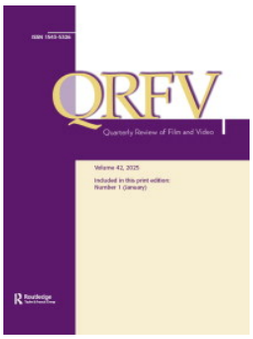

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Quarterly Review of Film and Video

ISSN: 1050-9208 (Print) 1543-5326 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/gqrf20

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To cite this article: Alison Peirse (2025) When the Woman Writes: Screenwriting, Censorship and Style in *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 42:1, 185-208, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2024.2410528

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2024.2410528

Published online: 03 Jan 2025.

QUARTERLY REVIEW OF FILM AND VIDEO
2025, VOL. 42, NO. 1, 185–208
https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2024.2410528

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When the Woman Writes: Screenwriting, Censorship and Style in *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948)

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In 1984, Linda Williams published "When the Woman Looks," a psychoanalytic account of the woman character's look at the monster in the horror film. Williams argued that the woman's look "offers at least a potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a non-phallic sexuality," concluding that "precisely because this look is so threatening to male power, it is violently punished" (Williams 2015, 26). Three decades later, Katarzyna Paszkiewicz published "When the Woman Directs (a Horror Film)", developing Williams' ideas in relation to "the extrafilmic dimensions of these looking relations: who orchestrates these gaze(s) and for whom?" (Paszkiewicz 2018, 41–42). For Paszkiewicz, while women spectators of horror films received valuable scholarly attention in the years following the publication of Williams' work, the same cannot be said for women horror filmmakers themselves. Paszkiewicz focusses upon press profiles, marketing materials and reviews to explore "what is at stake when women directors make horror films" (Paszkiewicz 2018, 42–43). I wish to build upon this valuable intellectual history on women and their relationship to horror film, but to take it in a different methodological direction. Instead, in this essay, I ask, what happens when the woman writes a horror film?

My case study is *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), written by Lucille Fletcher in an adaptation of her radio play of the same name, and produced by Hal Wallis Productions for Paramount Studios. One reason for choosing this example is that it is a relatively rare example of a woman with a sole author credit on a horror film during the studio era. As Erin Hill notes, "women movie workers numbered in the hundreds at each of the major studios of the 1930s and 1940s, yet their increased presence across a variety of departments did not help them infiltrate the masculinized specializations within

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those departments. If anything, women's options became more limited as time went on" (Hill 2016, 91). In the year of *Sorry Wrong Number*'s release, I can only find two other women screenwriters working on horror films: Sylvia Richards penning *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948) and Muriel Roy Bolton writing *The Amazing Mr X* (1948) – but, notably, both are credited as co-writers. As such, this research is underpinned by the following questions: when the woman writes a horror film, who is she writing for? Who works with her on the development of the screenplay? When, why and how are changes enacted? Then, given that the work of women screenwriters is almost never written into our horror film histories, where and how might we find the traces of these writers in the archives?[1]

To answer these questions, I explore the development, production and reception of *Sorry, Wrong Number* through film style, production histories and industry regulation. I read several key film moments through a range of archival sources, including draft screenplays and Production Code Administration (PCA) records, to establish an interplay between censorship, screenwriting and style. This formal analysis is designed to illuminate the ways in which Fletcher, as a screenwriter, negotiates industry regulation, production restraints, and the adaptation of her story from an aural medium to an audio-visual one. In so doing, I follow Tom Brown and James Walters' model for reading film, where "historical questions […] emerge out of the discussion of an individual film moment," and where that moment becomes "a dramatisation" of the "contending options and priorities' film-makers experienced in the culture of which they were a part" (Brown and Walters 2010, 65–66). These findings then become the starting point for a consideration of how practices of meaning intersect with practices of making, where making refers to the industrial contexts of film production. I consider not only how industry regulation can be considered in relation to the tone and style of film texts, but how the interaction of industry regulation with creative practice itself –here, screenwriting – *together* impacts upon the film. Ultimately, I suggest that it is the woman's touch – her parsing of the censorship reports, her press on the typewriter key, her revised drafts bringing the film to life – that creates the foundations of the film that we analyze today.

Operator, Operator, Operator!

Fading in from blackness, a telephone switchboard, in medium close up. Disembodied hands stab wires into connections, a hive of connectivity, of business, of life. A title appears, superimposed over this image: "in the tangled networks of a great city, the telephone is the unseen link between a million lives … " The stationary camera begins to move away from the switchboard, tracking left, revealing the arms, shoulder and then faces of

five telephone operators, all women. The text scrolls upwards, continuing: "it is the servant of our common needs – the confidant of our innermost secrets… life and happiness wait upon its ring…" None of the women look at each other, they are, to all intents and purposes, alone, hooked into the communication machine. The camera slows to a halt, focussing on the young woman in the foreground of the image, capturing her carefully set hair, smart blouse, and her blank face, expressionless, as she works. The title scroll slows to a stop on "life and happiness wait upon its ring…" and is joined by new text: "and horror… and loneliness… and *death*!!!" The words disappear, and the image fades to black.

Fade in on an exterior shot of a modern office building in New York City, the Chrysler building glittering in the distance. The image dissolves into an empty outer office, taking in the reception desk of a secretary. The lights are off and all is still. In the dim half-light, the camera roams, seeking out characters, but none are found. Without an actor to watch, we focus on taking in information through production design. The framed corporate posters on the wall spell out context and back story: "Drug Products. J. Cotterell." The camera snakes through the room to the frosted glass of the internal door, marked "Henry J. Stevenson, Vice President, Private." The door is ajar, and the camera continues forward, dissolving into a medium shot of Henry's desk. As the camera reaches the desk though, it does not stop. It inches ever closer to a black rotary dialer in the center of the desk, receiver purposefully off the hook, the handset laid to rest on the table.

The image dissolves once more, but this time the dissolve is slow, pronounced, and we linger between worlds, in the transition of time and space between Henry's empty office and the bedroom of our protagonist, Leona Stevenson (Barbara Stanwyck). Leona is sat up in bed, on the phone, presented in a medium shot that creates space in the frame for the costume and set design to tell us who she is. Leona is expensive, glossy, excessive. Her pillows are piled up behind her, thick and deep, a textural counterpoint to her blousy, billowing nightdress gathered chastely at the neck, a chastity subtly undermined in costume design through the transparent lace dressing gown. This production design carefully works with, and around regulatory contexts, while at the same time, using those contexts for insinuation. The PCA reminded the *Sorry, Wrong Number* producers that "the Production Code makes it mandatory that the intimate parts of the body – specifically the breasts of the woman – be fully covered at all times. Any compromise with this regulation will compel us to withhold approval of your picture" (Jackson 1947). This was adhered to: Leona might be wearing a translucent nightgown (transparent or translucent garments are not approved of in the Code), but she wears it over a nightgown that fastens high on her throat. Yet, despite the cocoon of material wealth and comfort,

we realize that all is not well with our protagonist. Leona clutches the handset tightly, as she tries to call her husband, Henry Stevenson, at work. Her telephone is superimposed over his black rotary dialer in the dissolve, both framed in the same part of the screen (Figure 1). The telephones become a metonym for the characters: connected, in theory but not in practice. Henry remains elusive, remote from his wife Leona, from this woman who grasps so hard, so determinedly, for him.

Leona scowls, lines thickening between her perfectly groomed eyebrows. "Operator! operator!" she commands, the grip on her handset now loosening a little, "operator" she demands, a third time, and we move into medium close up as we hear the operator respond with "your call please" (notably, we do not see any of the operators after the prologue; they remain offscreen for the entirety of the film – this is Leona's story). She complains, "I've been ringing Murray Hill 35097 for the last half hour and the line is always busy." She primps the curls in her immaculately set hair, an unconscious self-soothing gesture. "Can you ring it for me please?" As the operator agrees, Leona relaxes. Her desires are – at least temporarily – satisfied. She reaches for a cigarette on her bedside table. The camera tracks her hand to the table, and lingers on a gilt framed photograph of Henry and Leona on their wedding day. Leona smiles, a small, secret, satisfied smile. Henry is blank, his mouth a straight line, his eyes empty. Leona lights a cigarette and thanks the operator as they attempt to connect her call. She can be polite now she is getting what she wants.

This opening sequence uses framing, camera movement, on-screen text and performance to establish theme. The prologue suggests that telephones

Figure 1. A dissolve as Leona (Barbara Stanwyck) calls Henry's office in Sorry, Wrong Number (1948).

are intimately connected to women, and that telephones also indicate death. In the office and bedroom scenes, Fletcher sets up character, plot and premise through sluglines, action description, character performance and dialogue. This creates a coherent, satisfying story world and a clear inciting incident. Henry may be a remote, inaccessible husband in everyday life, but even he usually comes home. Tonight, Leona – a self-proclaimed invalid – is left alone in the house. Why? What is going to happen to her? To answer this, we need to ask, where did this scene come from? What are the origins of this film moment?

Sorry, Wrong Number began life as a twenty-five-minute radio play written by Fletcher. It aired live on the CBS "Suspense" series on May 25th, 1943, and was then rebroadcast eight more times between 1943 and 1960. The play takes place over two hours, but the sharp writing condenses down the time frame to a series of moments, a condensation so smoothly achieved that the play feels like it is happening in real time. In the original play, the protagonist is referred to as Mrs Stevenson (played by Agnes Moorhead), but in other respects the opening of the film and the play are almost identical. The inciting incident in both texts occurs when the protagonist is connected on a call, as requested above, but instead of Murray Hill 35097, she overhears two men confirming the plans for a murder to take place that evening. While this connection is a coincidence we must swallow (one worthy of celebrated suspense writer Patricia Highsmith, who notes "I am very fond of coincidences in plots and situations that are almost but not quite incredible") (Highsmith 2015 [1983]), the rest of the play then follows a tightly delineated cause and effect response to this information, as Mrs Stevenson/Leona makes increasingly frantic phone calls to the telephone operator, the chief operator and the police. However, her major problem is that people do not take her seriously. Not only is she "neurotic" (as the play describes her), but she is also imperious, demanding and entitled. When she explains to the skeptical Sergeant Duffy "I've been trying to trace down the call myself – but everyone is so stupid," she reads as "hysterical" and rude (Fletcher 1947a, 7). As a result, no-one is inclined to listen to her, never mind help her.

The narrative mid-point of the radio play comes at page eight of nineteen, when Stevenson realizes that the description of the location of the murder accords precisely with her home. She reflects, sadly, that her husband "says I'd be perfectly safe as long as I have a telephone right next to my bed" (Fletcher 1947a, 8). Yet her ego is still unable to acknowledge that her devoted husband may not be quite so devoted as she wants to believe. By page fifteen, a telegraph is delivered by phone: Henry has been called away to Boston and won't be back until tomorrow. The concrete nature of his betrayal becomes (almost) undeniable. Mrs Stevenson breathes "oh no,"

and calls a local private hospital, demanding a carer to be sent over. As the clock creeps closer to 11.15 pm, the appointed time of the murder, the hospital refuses to override their protocols, and Stevenson remains alone. She hears someone downstairs, calls the operator once more, the circular narrative bringing us back to the opening, but by the time she is connected to the police, all hope is lost. A man – one of the two we overheard plotting the murder at the start of the radio play – answers. He says "sorry, wrong number" and hangs up the call.

The radio broadcast was a critical and commercial success, Orson Welles describing it as "the greatest radio play ever written" (Pavlik 2017, 133). Inevitably, it was considered for screen adaptation. In November 1944, it was submitted to Paramount Pictures, but within four days Paramount passed on it, reader Elizabeth Tomkins classifying it as "Not Recommended," stating that "since this story is nothing more than a description of a series of telephone calls by means of which a woman realizes that she is to be the victim of a murder, there are practically no screen possibilities in it" (Tomkins 1944, 1). However, in July 1946, director Anatole Litvak bought the "exclusive motion picture and television rights" to the play from Fletcher for $15,000 (Litvak 1947; Capua 2015, 89; "Agreement with Lucille Fletcher" 1947, 10–11). Six months later, Litvak paid her $3,500, for her screen treatment of the story ("Letter to Richard Goldwater" 1947).

An exploration of the contractual discourse that then ensued will shed some light on Fletcher's role in the development of the script, and why the story was eventually picked up for production. In her study of costume designer Edith Head's career, Elizabeth Castaldo Lundén argues that considering her "contractual journey" may lead "to a more profound understanding" of Head's "roles and responsibilities" and an examination of the "political intricacies within the industry and the profession (Castaldo Lundén 2022, 31–32)." Unlike Head, Fletcher does not have a public archive of her own (yet), and in researching her career we have extremely limited access to any materials generated by and retained by Fletcher. However, the contractual journey metaphor remains apposite, and we can document her contributions through access to the archives of male film workers and the PCA. In doing so, we can extrapolate what Fletcher's contractual journey might reveal about the politics and practices of filmmaking during the 1940s studio system, both from the perspectives of the makers of horror film, and from those that regulated it.

Less than a year after buying the rights from Fletcher, Litvak approached independent producer Hal Wallis. Wallis had left his role as Head of Production at Warner Brothers in 1944 to set up Hal Walllis Productions (HWP) as an independent production company. He put HWP under

contract with Paramount Pictures, where Paramount subsidized his productions, and gave him, in his own words, "profit participation, a producer's fee, and complete autonomy" in filmmaking" (Wallis and Higham 1980, 114). In his autobiography *Starmaker*, Wallis explains why he was drawn to Fletcher's script: "movie-going audiences had matured during the war and no longer required false and sentimental portraits of human nature. I dealt again and again with the psychology of murderers." He groups *Sorry, Wrong Number* with *So Evil My Love* (1948) and *The File on Thelma Jordan* (1949) as films in which "frustration, poverty, and a desperate need for money could drive people to psychotic extremes," with "no excuse to glamorize, excuse or deify villains" (Wallis and Higham 1980, 118–199). *Sorry, Wrong Number* fits well with this categorization. It is a dark, psychological film, constantly beset by the threat of murder, with the protagonist in very real, ever-present danger, and where a lack of interest in the supernatural is supplanted by neurosis and drug trafficking.

Litvak sold the rights to HWP for $100,000 (an $85,000 profit on Fletcher's purchase price) and signed a contract with the production company that gave him the right to direct, co-produce, and to hire Fletcher as screenwriter if he desired it ("Letter to Anatole Litvak" 1947). For the screenplay, Fletcher was allocated $2500 to write the screenplay, with her fee to be paid in five installments of $500. Litvak was paid $5,500 – more than double Fletcher's fee – as another writer on the project, although nothing can be found in the records to demonstrate a writing contribution, nor does he receive a writing credit in the finished film. Litvak was then paid a further $110,000 to direct the film, and Hal Wallis paid himself as producer (listed as "Wallis and staff") $70,000 (Paramount Pictures Production Records 1947).

We do not have any records of Fletcher's personal correspondence with Litvak or Wallis during this period. The only traces we can find of her are when the lawyers for Litvak or HWP write to her to regarding intellectual property rights, a series of blank pro forma legal statements that she is expected to sign to waive her rights to her story and to her screenplay. Very occasionally, one or two of them are signed, and we get a rare glimpse of Fletcher, in pen, on the page. Fletcher's absence in our archives, or her – at best ephemeral - presence accords with the findings of feminist media historians who have pointed out that archival holdings have historically prioritized the paper documentation of powerful male media workers (Martin 2018, 455). Indeed, many of the archival holdings of Fletcher's work are only in place because of her work for men: much of the contractual data used in this research comes from the Hal Wallis Papers at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles. Beyond copies of the plays and screenplays, all evidence of her existence is by proxy. She can exist, but

only secondhand, a name in legal correspondence between Litvak and Wallis, when Litvak asks her to confirm that she no longer has any legal monetary recourse for the story's intellectual property, or in the biographies and autobiographies of these men, in their anecdotes about the quality of her work. Her own voice, her own experience, remains undocumented.

"Divorce as a Cure for Hysteria"

Even before the contracts were signed, Fletcher was at work on the screenplay. One month before HWP legally bought the package, John Mock, a HWP story editor wrote to Joseph Breen at the PCA enclosing three copies of a *Sorry, Wrong Number* script and asking for "some general reaction to the property." In his letter he describes the project as "a very famous half hour *Suspense* program" but it is clear from the PCA's response that what follows is not the radio play passed at Paramount in 1944 (Mock 1947). In a Motion Picture Producers and Director's Association (MPDAA) internal memo, produced two days after the submission, Geoffrey Shurlock recounts the "off the record" telephone conference he had with Mock that day. According to Shurlock, the MPDAA raised many concerns about the proposed screenplay: "we are not at the moment approving any story dealing in any way with the dope traffic or dope taking;" "the present ending of the story indicates a criminal, the husband, going off scot free;" "there is an unacceptable scene in which a doctor urges divorce as a cure for a wife's hysteria;" and there are concerns that the presentation of "this large drug manufacturing company" advertising narcotic pills may be said to "cast reflection on the drug industry generally." Shurlock notes that Mock agrees that the ending, where the husband escapes, "could be easily changed" (Shurlock 1947–1948). Yet, there is no dope trafficking, divorce or doctors in the radio play. This suggests that between Litvak buying the rights, and HWP signing a contract, Fletcher produced at least one version of the screenplay. However, there are no traces of any early drafts of this early screenplay in the Hal Wallis Papers or Paramount Pictures archives, nor can I find any other publicly accessible archives with printed materials relating to the early development process. However, this is precisely where the PCA becomes important. The PCA records for *Sorry, Wrong Number* play a primary role in deepening our understanding of film development. In truth, it is only through the PCA's records that we can extrapolate what elements were added by Fletcher to adapt the story from radio to film. Here, the history of regulation becomes a history of documentation, through which we can fill in the gaps of the history of screenwriting.

Fletcher produced two new drafts of screenplays between April and May 1947. We do not have any interviews with Fletcher that discuss her experience writing this film, and, indeed, there are very few extant interviews with Fletcher in the public domain (the ones that do exist tend to focus on her role as wife of composer Bernard Herrmann, in which she is typically asked about how they met and his composition process, or is asked to read out letters about him complaining about having to undertake commercial work for advertising and films) (Vertlieb 2014; Waletsky 1992). Instead, we have to turn to Wallis' autobiography for general information and then extrapolate. He explains that when he has bought a story, "if the material is close enough to screenplay form – like a play – I have him go ahead with a first draft. Then the director and I meet with him for our notes. We begin a series of conferences, rewrites, second and third drafts and so on, until we come out with our final shooting script" (Quoted in Stevens Jr. 2006, 590–591). In September, Wallis met with Paramount for "story confabs" on the film, which *Variety* describes as his "next for the studio" ("Wallis Back on Coast" 1947). Following these meetings, Fletcher produced a third version of the script, presumably in response to notes from Wallis, Litvak and Paramount.

While we do not have development notes, we do have archival access to the actual draft screenplays. This enables us to flesh out some of the information alluded to in the PCA report from March 1947, and to better understand how Fletcher restructured a short audio story into a feature film. In each of the three drafts, the radio play remains in situ, but it is split, bookending the beginning and end of the film. In essence, the beginning of the radio play is the first act, and the end of the play is the third act. The long second act is new material, composed of a series of flashbacks, which grow in complexity as the film progresses. Each flashback is either a story being told to Leona over the phone or is Leona's subjective memory. This reliance on the flashback enables Fletcher to retain the central conceit of the radio play – of the bed-bound woman trapped alone, in the house, with only a telephone to communicate with – but, at the same time creates ninety minutes of audio-visual entertainment.

It is worth analyzing the narrative structure of the third draft screenplay, from September 1947, not only to understand the complexity of Fletcher's plotting, but also as context for the PCA's forthcoming concerns about the final, "locked" version of the script to come in December of that year. The first flashback comes on p.24, indicated in the script via a dissolve, as Henry's secretary Miss Jennings, on the phone to Leona, tells her that earlier that day, Henry took a pretty woman out for lunch. The second flashback is on p.38, and this time it is Leona's own memory of a decade previously, when she first met Henry. She is described in the script as

"noveau-riche," Henry as "gauche," we learn in the sequential flashbacks that follow of the early romance (if it could be called that, it is clearly a mutually beneficial arrangement), wedding and Henry's background: no college, dead parents, works in a drugstore, and yet, according to the screenplay description, "already a latent snob" (Fletcher 1947, 46). Leona is trapped in her bedroom by imagined illness, by her own neuroses, her doctor confirming to Henry that her heart is "sound as a bell" (Fletcher 1947, 97).

The third flashback is the point of view of Sally, a new character developed for the screenplay. Wallis suggests that Sally is an "ordinary woman, living with her baby in a cramped apartment," and thus "necessary as a counterpoint to the wealthy Leona in her mansion on Sutton Place" (Wallis and Higham 1980, 119). Sally was Henry's girlfriend before Leona found him, a homely, small-town woman unable to compete with Leona's glittering lures. Leona's limitless money becomes an insatiable drug for Henry as a man repulsed by his own lowly station in life. If we think about audio-visual storytelling though, Sally is not simply a counterpoint to Leona. Rather, given that Leona remains bed-bound, Sally embodies the investigator: she runs to the store to make a call, dashes to the subway when the store closes, stalks Fred, her policeman husband, as he investigates Henry. Sally is Leona's active female counterpart, necessary to create changes in setting and story for the screen. She moves, and acts, where Leona cannot. Sally realizes Henry is in trouble and goes to see him at his office. Over lunch, he boasts that he is now vice president of the "biggest drug business in the country" (that is, Leona's father's company) and his job is to supervise "all the little invoices that are made out on all the dope that goes into the pills" (Fletcher 1947a, 70).

After Sally hangs up, Leona gets a telegram to say Henry is not coming home until tomorrow. She calls her doctor, Levine, who tells her about a meeting he had with Henry ten days earlier, and the fourth flashback begins. At the meeting, we move into a nested fifth flashback, eleven years previously, during which Henry refused to live with and work for Leona's father. After this declaration, Leona became "ill" for the first time. Levine asks Henry if he has "ever thought of leaving her?" and adds, "personally I think it's just what she needs. It might be the making of her" (Fletcher 1947a, 95–96). This demonstrates that the PCA's guidance, provided six months earlier, has not been followed. However, this was unwise, as the PCA would have never approved this exchange remaining in the script. As Gonzalo M. Pavés writes in his study of the censors and the studio system in the 1940s, "for the censors, there was no alternatives to marriage … no man, for any reason could break it," and that divorce "could not even be mentioned" (Pavés 2023, 36). The PCA explicitly stated that this statement

could not remain, but it does, draft after redraft, suggesting that HWP viewed the PCA's feedback as a point of negotiation rather than regulation. However, before Christmas, HWP relented. This third draft script is the last iteration in which divorce is uttered, and the final version, delivered in December 1947, removes divorce entirely. The sixth and final flashback comes courtesy of Evans, a pharmacist working for Leona's father's company. Evans reveals that one year earlier, Henry had quizzed him about the monetary value of narcotics and suggested that Evans could "make a mistake" when accounting for the opium, leaving enough opium for Henry to sell on.

We will return to the opium plot, and the PCA's thoughts on it, later in the essay, but for now we can reflect on what the above analysis offers us in terms of understanding how Fletcher developed her radio script into a feature film screenplay. In the radio play, we never knew why Mrs Stevenson was murdered. In the draft screenplay, the flashback sequences accumulate to reveal the answer. We discover who the murderer is (although this unnamed man matters little), who ordered the murder (the husband), why she is to be murdered (for her life insurance policy), and why the murder is taking place now: Henry has double-crossed Morano and has to pay him $100,000 immediately. By p.124 of the third draft screenplay, we return to the radio play ending, and Leona's final moments of life, as discussed earlier. But now, following the PCA's recommendation, Henry fails in his plan. He rings from New Haven train station and begs her to leave. But Leona can't or won't: she is trapped by the prison of her own making, unable to break free even to save her own life. As Henry hears Leona being killed, a police officer creeps up behind him, ready to make an arrest.

In illuminating these stages of development, from multiple industrial points of view, we follow Jane Gaines' recommendation that when we do film history, "we need to figure in the machines, the industrial practices, and the materiality of the mise-en-scene." Gaines suggests that what is worth researching is not the simple equivalency of author with text, but "their inequivalency, or, rather, the impossibility of equivalency produced by the layers of intervention and entwinement, both human and mechanical" (Gaines 2002, 111). This analysis demonstrates the major contribution Fletcher makes to creating film moments; she is pivotal in consolidating and creatively responding to fragments of feedback. In the process of developing *Sorry, Wrong Number*, Fletcher will have drawn together development notes from the director, from the production company, from the distributor and from the PCA (the latter most likely indirectly via the producers). These notes will have been delivered verbally and in writing, from a variety of individuals, each with different kinds of interests in the script.

Given that these interests span commercial returns, artistic considerations, and regulatory procedures, many of these notes will have been contradictory. Fletcher is then required to synthesize these contradictions, and consider how to make coherent changes that would make sense for cinematic storytelling on what would be her first (and only) feature film script. Here, the woman screenwriter functions as an intermediary between industry, regulation, whose intermediality creates, and has a direct impact upon, film form.

"Stimulate Curiosity"

At the end of September 1947, Wallis flew to New York for a "10 day session with Paramount home execs on his new season product," which included *Sorry, Wrong Number* and presumably the third draft of the screenplay outlined above ("Wallis Planes to New York" 1947, 1). On December 19th, *The Hollywood Reporter* revealed that Litvak was at Paramount Studios for "pre-production parleys" with HWP ("Litvak, Wallis Huddle" 1947, 1). The Paramount censorship division then sent a "white script" version to the PCA, dated December 22nd, asking for the company's approval. In filmmaking, a "white" screenplay signals a locked screenplay ready to go into production. Once a screenplay is locked, any further revisions to individual pages are distributed on colored change pages, and there is a "standard color progression" for this procedure: "white, blue, pink, yellow, green" pages (Honthaner 2010, 80). Therefore, in everything we can access prior to December 22nd, we can assume the draft revisions were primarily for readers at the production and distribution companies. However, in December, the audience changes. The locked script is for the director Litvak (and presumably the *Sorry, Wrong Number* cinematographer, Sol Polito) to prepare for production, and it is to secure PCA approval. The locked screenplay from December is reduced from 142 to 138 pages, and contains minor revisions to supporting characters, and a tightening of the visual storytelling, predicated upon a more active camera, that moves through spaces rather than simply establishing in static shot. While 138 pages would normally equate to roughly 138 minutes of screen time, we can extrapolate that the anticipated length at this point would be under two hours, or 120 pages. This is because *Sorry, Wrong Number* is a dialogue-heavy film, and dialogue plays fast, unlike action, which hews much closer to the one page per minute rule (and indeed, the finished film came in at eight-nine minutes). However, locking the screenplay at this point will prove to be premature, and, as we will see, many change pages were to follow.

According to the schedule on the locked screenplay, the film was in production between January 12th–March 2nd. Five days before shooting began, the PCA met with Wallis and Mock, a HWP story editor. In a memo accounting for the meeting, Shurlock writes that "we indicate grave concern as to the possibility of approving the present use of dope traffic in this script," which reflects the "new amendment to the code" as well as "general audience and censorship reaction." In the original version of the Code from 1930, "illegal drug traffic must never be presented," but September 1946 – just over a year before the above meeting – the Code was amended to read "the illegal drug traffic must not be portrayed in such a way as to stimulate curiosity concerning the use of, or traffic in, such drugs; nor shall scenes be approved which show the use of illegal drugs, or their effects, in detail" (Doherty 2007, 352). This "new amendment" leaves open the possibility for the PCA to continue to regulate the depiction of drug trafficking. Given that the manufacturing and selling of drugs (not to mention depicting the monetary profit to be secured by doing this) is at the heart of the film's flashback-heavy second act, it is not a surprise that the PCA continued to have significant reservations.

Wallis produced change pages, containing deletions to references of "dope, opium, narcotics," and met with Shurlock, Stephen J. Jackson and Milton Hodenfield on the first day of shooting" (Jackson 1947). At this meeting, the PCA representatives urged Wallis to go further, explaining that "there was still considerable danger and objection to the script even with these explicit references to dope deleted." They contended that the depiction of illegal dope trafficking will "stimulate curiosity", and that the film will "unquestionably cause trouble with the Legion of Decency" who are currently "engaged in a great deal of opposition to pictures containing reference to drugs or illegal traffic in drugs" (Jackson 1947). To understand the PCA's concern about the Legion of Decency, we can turn to Ruth Vasey's analysis of the power of Catholic organizations during the era of the studio system. She explains that they were "among the most active in maintaining contact with the industry, and by invoking their large and powerful constituencies they were able to exert considerable influence" (Vasey 1995, 66). In addition, the regulators saw further issues with Leona's family's pharmaceutical business being co-opted as an illegal drug manufacturer. This relates to supplementary PCA guidance added in the late 1930s about the representation of "professions" who "should be presented fairly in motion pictures. There should be no dialogue or scenes indicating that all, or a majority of the members of any professional group, are unethical, immoral, given to criminal activities, and the like." For Vasey, "this policy evolved from the general need to protect the industry from the disapprobation of any professional body that was apt to form

itself into a lobby" (Vasey 1995, 69). As such, the representation of illegal drug trafficking, concern about religious organizations, and the potential for pharmaceutical industry lobbying, meant that the PCA focussed its attention on drugs in the locked screenplay. Arguably, this came at some regulatory cost to other aspects of the script, as I will discuss later.

Negotiations continued. On January 16th, Paramount's censorship department wrote to Jackson, enclosing "blue change pages", dated January 15th and 16th, and asking for approval (Luraschi 1948). Jackson responded on January 19th to Wallis, copying in Luigi Luraschi at Paramount, noting that they had read changes ranging from page two to page 135, and confirming that the script now met the requirements of the Production Code (Jackson 1948, January 19th). The PCA archives do not contain any further information about what is included in these change pages, but here we can use screenwriting archives to fill in the gaps. A copy of Fletcher's final version of the screenplay, dated December 22nd, 1947 is held at the University of Southern California's Cinematic Arts Library. A copy of the locked shooting script with Stanwyck's own handwritten annotations, and forty-four change papers dated January 15th and February 5th, 1948, is held at the University of Wyoming in the Barbara Stanwyck papers. We can compare these two versions to pinpoint what changes were required to secure approval for production. Most of the change papers only contain minor word replacements: character name changes, street name revisions, telephone number amendments. However, there are a series of interconnected scenes that have more substantial changes. Unsurprisingly, these are the scenes when Henry first approaches the Cotterell chemist, Evans, to ask him how to extract opium to sell privately, and then later, when the fence, Morano, confronts Henry about double-crossing him.

When Henry enters Evans' lab, in Fletcher's screenplay he asks for confirmation that this is where the "dope" is made, but this becomes where "the formula is developed" in the January change pages. Evans then explains how he breaks "down the raw opium" into "twenty-four alkaloids" including morphine and codeine" in the screenplay, but in the change pages, he states "many ingredients" are included in "various pharmaceuticals" that contain "raw materials" which they break down into "various elements." In the screenplay, Henry is excited by opium's economic potential, stating it is "a gold mine," to which Evans amused, concurs (Fletcher 1947b, 103; Fletcher 1947–1948, 103). The change papers delete this exchange entirely. The revisions to later scenes continue in this way, replacing specific, strong nouns with vague language that could mean anything. The change pages also remove phrases that reference the power of drugs or monetary reward for trafficking. For example, in the screenplay, Henry describes the opium as "human dynamite," a phrase removed

entirely in the January pages (Fletcher 1947b, 104). When Henry returns to Evans, a few weeks later, to proposition him, Evans describes him as a "drug thief" which Henry doesn't deny, yet in the revisions, Henry states "No. Not necessarily" and explains that the Cotterell company "makes a lot of products we can dispose of" (Fletcher 1947b, 110; Fletcher 1947–1948, 110). This elision of detail continues when Morano confronts Henry. The word "dope" is removed throughout, as is any discussion of the product being in "grams," while specific monetary expenditure such as "$75,000" is replaced with "quite a loss" (Fletcher 1947b, 116–117; Fletcher 1947–1948, 117).

This comparison reveals a great deal about the final revisions on *Sorry, Wrong Number*. First, the alterations go against the basic principles of good screenwriting, which favor concrete nouns and images over abstract, weak words. Furthermore, there is nothing in the archive to suggest that Fletcher was involved in any of these amendments. Rather, Wallis turned over the solving of the drug trafficking issue to the regulators themselves. In a meeting on the first day of shooting, Wallis suggested that "Messrs. Jackson, Johnston and Hagen" of the PCA "thrash out" amendments to this element of the story, and the intended lack of clarity in word choices certainly suggests that the revisions are made by someone who is not a screenwriter (Shurlock 1947–1948). Regardless of who chose the words, or who pressed the typewriter keys to create those change pages, the comparative analysis demonstrates how the industrial politics of regulation lead the final screenplay revisions, rather than any creative contributions by Fletcher. As such, we can see how histories of regulation and histories of screenwriting complement each other, each supporting the other in filling in the gaps to reveal a process of creative practice taking place within the context of industrial regulation, and how the two histories then work together to create a story of how the final film came to be. That is, a story that elides the work of the woman screenwriter in the film's final stages.

"A Deep Freeze Chiller"

Filming continued throughout January and February. On March 10th, the *New York Times* reported that Litvak was "finishing work" on the film ("Of Local Origin" 1948, 32). On March 18th, the film was approved by L. Greenhouse at the PCA who notes that there is one killing and the fate of the criminal is "arrested," thus according with their earlier request (if not the actual narrative logic of the film, given that Henry is the client, but not the actual murderer) (Greenhouse 1948). *Sorry, Wrong Number* premiered in New York City on September 1st, and was released on September 24th. To market the film, Wallis led not only with Stanwyck, but also on the

name recognition of the successful radio play and Fletcher as its author. Shortly after signing Litvak, HWP took out a full-page back cover of *Variety* to announce that "the acquisition of *Sorry, Wrong Number* by Lucille Fletcher, adapted from her Radio Masterpiece which has thrilled millions on the *Suspense* show" ("Acquisition of *Sorry*" 1947). Two months before the release, according to *The Hollywood Reporter*, Paramount instigated a "world-wide radio exploitation campaign," with free copies of Fletcher's original script sent to radio stations sent to 43 international offices of Paramount International "for free use on broadcasts abroad" ("International Air Plugs for Para. Wrong Number" 1948).

This strategy did not please everyone. On September 10th, Litvak's lawyer, Mark Cohen, wrote to Wallis advising that HWP were not abiding by the terms of the signed employment agreement. Cohen explained that "in *numerous* newspaper advertisements on *Sorry Wrong Number*, [Ana]Tola failed to receive any credit as co-producer or director" which "is causing him irreparable damage." Joseph H. Hazen, Wallis' lawyer, responded a week later rejecting the claim (Cohen 1948, my italics; Hazen 1948). However, the decision to lead the marketing with Fletcher was smart, as many critics commented on her adaptation approvingly. *Good Housekeeping* suggesting that "instead of losing impact, twice-told stories sometimes gain excitement simply because they are so familiar," the *Los Angeles Times* noting "special credit going to Lucille Fletcher, the author, for making over her sketch into true pictorial terms" while the *New York Times*, the *World-Telegraph*, the *New York Herald*, the *Washington Post* and the *Daily Worker* (to name but a few) led their film reviews with Fletcher's name and the adaptation of the radio play.[2] Unusually then, not only for 1940s, but also for the studio system as a whole, HWP and Paramount recognized that the major selling name was not only their lead actor Stanwyck, but also Fletcher, their screenwriter.

One of the PCA's major interventions into screenplay development came out of their concerns for the reaction of Catholic Legion of Decency. The final script amendments did allay these concerns, and the Legion recommended the film for adults. However, the film did not satisfy the newly formed Protestant Film Council, who "blasted" *Sorry, Wrong Number*, stating "ethically and morally there is no justification for a vicious and torturous film of this sort" (Platt 1948, 12). However, this statement had little impact on either the film's box office in North America or internationally. *Variety* reported that *Sorry, Wrong Number* "ran the box office bell nationally for October," and placed it at number one in their "October's Big 10" list ("October's Big 10" 1948). Two months later, the film "outgrossed all current attractions" in its second week in Australia ("Number Cracks Mark" 1948). In the UK, the *Sunday Chronicle* reported "Stanwyck plays it

with a crescendo fury which culminates at the climax in quite the most bloodcurdling scream of my life," while the *Daily Herald* approves of it as "the week's best – a Grand Guignol thriller" (Quoted in Deane 1949).

The choice of words in these latter reviews – blood-curdling, Grand Guignol, thriller – lead us into a discussion of genre. PCA reviewer Greenhouse categorized it as "melo-psychological," yet this essay frames *Sorry, Wrong Number* as a horror film (Greenhouse 1948). Such a slippage makes sense in the context of the period in which this film was made. As screenwriter Curt Siodmak stated in 1946, "almost every melodrama contains scenes of horror, though the A-Plus producer would never accept that term for his million-dollar creation. When horror enters the gilded gate of top production, it is glorified as a 'psychological' thriller.' But a rose by any other name … " (Quoted in Rhodes 2015, 248). While producers of prestige pictures may not choose to name their genre, the critics were certainly not reticent to do so. The *Motion Picture Herald* reports that it "builds suspense steadily from the opening to the highest pitch of terror," *Variety* describes it approvingly as "a real chiller," the *Los Angeles Times* describes it as "a new kind of horror thriller," and *Box Office* categorizes it as a "terror-drama."[3] *Cue* magazine writes "for sheer, unadulterated terror there have been few films in recent years to match the quivering fright of *Sorry, Wrong Number*," describing it as a "hysteria-ridden picture of a woman doomed" (Quoted in "N.Y. Critics Heap Praise" 1948, 7). Yet the PCA archive does not seem to demonstrate any concern about the potential horror, brutality or violence in the film. Where does the horror, so absent in the development notes, and yet so prominent in the reception, come from?

We can look to the final scene of the finished film for our answers. The bedroom clock chimes eleven PM. Leona looks up, skin slicked with sweat, tears rolling off the end of her nose and into her mouth. She knows she only has fifteen minutes until the murder. She makes a desperate call to the hospital, demanding that a nurse is sent out to her. The receptionist takes too long, and Leona writhes about in frustration, and the camera moves out from medium close up, to medium shot, to medium long shot, so now we see not just her face, but her body, now she's shown in bed. She proclaims to the hospital, "I am a sick woman and I am all alone in the horrible empty house!" As she does so, the camera continues to move further away from Leona, and the bed is now small and insignificant in the baroque bedroom. She begs "please, I'm afraid" as the camera exits backwards through the window, over the balcony, and down to the back of the house where a man lifts the latch of the kitchen window and climbs in.

We follow the man's tentative progress through the kitchen. We don't see his face, we don't need to. He wears a hat, a coat, gloves. He is a killer. He is a cipher. We return to Leona, now in close up, gripping the receiver

in both hands as she hears the click of the kitchen phone extension connecting. We connect with her in this intimate frame as she realizes the man is downstairs. She whispers to the hospital, "there's someone in this house." She pants, heavily, "there's someone in the kitchen downstairs and they're listening to me," and covers her mouth, her huge wedding ring glinting in the foreground as she slams down the phone.

Henry calls her from a telephone box arranged in a single shot that mirrors Leona's own: sweating, in close up, gripping the receiver with both hands. He gaslights her until she questions him on Evans and Morano. Then he breaks. He wipes his wet top lip, eyes bulging, and gabbles his confession, but it is too late. The audience has lost interest, we know what he has done. Instead, the editor cuts to Leona in close up, staring straight ahead, interrupting his dreary monologue to scream. In an over the shoulder shot, we see what Leona sees. The bedroom door is open, and beyond it, there is a man walking up the staircase. Henry listens as his wife wails, but we only stay with him momentarily, before returning to Leona for the grand denouement.

In medium long shot, Leona puts down the phone, crying. The approaching man remains offscreen, an invisible threat, and casts a shadow over her body. She shrinks back, pleading but the camera insists on moving forward, inching into close up as the man's shadow covers her face. His white gloved hand enters the frame. She screams for the final time, and the camera whips away, blurring, not letting us see, and coming to rest on the bedroom window. The soundtrack transitions from Leona's screams to the roar of a train, and we watch as the train crosses the bridge and leaves the city. Then, in a chilling, final image, we return to Leona's bedside table. We watch, helpless, as her hands scrabble on the table, strangulation taking place beyond the edges of the frame. There is nothing we can do: no-one believes her and no-one will help her. The contents of the table crash onto the floor before she goes limp and her hands are pulled out of shot by her killer. The telephone and her wedding photograph are all that remain on the table. The phone rings, once more, and the same gloved hand picks up the receiver. The killer states "sorry, wrong number" in a cool, level voice. He ends the call. The film's credits roll.

About a decade before *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the PCA passed two amendments to the Code covering "Brutality, Horror and Gruesomeness" and "Regulations re Crime in Motion Pictures." The former advised that "scenes of excessive brutality and gruesomeness must be cut to an absolute minimum," and the latter, "details of crime must never be shown" and when "action showing the taking of human life, *even in mystery stories*, is to be cut to the minimum" (Doherty 1999, 365–366). Given this amendment, it is understandable why the PCA did not focus their attention on

the horror angle. If we hew strictly to regulatory guidelines, Leona's death takes place off-screen (if we ignore those suffering hands), and the killer's gloves remain clean (notably, in Fletcher's final screenplay, those gloves are blood-stained). Yet this focus undermines the power of storytelling to create genuine terror. This film is predicated upon the fear of being home alone (as a woman), the experience of people not listening because they believe you are hysterical or neurotic (patriarchal diagnoses predicated upon gender), and the telephone system – which "has from almost the beginning been a heavily female domain " (Schantz 2012, 56) – changes function from lifeline to death sentence. This is then compounded by the terror of a man entering your home, of knowing that he is coming to kill you and that you are not physically strong enough to stop him. Fletcher understood these fears, and Leona's death, the way it plays out in the film, is present in every single version of the script right back to the 1943 radio play.

The film was well received by most women reviewers and in women's magazines, who enjoyed the scares, while at the same time, making connections with their own lives. Louella Parsons, writing for *Cosmopolitan*, states "the tension mounts and mounts until it is well-nigh unendurable" and concluding "its shock ending is the most powerful ending I've seen in any picture (Parsons 1948, 12, 127)." Eileen Creelman for *The Sun* happily warned that it will "scare an audience into shivers," Rose Pelswick for the *Journal-American* defined it as "a horror film of the hair-raising, spine-tingling, finger-nail-chewing variety," while *Redbook* selected it as a "Picture of the Month," proclaiming it to be a "deep freeze chiller, replete with menace."[4] Even *Good Housekeeping* recommended it, arguing that it was "a penetrating and disturbing picture of a woman's inner strength being drained away," and that you believe the ending "too much, almost, for comfort" ("Assignment in Hollywood" 1948, 109). What the PCA have missed here then, in their focus on dope and divorce, is the way that this screenplay generates intense feelings of horror for its (female) audience. Even Alton Cook, for *World-Telegram*, writes that *Sorry, Wrong Number*'s audience "will avoid dark streets on the way home," an implicitly gendered form of address (Quoted in "*Sorry, Wrong Number*" 1948, 9).

Conclusion

This essay offers three contributions to film history scholarship. First, it extends the history of horror to include *Sorry, Wrong Number*, a film often categorized as crime or film noir. If we look at Fletcher's radio play, her draft screenplays, the locked script, and the film, we can see how each draft consistently foreshadows many of the traits of the telephone horror film that emerged in the 1970s. This is when the woman alone in the house

becomes dependent on her landline, a device that becomes the primary mode of menace as well as her only means of communication. The narrative culminates in her realization that either "the call is coming from inside the house" (*Black Christmas*, 1974; *When a Stranger Calls* 1979; and *Scream*, 1996 to name but a few) or her revelation, as she twirls the landline cord around her fingers, that the killer is now inside the house and listening to her call. *Sorry, Wrong Number* is an opportunity to extend the histories back beyond the 1970s, to the 1940s.

Next, this research makes an original contribution to academic scholarship on women (horror) filmmakers. It focusses on a woman screenwriter, when women directors (or writer-directors) have been the primary area of interest to date. It then reveals that Fletcher is almost entirely absent in our archives. In the holdings of male media workers, she is only ever on the margins. She appears briefly in trade news, and her name is mentioned when it comes to signing over the rights to her stories. Her name appears on the front of scripts, in the bottom left-hand corner, but the archives do not hold any of her personal draft work, her alterations, her substitutions, so we can only ever read her words through the finished versions of scripts preserved by male producers and directors. We do not know to what extent she had any creative control over the "change pages" of the locked script she turned in in December 1947. Here, I attempt to offer strategies for reading around and through the gaps in archives to bring the work of the woman screenwriter into the light.

Finally, the principal aim of this work is to consider how histories of regulation and histories of screenwriting might intersect with and complement each other. In the *Sorry, Wrong Number* archives, we can read how regulation shaped the structure of Fletcher's scripts, the narrative choices, the small details, even individual words, which in turn became the basis for film style. At the same time, when the PCA archive holds only lists of numbered change papers for locked scripts, we can turn to the screenplays themselves to look at those change pages and discover the specific scenes, dialogue and action description that continued to concern the censors. Thus, while I follow the spirit of the original *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* special issue by exploring "the techniques of censorship and its effects on film form and content" (Jacobs and Maltby 1995, 2), the goal of this essay is to think through how to explore the interplay between film style, production histories and regulation. In so doing, I illuminate the woman screenwriter as an invisible but essential creative intermediary between the PCA and the production and distribution companies. In conclusion, then, when we ask, "what happens when the woman writes a horror film?" we are not only adding to the history of horror film, but we are also demonstrating the value of close readings of screenplays and films

through regulatory documentation. This, I hope, will not only further research on film censorship, but also the connections between censorship, horror film studies, and women's film history.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following institutions for supporting my archival research: the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Special Collections and Archives, J. Paul Leonard Library, San Francisco State University; the American Heritage Centre, University of Wyoming, and the Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California. Thank you to Tom Brown for his excellent editorial guidance and support throughout the writing of this essay.

Notes

1. Two valuable exceptions to this rule are Shearer (2020) and Paszkiewicz (2020).
2. "Assignment in Hollywood" 1948, 11; next two reviews quoted in "N.Y. Critics Heap Praise" 1948, 7; Lusk 1948; Crowther 1948; Coe 1948; Tank 1948.
3. "*Sorry, Wrong Number*" 1948; "Feature Reviews" 1948; Schallert 1948; *Box Office* quoted in "Talk About a Great Motion Picture!" 1948.
4. First two reviews quoted in "*Sorry, Wrong Number*" 1948, 9; Delehanty 1948, 4.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, project reference AH/W000105/1.

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