action. On the other hand, this chapter has pointed out the potential challenge these films may pose to the traditional dominance of the powerful straight male superspy action hero, subverting or appropriating well-established generic, gender and heteronormative conventions.

Although this chapter has focused on representation in the three case studies provided, it should finally be noted that they all have in common that women are either a central or important creative force behind these spy action films. Robinson wrote and directed *D.E.B.S.*; Fogel co-wrote and directed *The Spy Who Dumped Me*; and Theron co-produced *Atomic Blonde*. In interviews, Robinson has discussed her personal investment in queer representation in film and television, and Fogel and Theron have both regularly talked to the media about their queer allyship. This clearly illustrates the significance of discussing wider issues of diversity, including the intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and class in the film industry to further expand the possibilities of the action genre, and test or extend representations for audiences.

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