A Cinema of Violence: The Films of D. Ross Lederman

Abstract: Although he worked for two major studios for the bulk of his career, Warner Brothers and Columbia, D. (David) Ross Lederman specialized in genre films and created his films swiftly, compactly, and with authority. His films stand out because they all display Lederman’s uniquely dystopian view of life, combined with a relentless, inexorable narrative drive. In his best films, Lederman not only bent the rules of genre cinema, he all but abolished them. The sheer intensity of Lederman’s imagistic and editorial pacing, coupled with his encyclopedic knowledge of genre filmmaking, allowed him to transcend the conventions of the typical program film, no matter what the genre, and make it a personal project.

In the Golden Age of the classical Hollywood cinema, from the late 1920s to the early 1960s, there were numerous “contract directors” who labored for the major Hollywood studios. Some, like Don Siegel, have achieved a degree of immortality for their later work, while their earlier efforts are often ignored; others, like Irving Cummings, Roy Del Ruth, André De Toth, Edward Cline, and David Butler have all but been forgotten. All were conscientious studio craftsmen. Yet in the midst of the Hollywood studio system, one director created a stylistic signature so unmistakable as to make his work immediately recognizable, both because of his audacious visual stylization, and his bizarre, often-surrealistic compression of both narrative and character.

Working for two major studios for the bulk of his career, Warner Bros. and Columbia, D. (David) Ross Lederman specialized in genre films, and created them swiftly, compactly, and with unassailable authority. Lederman’s films stand out from those of his more traditional studio colleagues because they display his uniquely dystopian view of life; a relentless, inexorable narrative drive; rapid, nearly Eisensteinian camera setups; and a willingness to alter or change the course of his character’s destiny at a moment’s notice. In his best films, Lederman not only bent the rules of genre cinema, he all but abolished them. The sheer intensity of Lederman’s imagistic and editorial pacing, coupled with his encyclopedic knowledge of genre filmmaking, allowed him to transcend the conventions of the typical program film, no matter what the genre, and make it a personal statement, while still staying firmly within the proscribed schedule and budget.

A prolific director with more than 85 feature films to his credit spanning back to the silent era, Lederman enjoyed his greatest success at Warner Bros. in the 1940s, where, as we shall see, he perfected his own peculiar style of hyperkinetic cinema. But behind the slick surface of Lederman’s Westerns, crime films, and espionage dramas, there is a darker story to tell. Through the kindness of his daughter, Joan Neville, and access to Lederman’s personal papers, I was able to reconstruct Lederman’s life—the life of, as Neville put it, “a violent man” (Neville, 21 October 2005). It is not a pretty picture. Lederman drove himself relentlessly in his work, and was equally brutal in his private life. For the world of Lederman’s violent action thrillers mirrored Lederman’s own approach to life: gruff, taciturn, he was demanding of both himself and others. Actor Sid Melton, who