## Chapter 5 Dimension Pictures

## Portrait of a 1970s' independent Ed Lowry

Late in 1971, *Variety* announced the formation of Dimension Pictures, a small film company which intended to produce films budgeted at around a quarter of a million dollars for the booming exploitation market. The principal partners in this venture were Lawrence Woolner, a low-budget exploitation producer since the mid-1950s; Stephanie Rothman, a young woman who had already begun to attract attention as one of the few female writer—directors working in Hollywood; and her husband Charles Swartz, producer of the three films Rothman had directed since 1966. All three partners had left Roger Corman's independent New World Pictures (itself barely a year old) to go to work for themselves. Dimension was to provide them the opportunity to make their own low-budget features while turning a healthy profit from the same lucrative drive-in audience targeted by New World.

The recognition and exploitation of this specialized audience outside the main-stream of Hollywood production, distribution and exhibition, was hardly new to the 1970s. Certainly during the 1950s and 1960s, this stratum of the industry had been profitably mined by companies such as American-International Pictures and Allied Artists, which distributed cheaply produced or cheaply purchased films to a sectionalized market: primarily the 'youth' audience that attended drive-ins to see 'schlock' science fiction and horror films, and low-budget movies exploiting topical subjects in such newly molded sub-genres as beach party musicals, Hell's Angels' films and hippie drug-culture movies. Tacitly acknowledging that television, not cinema, had become the true mass medium of the period, these independents filled a gap left open by the majors, focusing on a target audience instead of the public-at-large to which Hollywood had traditionally appealed.

By 1970, successful AIP producer—director Roger Corman felt secure enough about the stability of this target audience to form his own production and distribution company, New World. The market seemed to be expanding: the number of drive-in screens had increased steadily since 1963, <sup>2</sup> and the establishment of the ratings system only two years earlier had introduced the possibilities of appealing to a sizeable audience interested primarily in films rated 'R' for nudity and violence. Corman's move also took place in the wake of *Easy Rider's* phenomenal success, when the Hollywood majors had begun to eye with some interest the very youth market that was Corman's speciality. After a few abortive attempts to reach this audience via small 'counterculture' films, the majors turned their attentions toward milking bigger profits out of fewer films, focusing on the 'blockbusters' that came to symbolize Hollywood in the 1970s. Between *The Godfather* (1972), which surpassed all box office records back to *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and *Star Wars* (1977), the biggest blockbuster of the decade, the number of features released by national distributors decreased by 40% (from 312 in 1972 to 186 in 1977.<sup>3</sup> During the

same five years, box office grosses for Hollywood films increased inversely, with the top ten grossing films of 1977 amassing \$424 million in contrast to the \$123 million accounted for by the top ten films of 1972—an increase of nearly 345%. Where nine films had grossed over \$10 million each in 1972, some 28 films topped the \$10 million earning mark in 1977. Meanwhile, production costs for the average film during that period more than doubled, from an estimated \$1.9 million in 1972 to around \$4 million in 1977, and by 1980, that figure more than doubled again, to about \$8.5 million for the average film. Such increases are far greater than the national rate of inflation, and represent a trend among the majors toward the increasing concentration of capital in fewer, more profitable productions.

Never before had such an enormous gap existed between Hollywood's majors and its independents. While the six majors had become broadly diversified corporations (in the case of Columbia, Twentieth Century—Fox) or subsidiaries of still larger conglomerates (as in the case of Warner Bros., Universal, Paramount, United Artists), such independents as Dimension, New World and Crown International were personally owned businesses or partnerships. Producing fewer and fewer films themselves, the majors concentrated on the distribution of independent productions; but these independents had little to do with the low-budget fare of the exploitation market, and even less to do with the small films of the so-called New American Cinema of the late-1960s. Instead, they represented money from within the system employed by major producers with direct links, or at least distribution agreements, with the major companies. Thus, despite the increase of independent production, the six majors still dominated the market, accounting for 90% of box office earnings while producing only one-third of the films rated by the MPAA; this left the other two-thirds to compete for the remaining 10% of receipts. 10

These are the trends responsible for what has been termed 'the notorious product shortage of the mid-70s' which left exhibitors with fewer films than ever to show, and tended as never before to delineate 'specialized audiences' as the province of the independent companies. Here, outside the mainstream industry, existed a limited, highly competitive, but potentially profitable market characterized by its own types of exhibition (mainly the drive-in and, by the 1970s, the inner-city movie theatre) and its own, mostly R-rated sub-genres (the softcore nurse/teacher/stewardess film, the women's prison picture, the graphic/erotic horror movie, the imported kung-fu actioner, and the whole range of blaxploitation). Dimension played a key role in the development and exploitation of this market during the 1970s.

The major stockholder of the fledgling company, Lawrence Woolner, had entered the movie business as owner of a New Orleans drive-in during the late 1940s boom in outdoor theatres. By the mid-1950s, he, like other regional exhibitors, had become involved in advancing money for the production of low-budget features which he could eventually exhibit. In 1955, he formed Woolner Brothers Pictures with his brothers Bernard and David, and co-produced *Swamp Woman*, Corman's third film as a director. Moving to Hollywood, Woolner continued to co-produce low-budget exploitation fare such as *The Human Duplicators* and *Mutiny in Outer Space* (both 1965); and in 1970 he became a partner in Corman's New World Pictures, serving as President in Charge of Sales and Distribution. <sup>12</sup> By the end of 1971, he had left with Rothman and Swartz, two of New World's most talented personnel, to form Dimension.

A veteran of exploitation films since the mid-1960s at AIP, Stephanie Rothman was the first woman to receive a Director's Guild Fellowship, which was granted her while she was studying film as a graduate student at the University of Southern California. In 1966, she began working on a variety of projects at AIP, and was given her first chance to direct with a beach party spoof called It's a Bikini World, produced and co-scripted by Charles Swartz. She and Swartz served as production executives on Corman's last AIP film Gas-s-s (1970), and left with him to begin New World. It was Rothman who directed and Swartz who produced one of New World's first releases, The Student Nurses (1970), a soft-core comedy of manners that initiated one of the new company's most successful sub-genres. Within the next year, they had made a second film for New World, The Velvet Vampire (1971), an R-rated erotic horror film centering around a female vampire in a hip southern California setting. As partners in Dimension Pictures, and the company's only in-house talent, Rothman and Swartz intended to continue producing the kind of commercial exploitation films which they found personally interesting, and to do so with even greater speed and less interference than they had encountered at New World. 13

Charles Swartz, as Dimension's Executive Vice President in Charge of Production, and Stephanie Rothman, named Head of Project Development, were central to Dimension's initial plans to produce five low-budget films during 1972. 14 By February of that year, Dimension claimed to have three films in production. The first was a horror film, The Twilight People, directed by another AIP and New World veteran, Eddie Romero, and shot in the Philippines. The second was a women's prison camp film, first called Sweet Sugar and later Chain Gang Girls, produced by Swartz in Costa Rica. Nonunion labor costs in such Third World locales more than made up for the expense of location shooting. The third film in production was actually a Mexican 'pickup' (that is, a film to which Dimension had purchased the US distribution rights) called The Sin of Adam and Eve which was partially re-shot and completely re-dubbed by Dimension. Such pickups quickly expanded the company's list of projected 1972 releases to fifteen.<sup>15</sup> The remainder of the year also saw the releases of Group Marriage, the first Rothman/Swartz film made for Dimension, and of the company's first genuine hit *The* Doberman Gang, co-produced with its writer—director David Chudnow's independent company Rosamund Productions.

By August, Dimension estimated a first year's gross of \$8–10 million on an initial investment of only \$1.5 million. By November, Dimension's success served as the best example of new trends in low-budget production for *Hollywood Reporter's* Ron Perinington in an article entitled 'Indies Taking Up Slack Where Majors Left Off.' Noting that 30% of playtime in the major US exhibition circuits was occupied by independent productions, he quoted Woolner's prediction that the percentage would soon reach 60%. The majors have lost control,' Woolner proclaimed boldly, 'to the extent that we can come in and demand and get preferred playing time.' Woolner accounted for the fact that Dimension was already 'in the black' with a weekly cash flow of \$150,000 by pointing to the company's low operating expenses: 'What we do for \$300,000, a major couldn't duplicate for \$700,000 because of overhead. We do not allow one nickel to be wasted in production.'<sup>17</sup>



Figure 5.1 A star in The Doberman Gang (Chudnow, 1972). Courtesy of Rosamond Productions/Kobal Collection.

Woolner's remarks at the end of a first, successful, year indicate a sense of pride in what independent production, and Dimension Pictures in particular, represented in terms of creativity (the 'quality' of the company's first-year product notwithstanding). 'Majors today are hiring independents to produce pictures for them,' he comments, 'but they will never give a guy the freedom to make a picture in the way he wants.... We give people freedom to make pictures as they see it. 18 A somewhat different, but related, sense of accomplishment can be seen in an earlier Hollywood Reporter article devoted to Rothman, entitled 'Dimension Pictures Opens Up Opportunities for Women.' Here Rothman declares that 'a concerted and unprecedented effort will be made to locate and hire qualified women in areas of filmmaking in which they are rarely if ever found.'19 Rothman's statement, indicating a policy which she and Swartz seem to have followed enthusiastically, and Woolner's claims regarding creative freedom, highlight two of the frequently noted 'progressive' aspects of low-budget production which have drawn attention to the exploitation film. Unburdened by a corporate bureaucracy entrenched in a traditional studio hierarchy or by a need to appeal to the broadest possible audience, the exploitation film has served historically as a back door into feature filmmaking, offering young talent the opportunity to create and even to innovate, albeit within severe restrictions of budget and subject matter. Certainly Rothman has drawn attention from quarters that might normally eschew exploitation films as such-from the Sunday supplement of the local newspaper, where she was treated as a successful professional woman with feminist inclinations, <sup>20</sup> to the pages of *Screen* where her films were heralded as potential guide-posts toward a feminist discourse within the commercial cinema. <sup>21</sup> The desirability of viewing the exploitation film as an alternative to mainstream cinema capable of mounting a critique of prevailing film practices and dominant ideology must

however be weighed against its simultaneous and consistent exploitation of talent, of women's bodies, and of violence as commodities. Not only does the exploitation film tend to adhere to the basic economic and representational practices of dominant cinema but in certain respects it intensifies them as a direct result of the often debilitating financial concerns bred on Poverty Row.

One of those concerns for Dimension involved its difficulty as a small producer in distributing its releases. Supplying a market outside the concerns of the majors, most independent exploitation films were distributed by regional exchanges. These subdistributors most often handled films from a number of independent companies and exercised complete control over the bookings a film might receive. Despite Woolner's claims to the contrary, Dimension, as a new company selling a low-budget product, had less chance of demanding good bookings than a company with an established record or an inherently desirable slate of films (those with major stars or major national advertising). In addition, regional distributors were notoriously careless in the handling of prints (which represented a sizeable investment for a small company) and equally notorious for their slowness in paying rental percentages to the company owning a film. These practices could wreak havoc for a small company such as Dimension. Finally, regional exchanges generally received between 20% and 25% of the rentals paid by exhibitors, and that, too, was a major consideration for a company that did not waste a nickel.<sup>22</sup>

If Dimension were to continue producing films and releasing pickups, it would have to follow the lead of New World by setting up its own exchanges, asserting some measure of control over playdates, promotion, prints and cash flow. Therefore, at the end of 1972, Woolner announced plans to establish distribution offices in six of Dimension's key markets across the country: New Orleans, Charlotte, Memphis, Dallas, Minneapolis and Salt Lake City. These exchanges were to be jointly owned and operated by the General Film Corporation, a small film company owned by Don Gottlieb and Arthur Marks, a former television producer—director who had turned to the production of R-rated exploitation films.<sup>23</sup> Seeking a stake in distribution seemed both a logical and a wise way to invest the profits of Dimension's first successful year. Southern markets, where driveins operated year-round, were essential to the company's ambitious production plans. By March 1973, Dimension had opened three exchanges—in New Orleans, Dallas, and Memphis—but stopped plans for further expansion. And, although Woolner still proclaimed his intentions to open offices in 'every exchange center in North America,' 24 subsequent exchanges announced for Charlotte, Detroit, Miami, and Atlanta never seemed to have materialized.<sup>25</sup>

A major consideration in this respect is the high cost of distribution; for, while company-operated exchanges may give a producer more control, the expense of setting up such a network and of promoting films may far outweigh the advantages. It was estimated in 1975, for example, that a minor distributor like Allied Artists, with only 12 exchanges, ran on a yearly overhead of \$3 million, and that it required over \$12 million in annual rentals to support even this small network. No matter how prosperous Dimension was by 1973, it could hardly guarantee yearly rentals of that magnitude (with rentals representing only a percentage of grosses), especially based on a slate of only eight or so low-budget releases.

Although 1973 saw the success of Rothman's Terminal Island and of The Daring Dobermans, a sequel to the first doberman hit, several of Dimension's eight announced releases for the year were pushed back to join the 15 films slated for 1974.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Dimension enjoyed an unprecedented popularity during the mid-1970s, a result, as Hollywood Reporter's Will Tusher slyly asserted in 1974, of 'the fact that even clunkers are clanking the cash registers at the box office.' In fact, this prosperity corresponded quite closely with the fall-off in product from the majors. At a time when mainstream Hollywood was seeking bigger profits from fewer films, Dimension was discovering that profits were to be made by filling the void with quantity rather than quality. 'Pictures that are not supposed to get money are getting more than they should,' Woolner commented happily in 1974, announcing an unprecedented \$6 million budget for twelve 1974 releases and plans for 16 exchanges by the year's end. 28 Supplying product for this ambitious expansion into distribution would be a main concern for Dimension during the next several years; and though the additional exchanges were never realized, the release schedule was pursued in earnest. The company projected 25 new releases for 1975<sup>29</sup> and another 40 for the next two-year period, a release slate surpassing any of the majors except for United Artists. 30 Woolner sought product wherever available, from the pickup of foreign films such as the Italian film Diary of a Female Prisoner (1974) to the independently produced American documentary on the 1930s Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? (1975).31 As for in-house production, two Rothman— Swartz films, The Working Girls and Mama Sweetlife, were planned for 1974, 32 but only the former was completed and released. By 1975, Rothman and Swartz had withdrawn from their partnership with 3 and left Dimension. The precise reasons remain unclear, although Rothman later expressed her disappointment at finding it impossible to make the kinds of films she wanted in such an environment.<sup>33</sup>

In the period following the box office successes of such films as *Walking Tall* (1973), *White Lightning* (1973), and *Macon County Line* (1974), Dimension co-productions during the mid-1970s included a good many imitative backwoods sex-and-violence films. Among these were the commercially successful *Dixie Dynamite* (1976) and *Gator Bait* (1976), the latter produced and directed by the husband-and-wife team of Fred and Beverly Sebastian whose 1972 *The Hitchhikers*, a soft-core crime comedy shot in the California desert, was one of Dimension's first releases. In addition, 'blaxploitation' films made up an important part of Dimension's 1975 output, including such titles as *Boss Nigger, Tough, Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde*, and *Black Shampoo*. Reporting a 'steadily increasing market for black films in all parts of the country,' Woolner signed Steve Krantz, producer of the successful black film *Cooley High*, to a non-exclusive three-picture deal.<sup>34</sup>

It might be noted that the trends toward R-rated action films with rural settings, on the one hand, and 'blaxploitation' on the other, corresponded rather closely to Dimension's main target audiences: the southern drive-in crowd in the first case, and the inner-city movie-goer in the second. The decade-long rise in the number of drive-in screens prior to 1974 (at the moderate rate of about 26 per year)—a trend upon which Dimension's initial success had been partially based—underwent a major reversal in the mid-1970s with the startling loss of some 387 screens in 1976.<sup>35</sup> Rising real estate values in the suburbs which had grown up around the drive-ins had begun to make it more lucrative to sell the property than to show films there.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the propagation of suburban multiplex

theatres, which corresponds historically to the decline in drive-in screens, had begun to compete for neighborhood audiences.<sup>37</sup> Increasingly in the 1970s, major urban areas (where most movie-going took place) were dominated by a few large theater chains, which tended toward the exhibition of mainstream Hollywood fare.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the bulk of Dimension's revenues during this period came from towns of 100,000 or less.<sup>39</sup>

If suburbanization had taken its toll on one of Dimension's major outlets, it had also contributed to the economic decline of formerly prestigious downtown theaters, which indirectly created another exhibition site for exploitation films. As the demographics of many inner-city areas shifted toward a larger minority population and lower income levels, downtown theatres often gave up trying to attract suburban audiences, choosing instead to book double bills of exploitation films to appeal to neighborhood patrons. While such theaters provided important venues for Dimension, they hardly constituted an expanding market, as such theaters tended to close throughout the decade. Urban renewal and the gentrification of such neighborhoods, of course, simply reversed the demographics upon which the appeal of Dimension's films were based.

By the end of 1976, it had become clear that if Dimension were to continue its expansion, it would have to find new outlets for its product. In a November issue of *Variety*, Woolner complained about the 'lack of cooperation from theater exhibitors in a shrinking market.' Decrying their lack of 'showmanship,' he added that exhibitors were 'destroying themselves with the high admission prices they are asking today. If a distributor or producer doesn't create box office excitement, there isn't any, because the distributor...won't spend money to help a film.' In response to these difficulties, Dimension announced plans to enter the production of features for television, emphasizing the type of exploitation fare with which the company had succeeded theatrically. By offering percentages of potential European theatrical releases of such films, Woolner hoped to attract major talent to such projects.<sup>40</sup>

Dimension's theatrical plans were expanding as well, with a record \$12–\$15 million budgeted for 1977–78 releases. He mid-1977, the company would announce that it was enjoying its best year ever. We are on the brink of becoming a very important source of product,' Woolner proclaimed. The independent is important to the exhibitor... Dimension, Corman, and Crown. We are the three biggest independents. He biggest was still no guarantee of stability. We gamble with our money,' Woolner said proudly. We are not a stock company, and we do not go to a bank. In fact, since Dimension could offer no guarantee of major distribution agreements for its product, bank loans were virtually unavailable to the company.

Having shifted with the market once again, Dimension's biggest releases of 1977 were horror films: *Kingdom of the Spiders*, a film about a town overrun by tarantulas, and the company's first production budgeted at over \$1 million;<sup>45</sup> and *Ruby*, one of the films produced by Steve Krantz, starring Piper Laurie (fresh from her comeback in *Carrie*) as the owner of a drive-in haunted by a bloodthirsty ghost. After director Curtis Harrington was fired from the film, Stephanie Rothman was persuaded to complete it.<sup>46</sup> The result was Dimension's biggest hit ever, grossing more than \$16 million.<sup>47</sup>

Spurred by this new property, Woolner was anxious to change Dimension's image to fit its newfound status as 'the fastest-growing independent.' Plans were made to move the company offices from a highrise on Sunset Blvd. to a 20,000 square-foot building providing room for the creation of a department to produce advertising trailers. Woolner

also felt that it was time for Dimension to turn from quantity to quality in its releases, promising that 'even greater selectivity than has been exercised in the past will be used in deciding on a product pickup.... We want to give exhibitors better features—on a growing scale.' Such changes seemed necessary if Dimension were going to compete for bookings in the multiplex theatres, especially in light of the rise in overall film production beginning in 1977. 49

At the Cannes Film Festival the following year, Dimension officially announced its intentions to move from low- to medium-budget films, with three films planned, each in the \$3 million range. None of these projects was ever completed, nor did Dimension begin its production of television features. Although the company's expansion on every front, envisioned by Woolner as an aggressive response to an unpredictable market, was exactly the sort of gamble Dimension had taken again and again with great success, such actions could hardly be supported by a single hit like *Ruby*. They required a steady influx of capital which Dimension's sporadic release schedule could not provide.

By mid-1979, Dimension was cited in the first of a series of lawsuits that would spell the end of the company. The \$1.6 million suit involved Saber Productions, co-producers of *Dixie Dynamite*, which charged that Dimension had violated the terms of its distribution agreement on the film and had lied regarding a deal to sell rights to another company. In July 1980, Steve Krantz also filed suit against Dimension to recover \$125,000 awarded to him in a settlement by the American Arbitration Association involving the release of *Ruby*. Three months later, Dimension itself decided to sue David Chudnow and Rosamund Productions for \$350,000, claiming that Chudnow had not paid Dimension its complete percentage for his re-use of footage from the doberman films that they had co-produced. The suit seemed to be a last-ditch effort to postpone what by then seemed inevitable—a declaration of bankruptcy. Citing Dimension as the latest in the falling market for independent producers, *Variety* announced in February 1981 that the company had filed for bankruptcy under the provisions of Chapter VII, reserved for businesses 'hopelessly in debt.' 54

The brief ten-year history of Dimension Pictures provides an excellent indication of the ups and downs of the independent film company struggling to survive the 1970s outside the mainstream of Hollywood production and distribution. While Corman's New World Pictures is most frequently cited as the prototype for this particular niche of the industry, it is usually chosen for its exceptional qualities: its prominence as the largest of the independents, its foray into the distribution of foreign art films, and Corman's virtually mythic role as the architect of the postwar exploitation film and talent scout for the New Hollywood. Dimension Pictures, it seems, may tell us far more about the marketplace itself. A production company formed to take advantage of the early-1970s boom in the exploitation field, it sought to gain control of its market by expanding into distribution. On the one hand, it proposed an ambitious production slate heralded by claims of creative freedom, while on the other hand it filled its release schedule with cheap foreign pickups and low-budget co-productions aimed at exploiting whatever trends were current. Buoyed by success in an industry climate more unstable than anyone suspected, Dimension attempted to make the leap from the shrinking exploitation market into the fringes of the mainstream, only to find itself faced with financial demands which few but the majors could meet.

The demise of Dimension Pictures marks the end of one of the 1970s' most interesting sub-chapters of film history: the one involving the exploitation film as a kind of alternative system flourishing in the gaps left open by the Hollywood majors. By the beginning of the 1980s, an increased uniformity in exhibition practices had enabled the majors to consolidate their control of distribution to the extent that those gaps had begun to close.

## **Notes**

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- 4 James Monaco, American Film Now, New York: New American Library, 1979:35-8.
- 5 Edgerton: 74.
- 6 International Motion Picture Almanac (1976):42A.
- 7 International Motion Picture Almanac (1978):34A.
- 8 International Motion Picture Almanac (1981):36A.
- 9 Monaco: 33-7.
- 10 Douglas Gomery, The American Film Industry in the 1970s: Stasis in the "New Hollywood", 'Wide Angle, 5, 4 (1983):53.
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- 13 Terry Curtis Fox, 'Fully Female: Stephanie Rothman,' *Film Comment*, 12, 6 (November–December 1976): 46–50.
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- 15 Hollywood Reporter, 16 February 1972.
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- 17 Ron Pennington, 'Indies Taking Up Slack Where Majors Left Off'. *Hollywood Reporter*, 1 November 1972.
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- 21 Pam Cook, 'Exploitation Films and Feminism,' Screen, 17, 2 (Summer 1976): 122–7.
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- 30 Cobbett S.Steinberg, Film Facts, New York: Facts on File, 1980:84.
- 31 Daily Variety, 21 April 1975.
- 32 Tusher, 'Box Office Bulge.'
- 33 Fox, 'Fully Female,' 50.