"Queer Hitchcock." What does this mean? If we understand "queer" as an adjective, then it is about naming and analyzing what is "queer" about Hitchcock's life or his work. If we understand "queer" as a verb (as in "to queer Hitchcock"), then it is about reading his life or his work from certain cultural or theoretical positions. Queer Hitchcock, in the first instance, is concerned with (auto)biographical signs or textual codes that mark the man and his works as expressing queerness – or as "being" queer – in some way. In the second sense, the focus is upon how particular culturally- or theoretically-informed readers understand Hitchcock and his work in queer ways. In practice, most commentaries move between suggesting that queerness in Hitchcock is an inherent property of the text (whether the "text" is Hitchcock himself or his various cultural productions) and suggesting that it takes a reader attuned to queerness, in one way or another, to explain how Hitchcock might be understood as queer. In Hitchcock's Bi-Textuality, Robert Samuels enacts this coming together of textual and readerly approaches when he promises to "show how Hitchcock's films are extremely heterogeneous and present multiple forms of sexual identification and desire, although they have most often been read through the reductive lens of male heterosexuality" (1).

In order to consider the widest range of popular and academic work on Hitchcock’s films – on which most of this Queer Hitchcock work has focused – this chapter understands, and uses, queer as (1) an umbrella term that includes all categories of non-normative sex, gender, and sexuality identities and practices, such as homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, non-normative heterosexual, genderqueer, intersex, and as (2) indicating positions and practices that are both non-normative and not clearly connected to, or contained by, existing sex, gender, or sexuality categories. I should add that, in the academy at least,
queer has also become associated with work that conducts progressive or radical critiques of normative heterosexuality. Things get a bit tricky when deciding what to include within the non-normative in general and what constitutes non-normative heterosexuality. Should all non-normative sexuality practices be considered queer? Incest? Necrophilia? Bestiality? Sadomasochism? Pedophilia? When and how does the enactment of gender become non-normative? When a woman punches someone? When a man cries? When and how, exactly, does heterosexuality become non-normative and, therefore, queer? Is non-normative heterosexuality any sexual activity that is not conducted within marriage, in the missionary position, and for the purpose of procreation? Or does it happen whenever a woman is on top?

Since I don’t consider queer as referring only to “positive” or progressive/radical non-normativity, all non-normative sexuality will be fair game in discussing Queer Hitchcock. As for non-normative gender and heterosexuality, while definitions of what “the norm” is for gender and heterosexual performance in Britain and the United States do not change radically during the period when Hitchcock is alive and making films – a consistency enforced by the British Board of Film Censors and the Production Code Administration, among other social institutions – there are consensual shifts throughout the twentieth century concerning “proper” masculine, feminine, and heterosexual behavior. There is also the experience of looking back at Hitchcock and his films from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, with its considerably different notions of what falls within, and outside of, sex, gender, and sexuality norms. In deciding what we might consider expressions of queer gender or non-normative heterosexuality in Hitchcock and his films – as well as in what critics say about these films – I will keep one eye on history and one on the here-and-now. So what is queer about Hitchcock, the private person, the public figure, the artist? Who are the queer characters in Hitchcock-directed films? What, more generally, are the queer qualities of these films? What moral or ideological positions do Hitchcock and his films, individually or as a group, take on queerness? These questions lay out the major issues and concerns in popular and scholarly work when it comes to Queer Hitchcock.

Biographies and autobiographies are considered non-fiction, but, as we know, they offer interpretations of lives that give these lives narrative structure and thematic coherence. While they are not autobiographies per se, interviews often use autobiographical material to construct or support a desired public persona. Since Hitchcock didn’t write an official autobiography, but was interviewed many times, we might take the collected interviews as providing an autobiography of sorts. Certainly these interviews have been a rich source of material for Hitchcock biographers, all of whom cite at least one of those classic anecdotes the director loved to repeat. For our purposes, the anecdote du jour, which takes place variously in Paris, Munich, or Berlin in the early 1920s, involves Hitchcock and his wife, “two innocents abroad” (McGilligan 143), being taken to either a brothel or to a sex party at which they watch two women having sex. Depending upon the interview,
Hitchcock reports that he either became a mesmerized voyeur in the face of queer sex (and filed the image away) or he exclaimed something like, “But this is a world of perdition!” (Fallaci 58).

Given the composite portrait the biographies paint of Hitchcock and sexuality, there is every reason to conclude that he was simultaneously appalled and enthralled by the woman-on-woman action. After telling his version of this anecdote, Patrick McGilligan remarks that “the Jesuit in [Hitchcock] was attracted by taboos and fascinated by sin – and sex ranked high in the Catholic pantheon of sins” (65). Suggesting that the greatest taboo – and therefore the most fascinating one – for Hitchcock was queer sexuality, McGilligan continues by making a brief excursion into the “Sapphic overtones” in Hitchcock’s films “inspired” by the “lesbian” incident (65). Truffaut cites butch-femme coded couples in The Pleasure Garden (1925) and The Lodger (1926) as evidence that “from [his] very first pictures on, there is a distinct impression that [he] was fascinated by the abnormal.” Hitchcock replies, “That may be true, but it didn’t go very deep; it was rather superficial” before launching into the “lesbian” anecdote (39). The (auto)biographical fixation on this homosexual story should not obscure the fact that Hitchcock was also simultaneously disturbed and aroused by heterosexual sex, which he found “perverted in a different way” (Cameron and Perkins 51). Indeed, Robin Wood asserts that we can’t fully understand Hitchcock’s attraction-repulsion to homosexuality unless we consider it alongside his equally conflicted attitudes about heterosexuality (“Letter” 195).

Donald Spoto’s The Dark Side of Genius provides the most consistently queer interpretation of the director’s life, in part by using Hitchcock’s off-the-set life to read his films and using the films to understand his life. More than once, Hitchcock said that through his films he expressed the desires and anxieties he was loath to reveal in his personal life, so Spoto’s approach is understandable. In “The Murderous Gays: Hitchcock’s Homophobia,” Robin Wood analyzes Spoto’s biography and concludes, “The testimonies and biographical data that Spoto presents, with reference to Hitchcock’s attitude to homosexuality and homosexuals, add up to evidence that is characteristically complex and contradictory ... suggesting an ambivalence that parallels and is closely related to the ambivalence toward women” and femininity (202).

Spoto’s biography sets up its queer thematic on Hitchcock’s life while discussing The Lodger. According to Spoto, Hitchcock was initially “shock[ed],” then “[f]ascinated,” by “the darkly handsome and effeminate” star of the film, Ivor Novello, who was open about his homosexuality, at least within show business circles (Dark 86). Novello would be the first of a number of actors Hitchcock worked with – Esme Percy, Henry Kendall, John Gielgud, Charles Laughton, Judith Anderson, Tallulah Bankhead, Farley Granger, Cary Grant, John Dall, Montgomery Clift, O.E. Hasse, Anthony Perkins – who, for Spoto, offered the director vicarious queer thrills as they represented “the possibilities of life’s alternatives” (86). Taking into account all Spoto and other biographers have to say about Hitchcock’s interactions
with queer performers, it appears that the director was both disturbed and compelled by these actors – and that he felt that they could lend a certain queer aura to their characterizations and to his films. According to *Rope* (1948) scriptwriter Arthur Laurents, “Hitchcock knew exactly what he was dealing with in this story” (Spoto, *Dark* 304). The homosexuality in *Rope* “never came up until we got to casting,” Laurents said in another interview. Cary Grant and Montgomery Clift turned down the parts of Rupert and Brandon, respectively, because they wouldn’t take the “risk”; John Dall (Brandon) and Farley Granger (Phillip), however, “were very aware of what they were doing” (Russo 94). According to Laurents, Hitchcock “wanted to be able to get away with” the “homosexual element of the script” (Spoto, *Dark* 304) and “was interested in perverse sexuality of any kind. ... But being a strong Catholic, he probably thought it was wrong” (Russo 94).

If we are to believe the unnamed actress Spoto cites “who knew [Hitchcock] well,” the director’s queer “instincts” extended to gender, as he “always told his actors that they really had to be part masculine and part feminine in order to get inside any other character” because “[s]ubjectivity ... and feeling ... transcended gender” (*Dark* 86). Spoto and others read many Hitchcock films – especially *Blackmail* (1929), *Rebecca* (1940), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Marnie* (1964) – as offering evidence of how Hitchcock’s own “subjectivity” appears to “transcend gender” in the sense of empathetically representing women/“the feminine” and constructing complex characters who combine traditional gender qualities. Hitchcock also appears to have enjoyed more literal gender play. Spoto describes an “offbeat home movie” shot in the early 1930s in which the director appears in drag after spending “hours of preparation – sewing sheets, refining the makeup, making a wig” – for his performance (130). Although “[c]arefully guarded for decades after,” Spoto contends that the film was “shown in Hitchcock’s private screening room at Universal Studios in 1976” (130). The revised edition of François Truffaut’s book-length interview with the director reproduces (without credits) a short 1950s article by John D. Weaver, “The Man Behind the Body,” that places its text about Hitchcock “living the orderly nine-to-six life of a civil servant” next to a large picture of the director decked out as a dignified matron, complete with lace and pearls, looking demurely at the camera (321).

Certainly something queer had been building up in the (auto)biographical air over the years, if Georgine Darcy, who played Miss Torso in *Rear Window* (1954) could tell biographer Charlotte Chandler that, after Hitchcock’s death, interviewers would ask her, “Was he gay?” (219). Patrick McGilligan cites an appearance by John Russell Taylor on a 1999 episode of *El Hollywood True Story* during which Taylor drops a bombshell that he kept out of his Hitchcock biography. According to Taylor, the director told him that he might have become a “poof” if Alma hadn’t come along (McGilligan 65). Perhaps as telling is *Out* magazine’s quoting a note from Hitchcock to Joan Crawford: “In my very rare homosexual moments I often glance through the pages of *Vogue*, where the other day I saw a magnificent picture of you” (Duckett 8). Like the home movie, his “poof” comment to Taylor, and his
picture as a matron, this statement reveals that Hitchcock, if not fully queer himself, had his queer gender and sexuality “moments” that were pitched somewhere between serious engagement and comic detachment. The Vogue comment and the comment from that unnamed actress also reveal that Hitchcock seemed to understand that gender and sexuality identity/subjectivity are not monolithic or unified, but can be a many-splendored, if sometimes disconcerting, thing.

If Hitchcock the person only sporadically revealed his queerness, his films provided him with a more consistent outlet. “I think too much sex while you are working goes against the work and that repressed sex is more constructive for the creative person,” Hitchcock told Charlotte Chandler, adding, “It must get out, and so it goes into the work. I think it helped create a sense of sex in my work” (7). If we follow Hitchcock (who followed Freud), “repressed sex” doesn’t generally “get out” in normative ways. Popular and scholarly discourse over the years has provided a striking guidebook for spotting how and where non-normative sexuality and gender seems to “get out” in Hitchcock films, as well as offering a handbook for reading Hitchcock queerly. If we use a definition of queer that includes all sex, gender, and sexuality non-normativity, the Hitchcock films with the most consistent critical and audience queer quotient have been (in chronological order) The Lodger, Murder! (1930), Rebecca, Shadow of a Doubt, The Paradine Case (1947), Rope, Strangers on a Train (1951), Vertigo, North by Northwest (1959), Psycho (1960), and Marnie.

For critics like Robin Wood, “compound[ing] the problem” of naming the non-heterosexual queer characters in Hitchcock films is that “it was impossible openly to acknowledge even the existence of homosexuality in a Hollywood movie; consequently, homosexuality had to be coded, and discreetly, and coding, even when indiscreet, is notoriously likely to produce ambiguities and uncertainties” (205). For example, should the male transvestism in Murder! and Psycho be understood as a code for a gender-inversion form of homosexuality, or are these instances of (queer) heterosexual cross-dressing, as they are connected to theatrical performances and to a personality “split” between a young man who looks at women through a peephole and his dead mother? Critics run the gamut in making cases for who, exactly, are the non-heterosexual Hitchcock queers. There is, on one hand, a Wood-like conservatism that concedes “supposed to be” homosexuality only to Handel Fane (Esme Percy) in Murder!, Brandon and Phillip in Rope, Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson) in Rebecca, Andre Latour (Louis Jourdan) in The Paradine Case, and Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker) in Strangers on a Train. On the other hand, there is the liberalism of Theodore Price, who finds homosexual elements in most Hitchcock films and queer characters in many of them, often by understanding any sign of unconventional gender performance and all troubled relationships with women as evidence of male homosexuality or bisexuality. Give or take a character or two, most commentators seem to agree that, besides the characters on Wood’s list, Hitchcock’s major non-heterosexual queers would include Leonard (North by Northwest), Norman Bates (Psycho), and Marnie Edgar (Marnie). Less frequent or sustained cases have been made for the queerness of the
Lodger (The Lodger), the General (Secret Agent [1936]), Caldicott and Charters (The Lady Vanishes [1938]), Rebecca and the second Mrs. de Winter (Rebecca), Isobel Sedbusk (Suspicion [1941]), Uncle Charlie (Shadow of a Doubt), Alex Sebastian (Notorious [1946]), Rupert Cadell (Rope), Guy Haines (Strangers on a Train), Father Logan and Otto Keller (I Confess [1953]), John Robie (To Catch a Thief [1955]), Phillip Vandamm (North by Northwest), Lil Mainwaring (Marnie), and Bob Rusk (Frenzy [1972]). I would add to this list Louisa Windeatt (The Farmer’s Wife [1925]), young Charlie (Shadow of a Doubt), and Herb Hawkins (Shadow of a Doubt).

Interestingly, if the Lodger, the second Mrs. de Winter (Joan Fontaine), Rebecca, Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten), young Charlie (Teresa Wright), Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains), Norman (Anthony Perkins), Marnie (Tippi Hedren), and Bob Rusk (Barry Foster) are not read as homosexual or bisexual, they are sometimes understood in relation to incest, and, therefore, considered queer in another way, whether heterosexually (the Lodger; his sister, and his mother; Rebecca and her cousin Jack Favell [George Sanders]; Uncle Charlie, his sister, and his niece; young Charlie and her uncle; Sebastian and his mother; Norman and his mother; Rusk and his mother), homosexually (young Charlie, Marnie, and their mothers; the second Mrs. de Winter and her mother substitutes), or bisexually (if we consider Rebecca, Jack, Maxim, and Mrs. Danvers; the second Mrs. de Winter, her mother substitutes, and Maxim; young Charlie in relation to both her mother and her uncle; Sebastian in terms of his mother and his comments about Prescott [Louis Calhern] and Devlin [Cary Grant] being “handsome” men; and Marnie in terms of her mother and Mark Rutland [Sean Connery]). Joan Fontaine’s Lina McLaidlaw (Suspicion) and Rod Taylor’s Mitch Brenner (The Birds [1963]) might also be considered under the queer sign of incest. Besides incest, other forms of queerness evoked — if never made explicit — in Hitchcock’s films include necrophilia (most strikingly in The Lodger, Rebecca, and Vertigo), bestiality (Marnie, in which Marnie croons to her horse, “Oh, Porio, if you want to bite somebody, bite me!” and, arguably, The Birds, in which beaks most memorably penetrate Annie Heywood [Suzanne Pleshette], Melanie Daniels [Tippi Hedren], and a farmer, leaving the former in a suggestive position and the latter two prone on bedroom floors), and sadomasochism. Sadomasochism presents the challenge of (1) separating representations of more positive consensual S/M role-playing from its more negative “power struggle” forms, and (2) deciding what kind or degree of abusive sadomasochism would mark “non-normativity,” particularly in representing heterosexual relationships, which in their normative forms frequently contain some degree of mental, if not physical, abuse. As far as I can tell, no one has made a case for the first kind of sadomasochism as being represented in a Hitchcock film, and Notorious would appear to be the model for separating garden variety heterosexual sadomasochism from its more pathological queer forms in Hitchcock films, while Rope offers the same model for homosexual relationships.

Part of making a case for the sexuality of characters in Hitchcock films is identifying, or rejecting, certain visual and aural codes or particular narrative
constructions as signs of queerness or straightness. In establishing what he considers Hitchcock’s homosexual “motifs,” Michael Walker finds that “[h]omosexual undercurrents are one of the most persistent and significant features to Hitchcock films” (52). For Walker, these “undercurrents” can work to establish particular characters as homosexual, or they can create a more vaguely queer erotic atmosphere around characters and events. For example, Walker points out the frequency of such motifs as the same sex “cruising” scenario – as in Rebecca, The Paradine Case, Strangers on a Train, North by Northwest, Torn Curtain (1966), and Topaz (1969) – and offers extended analyses of the bedroom encounter between Andre Latour and Anthony Keane (Gregory Peck) in The Paradine Case and the hotel meeting between Philippe Dubois (Roscoe Lee Browne) and Luis Uribe (Don Randolph) in Topaz to show how they evoke “a gay pickup” (252–54, 257–58; see also Durgan 388 on Topaz). Walker also considers the homosexual charge in episodes of male-male voyeurism, particularly in espionage films like Secret Agent, but also in such films as Strangers on a Train and Rear Window. One might expand Walker’s discussion by considering the queer ménage à trois in which the one person, usually a woman, acts as the trigger or the diffuser for homosexual, bisexual, or incestuous desire, as in The Ring (1927), Murder!, Rebecca, Shadow of a Doubt, Notorious, The Paradine Case, Strangers on a Train, I Confess, North by Northwest, Psycho, The Birds, and Marnie.

Robin Wood makes a spirited case for not identifying characters as homosexual based on “heterosexual” cultural practices. For example, he takes issue with critics who seem “to assume that ‘sexually disturbed’ equals ‘homosexual,’” or those who accept “popular” notions that a gay man “shows traces of effeminacy, had a close relationship with [his] mother, or hates and murders women” (“Letter to the Editor” 195; “Murderous” 197). However, Wood admits that Hitchcock may “have shared” these “heterosexual myths about homosexuals” (“Murderous” 205). Robert J. Yanal takes up this idea: “[I]t is just these [heterosexual] ‘myths’ which a heterosexual film director … would have used to signal homosexuality to … [a general] audience otherwise clueless about gay men” and other queer folks (105). Certainly Price’s reading of widespread male homosexuality in Hitchcock films hinges on understanding the director and his films as working within mainstream conventions, including the idea that homosexual men hate or resent women. Implicitly, at least, most critics seem to agree that Hitchcock – out of prejudice, ignorance, or expediency – employed certain dominant cultural codes to represent homosexuality and other forms of queerness. However, not all commentators have the critical distance of Wood and Yanal. John Hepworth is particularly scathing about critics who unreflexively buy into the stereotypes Hitchcock employs and who seem unaware of the homophobia of their own remarks. Hepworth cites an example from Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol:

When Hitchcock gets around to probing the problem of homosexuality ... we will become aware that his condemnation of homosexuality is justly based on the
impossibility of true homosexual love: since this love is only an imitation, it is condemned to nonreciprocity.

(27–28)

For Hepworth, passages like this reveal how certain critics are themselves guilty of the “idiotic prejudice” against homosexuals that he finds in many Hitchcock films (191).

With Hepworth’s remarks about Hitchcock critics, we move from debates about merely naming queer characters or queer situations to examining the politics of Queer Hitchcock. Hepworth takes a very hard line, linking negative representation in the films to psychosocial flaws in Hitchcock:

Whenever Hitchcock reaches for his pet theme of “psychological disorders” you can almost invariably expect him to deal with sexual disorders, and this in turn usually means crazy – and I mean crazy – dykes and faggots. ...

Any thoughtful examination of Hitchcock’s cinema reveals that ... gay sexuality was his supreme bête noir, and that Hitch was a supreme fag baiter. ... The infuriating nastiness of Hitchcock’s most homophobic films lies in his willingness – even eagerness – to strike low blows and hold up crowd-pleasing scapegoats.

(188)

In one interview, Hitchcock seems to resist readings like Hepworth’s that understand many of his psychopathic murderers as homosexuals, by noting that “[n]ormally a psychopath is sexually impotent. He manages to make it with women only when he strangles them” (Nogueira and Zalaffi 127). But what does this mean, exactly? Is someone who can become aroused by women only by killing them unambiguously heterosexual? Should we consider this some horribly “queer” form of heterosexuality? Might we understand actions like these as signs of “repressed” or “latent” homosexuality? Revelations in later Hitchcock biographies, like McGilligan’s and Chandler’s, about the director’s own impotence – he sometimes introduced himself as “Hitch, without a cock” (Chandler 35) – as well as promotional photographs of the director “playfully” strangling women, make his remark about sexual psychopathology all the more provocative, especially when we consider that many male–female strangulations (and stabbings, which would “read” similarly) in his films are committed by men who are marked as queer, if not as clearly homosexual: Ivor Novello’s Lodger (if you see him as the killer), Uncle Charlie, Bruno Anthony, Norman Bates, Bob Rusk. And what might we make of those highly charged male–male strangulations in Rope and Torn Curtain? With the exception of Torn Curtain, the murderous men in these films are often decoded as both psycho and queer. So, while only a certain percentage of murders in Hitchcock’s films are committed by characters who might be read as queer or homosexual psychopaths – and whose violent psychopathology could be understood as an expression of their queerness – the bottom line for many people appears to be that these killer queers represent a large percentage of all queer characters in Hitchcock’s oeuvre.
But just how large is this cohort of killer queers in relation to all queer representation in Hitchcock? This gets us back to the question of how one goes about designating who or what is queer in Hitchcock films. Hepworth is one of the critics Wood thinks is too broad—and too set on using dominant reading practices—in naming queer characters, and therefore concluding that all psychotic murderers in Hitchcock films are queer. For his part, Wood understands characters like Uncle Charlie, Norman Bates, and Bob Rusk as straight psychopaths, and he suggests that we might consider Hitchcock’s “supposed to be” queer characters, psychopathic or not, in relation to how the director represents heterosexuals and heterosexuality (“Murderous” 207). While he does see a “homophobic element” in Hitchcock films, Wood also points out that many of these films are highly critical of straight men and “patriarchal domination” (“Letter to the Editor” 195). That is, if queerness is sometimes phobically (re)presented in Hitchcock films, then straightness, particularly straight masculinity, comes in for its fair share of negative representation. “This doesn’t excuse the homophobia,” for Wood, but it can explain why a figure like Bruno in Strangers on a Train is presented both homophobically and as “a far more attractive and fascinating character than the shallow, bland, and opportunistic ‘hero’” (“Letter to the Editor” 195). Wood also suggests that if we begin queerly reading outside of heterosexual and homophobic dominant culture conventions, we might discover queer characters in Hitchcock films who aren’t linked to mental illness or to violence:

Is Louis Jourdan in The Paradine Case supposed to be gay? He has none of the iconography of “gayicity,” but gayicity has always been a heterosexual construction, one way or another. ... As a gay man, I find it easier to accept him ... as gay or bisexual than, for example, Joseph Cotten in Shadow of a Doubt or Anthony Perkins in Psycho. But if this reading is correct (or at least plausible), he is certainly the gay character in Hitchcock who is neither neurotic nor villainous.

(205)

For the past two decades, most ideological analyses of Queer Hitchcock have taken Wood’s middle road, which considers how the ambiguous coding of non-normative gender and sexuality in Hitchcock films frequently allows for readings that recognize the potential for homophobia (or a less specific queerphobia) along with the potential for readings of queer characters and narratives that might, for example, make a case for the attractive (queer) villain, or for a film such as Rope being more about how homophobic, heterosexist, patriarchal culture perverts Brandon and Phillip than it is about how queerness leads to psychopathology and murder.

Wood’s call for reading practices less constrained by dominant culture’s ways of seeing has also been taken up by a number of critics who, besides Andre Latour, have added Louisa Windeatt, Caldicott and Charters, the second Mrs. de Winter, Isobel Sedbush, Herb Hawkins, young Charlie, and Lila Crane to an ever-growing list of what we might called Hitchcock’s usually overlooked “stealth queers.” These stealth queers are not necessarily “positive” representations, but are characters
whose visual, aural, and narrative (re)presentation generally resists the easy, common dominant-cultural practice of equating things like "gender inversion," an artistic sensibility, and closeness to one's mother to queerness — and queerness to neurosis, psychosis, violence, criminality, sin, evil, and villainy. Granted, a character like Louisa Windeatt (Louie Pounds) is presented wearing a tweedy, tailored skirt, jacket, and tie ensemble, but the film clearly is on her side when this robust, independent landowner laughs uproariously in the face of a marriage proposal from egotistical widower Samuel Sweetland (Jameson Thomas). She gives him no reason for her refusal — but we can guess at one reason she laughs at her befuddled suitor. Similar sartorial coding again becomes "classic" rather than "clichéd" (or "typing" rather than "stereotyping") when placed in a benign narrative context in Suspicion:

When Lina and Johnnie ... go for dinner at the novelist Isobel Sedbusk's house, there are two other guests. One is Isobel's brother Bertram; the other is a woman who is dressed in a manner which is clear 1940s coding for a lesbian: jacket, tie, tightly drawn back hair. It is fairly clear that she is not Bertram's companion. Isobel calls her 'Phil' ... and she in turn calls Isobel 'Izzy'; surely Hitchcock is implying that the two are a (completely unneurotic) gay couple.

(Walker 249)

One might also note here that while "Phil" may be more obviously coded, Isobel (Auriol Lee) is not — though she is made legible as a lesbian by her association with Phil. But, again, even the "clear 1940s coding for a [mannish] lesbian" is positively presented — especially in relation to the dysfunctional heterosexual couple, Lina and Johnnie. Then there is Lila (Vera Miles), who also has a no-nonsense tailored ensemble to match her take-charge attitude. If Psycho were a conventional film, the narrative would make her more normatively feminine so that she could take her murdered sister's place as the girlfriend of Sam Loomis (John Gavin) — which is what happens in the novel. But this Lila has no interest in men, she doesn't like Sam, and she doesn't hesitate to step in as detective and avenger when Sam, Arbogast, and the local authorities seem too slow or too tentative in investigating her sister's disappearance. Gus Van Sant's 1998 remake was much more explicit in representing Lila (Julianne Moore) as lesbian hero, but clearly the signs were already subtly — and affirmingly — there in Hitchcock's film.

Shadow of a Doubt's soft-spoken Herb (Hume Cronyn), who lives with his mother and continually draws the father of the Newton family away from his wife and children, is made a sympathetic and warmly comic figure, particularly when he is juxtaposed with the incestuous Uncle Charlie—young Charlie—Emma Newton (Patricia Collinge) triangle. Herb also becomes a hero when he rescues young Charlie from succumbing to carbon monoxide poisoning in the garage. Rounding out this examination of Hitchcock's heroic queers are Caldicott (Naunton Wayne) and Charters (Basil Radford), from The Lady Vanishes, whose lack of interest in women, and appearance in a small bed sharing a pair of pajamas, codes them as a couple for some viewers. Initially, Caldicott and Charters are represented as comical
and self-centered. But they are no worse than the antagonistic straight couples, and they save the day in a climactic gun battle.

One recent line of critical inquiry that takes in both controversial killer queers and stealth queers considers the dandy figure in relation to Queer Hitchcock. Richard Allen finds Hitchcock’s use of dandyism an important part of the director’s “romantic irony,” which combines “ideal[ized]” and “perverse” representations of sexuality, whether straight or queer (118). In Allen’s reading, the dandy is a “complex” figure, who, “[c]onsidered as a figure who is incipiently homosexual, though not explicitly so, ... can also be defined by the way that he combines feminine and masculine traits in accordance with the theories of gender that circulated in Hitchcock’s youth, where homosexuality was conceived in terms of male femininity – a feminine soul in a man’s body” (83, 84). For Thomas Elsaesser, “Hitchcock’s dandyism” (both in the man and in his films) is “a combination of the aesthete, the rogue and the mountebank,” representing “a mode of irresponsibility, playfulness, unseriousness and sexual ambiguity that combined the stance of the Oscar Wilde dandy with a more aggressive brand of schoolboy humour and a willful immaturity” (10). While he admits that most Hitchcock’s villains are connected to a dandyism “often made ‘sinister’ by stereotypically homosexual traits or hints of sexual perversion,” Elsaesser also contends that some of Hitchcock’s protagonists are coded as dandies to a certain degree, and, therefore, are ripe for the queering, including Robert Donat’s Richard Hannay (The 39 Steps [1935]) and Cary Grant’s Johnnie Aysgarth (Suspicion) and John Robie (To Catch a Thief).

Marking a difference from Elsaesser’s work on the Hitchcock dandy, Allen finds that “while there is only a thin line between the dandy” and certain gothic “Jekyll/ Hyde hero figures (like Maxim de Winter in Rebecca),” Hitchcock dandies are always (a) criminals and (b) antagonists (and doubles) of the films’ heroes, “demarcated from [the heroes] by their queer sexuality, which excludes them from entering into a normative heterosexual relationship” (106–07). While Allen’s Hitchcock dandies can’t enter into a “normative heterosexual relationship,” one might follow Wood in considering these queer criminal dandies against the many straight-coded Hitchcock protagonists, like John “Scottie” Ferguson (James Stewart) in Vertigo or Mark Rutland in Marnie, who also are not part of normative heterosexual relationships. These characters – for better, but usually for worse – might also be said to inhabit queer representational spaces.

Heterosexuality is also queered in Hitchcock through what Lee Edelman calls Hitchcock’s “attack on ‘heteronormativity’” in many films (quoted in Allen xi). Vertigo, Notorious, and Marnie would top the list of films critics have read as scathing indictments of heterosexuality, as these films reveal how horrifying it is when heteronormative notions about gender roles, romantic love, and sexuality are taken to their “logical” conclusions. Of course, not everyone finds Hitchcock’s take on heterosexuality all that progressive or radical. For all the elements of heteronormative exposé and critique in Vertigo, for example, there are aspects of the film that invite us to share Scottie’s patriarchal romantic reverie. Mark Rappaport
feels that even though "hell is the couple," for Hitchcock, and "[t]he relationships portrayed in [his] films are codependencies that are fueled by dovetailing neurotic needs," the director usually holds out "the notion of love, however damaged or distorted," as a possible means of redeeming these "flawed relationship[s]" (48–49). "In this respect, Sam [Joseph Cotten] and Henrietta [Ingrid Bergman] in Under Capricorn (1949) are the paradigmatic Hitchcock couple" for Rappaport (49).

Raymond Durgnat also finds that if the representation of heterosexuality in Hitchcock films "has its troubled streak, its variations from the norm are usually prudent, stylised and, if not exactly innocent, impersonal. ... [T]here is much teasing, much dissatisfaction, much involuntary tussling for dominance. ... [But] Hitchcock remains, prudenly, within the limits" (53, 51, 53). However, Durgnat makes much of the moment in the Truffaut interview where Hitchcock, while discussing the heterosexual couple in The 39 Steps, insists that the handcuffing in this film (and, by implication, Joe’s handcuffing Daisy in The Lodger) "has deeper implications. ... [I]t’s somewhere in the area of fetishism, isn’t it? ... When I visited the Vice Museum in Paris, I noticed there was considerable evidence of sexual aberrations through restraint" (Durgnat 52; Truffaut 47). A page or two earlier, Durgnat asserts that the "simplest yet most precise image" of heterosexuality in Hitchcock is in The 39 Steps, where "[h]andcuffs pull your limp hand over the silk-stocked thighs of the girl who wants to hand you over to the police" (51). Setting aside Durgnat’s heterocentric male description of the shot, I wonder how many people would consider the image heteronormative? This image also takes us back to Hitchcock’s own admission of impotency, often signaled by his “Hitch, without the cock” introduction. While a man “without a cock” might be in a heterosexual relationship, would it be considered heteronormative?

Besides The 39 Steps, some of the Hitchcock films that feature signs of male impotence in the face of the (hyper-)feminine are The Lodger, Rich and Strange (1931), Rebecca, Notorious, Strangers on a Train, Rear Window, Dial M for Murder (1954), To Catch a Thief, Vertigo, North by Northwest, Psycho, and Frenzy. Of course, in order to conduct a queer heterosexual reading of a number of these films, you would have to understand certain male characters (the Lodger, Bruno Anthony, Guy Haines, Norman Bates, Bob Rusk) as straight and not as homosexual or bisexual. Not surprisingly, considering Hitchcock’s pronouncements on impotence and psychopathology, a number of these male characters turn sadistic and become aroused by verbally or physically abusing women in attempts to control them. Since women in Hitchcock films are rarely complete masochists – they almost always fight back to some extent – Hitchcock’s male sadists are seldom able to achieve the terrifying, full-blown queer sadomasochism of the heterosexual relationships in Notorious and Vertigo. Rebecca represents an interesting case of queer heterosexuality. While it is initially Maxim (Laurence Olivier) who torments his masochistically-inclined second wife, leading her to the brink of suicide (with the help of Mrs. Danvers), it turns out that his callous treatment of his second wife is the result of the equally sadistic treatment he endured at the
hands of his first wife, Rebecca, who forced him into a position of impotent shame and fury, which he then takes out on his second wife. Psycho is another interesting case for a queer heterosexual reading, not only because the sadomasochistic heterosexual couple living beyond the pale consists of a mother and son, but because this couple has been internalized by the son, Norman, who most likely murdered his mother in a fit of jealousy and repented by preserving her body and taking on a version of her personality in which she is as intensely jealous of his being with other women as he was of her being with other men after his father died. Norman is both the sadistic mother who bullies her son and kills any woman he becomes interested in and the masochistic son who puts up with his mother’s abuse and cleans up after her murders. Here is a gender-and-sexuality queer heterosexual couple contained in one psychotic body.

But a big part of what makes Psycho an endlessly fascinating film in the Queer Hitchcock canon is the way in which it becomes the locus of a number of queernesses: abusive heterosexual sadomasochism, incest, necrophilia, gender crossing or mixing, and repressed homosexuality — if you read as “repressed homosexuality” Norman’s use of an internalized, murderous mother as a way for him to take on/in “the feminine,” a way to remain permanently close to his mother, a way to avoid sexual contact with women, and a way to avoid dealing with what all this might mean. The most persistent queer focus on Psycho has been on its incest theme, which might include Lila and Marion living in their dead mother’s house (and with her memory), Marion’s co-worker, Caroline (Patricia Hitchcock), going on about the strain of dealing with the rivalry between her mother and new husband, the oilman Cassidy (Frank Albertson) coming on to Marion while telling her about his daughter, and Norman’s relationship with his mother. All of these parent-child relationships are presented in sexually charged contexts that juxtapose normative heterosexuality with its queerly incestuous rival. Marion’s boyfriend, Sam, is reluctant to come to her house for a date, feeling they’d have to send her sister away and “turn mother’s picture to the wall.” Caroline tells Marion how her mother provided her with tranquilizers to knock her out on her honeymoon. Cassidy uses an insinuating tone as he calls his daughter “my baby” and “my sweet little girl” while discussing her upcoming wedding. And Norman apparently killed his widowed mother after he found her in bed with a man.

Same sex and opposite sex incest turns out to be one of the most persistent forms of queer sexuality in Hitchcock films. As with homosexuality and bisexuality, the incest motif in Hitchcock films most generally takes the form of insinuating or suggesting incestuous desire rather than gesturing toward the physical act itself. Incest is often suggested in Hitchcock films by having a parent and child set up housekeeping together in ways that indicate the child is substituting for a physically or emotionally absent parent, while the parent becomes like a spouse or partner to his or her child. This formation occurs, for example, in The Lodger, The Farmer’s Wife, Shadow of a Doubt, Notorious, Strangers on a Train, North by Northwest, Psycho, The Birds, and Marnie. Cases have also been made for incest-suggestiveness
occurring in quasi-parent/child relationships, like those between Iris (Margaret Lockwood) and Miss Fray (Dame May Whitty) in The Lady Vanishes and the second Mrs. de Winter and her matronly employer, Mrs. Van Hopper (Florence Bates), in Rebecca. Then there are those instances where sibling or other close familial relationships are represented within intense, sexually-charged contexts: The Lodger (the Lodger and his sister), Rebecca (Rebecca and her cousin Jack Favell), Shadow of a Doubt (young Charlie and both her mother and her uncle, Uncle Charlie and both his niece and his sister), Psycho (Lila and Marion), The Birds (Mitch and his sister, Cathy [Veronica Cartwright]). No matter how the “family romance” is represented, there is usually a sequence set around a bed or in a bedroom, or involving some other intimate object or act (a ring, matching chairs near a fireplace, lovebirds, a manicure, dancing at a “coming out ball,” the gift of a fur stole and flowers) that anchors incest readings of these Hitchcock films.

I will conclude this chapter with an analysis of Strangers on a Train, one of the films that everyone agrees is part of the Queer Hitchcock canon. Both Arthur Laurents and Farley Granger, who were lovers at the time, have testified that it was Robert Walker’s idea “to play Bruno Anthony as a homosexual” (Russo 94). According to Granger, this idea was worked out between Walker and Hitchcock, but not mentioned to Granger at the time, because “[Hitchcock] wanted me to act kind of normal and not be aware of too much undercurrent” (Chandler 196). Granger’s “act kind of normal” is telling, as the actor’s “kind of normal” performance has led audiences and critics to understand Guy Haines as straight, as a “repressed” or potential homosexual, as bisexual, or as more vaguely queer, as is the case for Robert L. Carringer, who sees Guy as “a man of indeterminate sexual identity” (quoted in McGilligan 443). Robert J. Yanal makes a case for Guy as “heterosexual, staid, taciturn, athletic, a bit slow, self-satisfied, sane, but passively murderous,” in contrast to Bruno, who for Yanal “is homosexual, theatrical, talkative, leisured, clever, envious of Guy, mad, and actively murderous” (104). Yanal finds that, in the context of mainstream American films and cultural codes of the early 1950s, Bruno “is best read as gay” (103). Among the items Yanal cites here are many things that would also code Bruno as one of Hitchcock’s dandies: “[h]e is a dapper dresser,” he and his mother “have tête-à-têtes during manicures,” and he “speaks in italics” – for example, “I’ve had a strenuous evening” (105). McGilligan attributes much of Bruno’s homosexual dandyism to writer Whitfield Cook, who “knew how to code the signals from his circle of friends” (442). For Robin Wood, however, it is just the kind of “evidence” for Bruno’s homosexuality offered by commentators like Yanal that make him, at best, a “supposed to be” queer character whose “attribution seems to rest more on popular heterosexual myths about gay men than on any actual evidence the film (caught in the constraints of censorship) can provide: he hates his father, is overindulged by his silly mother, seems rather to enjoy murdering women, and dresses flamboyantly” (“Murderous” 207). On the other hand, Wood says, “It is probable that Hitchcock thought [Bruno] was gay” (“Murderous” 207).
While Hepworth makes an impassioned case for understanding Bruno as one of Hitchcock’s vicious, homophobic creations, a number of critics read Bruno’s narrative and cultural function as being more complex than a simply negative image. For Wood, “Bruno forms a link in a chain of fascinating, insidiously attractive Hitchcock villains” both straight and queer (“Murderous” 207). Richard Barrios offers what is perhaps the most affirmative reading of Bruno as homosexual:

Witty, natty, and bright, Bruno could almost be a gay role model for the early fifties. He’s not a stereotype, certainly, and he’s more clever, funny, and likable than anyone else in this movie. Unfortunately, he’s also a psychopathic killer. (227)

Mixing queerness and feminism, Robert J. Corber and Sabrina Barton explore the ways in which Bruno’s homosexuality is paired with Miriam’s transgressive female heterosexuality as threats to all-American Guy’s gender and sexuality identity, as well as to his position as masculine, heterosexual narrative agent and bearer of the desiring gaze. Corber sets his reading of the film within the context of post–World War II hysteria about homosexual men and non-domestic women, while Barton’s psychoanalytic reading considers how the film uses Bruno and Miriam (Laura Elliott) to expose the violence patriarchy uses against sexual women and homosexual men in order to maintain its tenuous hold on power and privilege, even while it justifies eliminating “the deranged homosexual” and “the voracious tramp” (218).

For Spoto, Guy and Bruno enact a “homosexual courtship” from their first scene together, “with Guy as the latent closet type and Bruno the flamboyant gay who attempts to bring him out into the open” (Art 212). “Guy is not wholly given to his relationship with Ann[e] Morton,” Spoto says later, which is why he escorts her “away from the minister” in the final scene of the American version of the film (Art 218). In a more psychoanalytic vein, William A. Drumin also finds that “Bruno’s attention to Guy can be construed as a homosexual courtship” and that Guy’s ties to heterosexuality are tenuous, at best: “[T]he degree of Guy’s love for Ann[e] is in considerable doubt. Guy intends to go into politics, and marrying a senator’s daughter could be very helpful for making his way in this field” (194). For Drumin, Guy’s estranged wife, Miriam, and Bruno’s father “are the principal figures who can block a male homosexual relationship,” so Bruno decides that they must die in order to open the way for his union with Guy. It is a “union” that is consummated on a fairground carousel that runs amok, killing Bruno – “latent” and passive Guy’s more “flamboyant and aggressive” homosexual double – and returning Guy to Anne and to heterosexuality (206). Michael Walker, among others, takes this doubling a step further, suggesting that the film’s narrative might be read as the dream/nightmare of “the repressed homosexual” Guy – a dream in which he conjures up a seductive and murderous Bruno to embody his darkest desires (150–51). Walker and Drumin are among those who find Strangers on a Train a terrifying representation of homosexuality juxtaposed with a picture
of a troubled and troubling heterosexuality that is, however, good enough for Guy and the narrative to retreat to with a sigh of relief.

Bruno is also the center of Strangers on a Train's representation of incest, whose proposed plot – Bruno wants his father killed so that he and his mother can live together in a big house – suggests a dry run for Psycho. Bruno's connection to heterosexual incest also provides a way of reading his affinity for strangling women as an expression of male heteroerotic psychosis rather than of homosexuality or queerness. One of Bruno's most spectacular strangulations, which has him wrapping his hands around the neck of a society matron, might be read as a displacement of Bruno's simultaneously erotic and malign desires toward his mother. But perhaps the most famous strangulation in all Hitchcock involves Bruno cruising a flirtatious Miriam at an amusement park, just as he had cruised her husband on the train. If you read Bruno as a homosexual, then he is doing an excellent job of performing normative masculine heterosexuality here. However, if you see Bruno as (queerly) heterosexual, as bisexual, or as more vaguely queer, then he is being turned on by prospect of strangling Miriam after a long foreplay in which he seduces her away from her two boyfriends as they pass through the fairgrounds, into the Tunnel of Love, and onto the Isle of Love, where Hitchcock films the murder like an erotic embrace that ends with Miriam lying down where "smoochers" go for a tryst.

In speaking about Robert Walker–as-Bruno, Pauline Kael offers a pointed summary of the mixture of fascination, empathy, and aversion typical of Queer Hitchcock: "D]ear degenerate Bruno. ... Walker's performance is what gives this movie much of its character and its peculiar charm" (352).

Works Cited


