

Hollywood's Take on the Working-Class Writer: Filming Bukowski's Factotum

Directed by Bent Hamer; Produced by Bulbul Films; Runtime: 94 mins.; 2005.

Reviewed by Russell Harrison

In the most recent edition of the popular Penguin anthology, *Contemporary American Poetry*, two poems by Charles Bukowski, author of (among much else) the proletarian novel *Factotum*, are included. In the brief blurb introducing the author he is referred to by the editors as someone who has "spent much of his adult life as a drifter."¹ This is odd, though not unexpected. Odd, because Bukowski traveled around the country for, at most, five of his 55 adult years. For roughly fifteen years he worked for the U.S. Post Office, hardly evidence of "drifting" and for another roughly quarter of a century after his retirement from the Postal Service, he was ensconced with house, wife cats and cars in suburban San Pedro as an increasingly successful writer able to live, and live increasingly well, off the income from his books, (in English and in translation into many foreign languages). Not unexpected, because what troubles the editors of this blurb, and other proponents of this view of Bukowski, are not the years of vagabondage (although this is a mostly inaccurate characterization since Bukowski was almost always working during his wanderings) but the many jobs and the types of jobs. They are boring, routine, low-paid, manual-labor jobs; this is not T.S. Eliot going to his bank job with a Latin Vergil in one jacket pocket and an Italian Dante in the other. Henry Chinaski's (Bukowski's fictional alter ego in his strongly autobiographical fiction) jobs are the jobs that people who go to college go to college to avoid. And who, editors mistakenly, think once in college prefer not to read about such jobs.

Bukowski's 1975 novel *Factotum* is the compendium of such jobs.² The 22 jobs Chinaski holds for varying lengths of time provide the structure of the novel as he is fired, laid off or quits. They are jobs like: clerk in a magazine publishers distributing house or auto parts warehouse, replacer of subway-car advertisements, stock/shipping clerk in a bicycle warehouse, janitor at the L.A. Times, shipping clerk in an art supply store, "utility man" at a wholesale and retail clothing store, worker in a dog-biscuit factory. Well, one gets the idea. During one of his bouts of unemployment, Chinaski muses in *Factotum* about the nature of work in the United States, as it exists for most people (p. 127):

How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so.

The genius of *Factotum* is that it recognizes the structurally "antagonistic relationship" that exists between the boss and the worker in a capitalist economy/social system and yet in the face of such a social structure persists in demanding pleasure (one implication of the above question being that work be "enjoyable"). In a classic elucidation of this relationship, Harry Braverman noted that when the employer buys the worker's labor power, "What he buys is infinite in potential, . but in its realization it is limited by the subjective state of the workers, by their previous history, by the general social conditions under which they work as well as the particular condition of the enterprise, and by the technical setting of their labor."³ It is no accident that Braverman's and Bukowski's books are published at almost identical moments in U.S. history. It was a time when the traditional labor relations of capital were being much questioned, instances of such "interrogation" ranged from wild cat strikes in the auto industry and the welfare rights movement to Richard Nixon's and Milton Friedman's suggestions for a Guaranteed Annual Income. Since, under the conditions of alienated work, the workers have no interest in working any more/harder than they have to, "The labor process has become the responsibility of the capitalist. In this setting of antagonistic relations of production, the problem of realizing the "full usefulness" of the labor power he has bought becomes exacerbated by the opposing interests of those for whose purposes the labor process is carried on, and those who, on the other side, carry it on." (Or, as Bukowski once delineated the boss/worker relationship: "before there was always much for me to do / but it was always the other man's idea / the other man who was making all the money using me."⁴

It is just such a relationship and just such a demand that Norwegian director Bent Hamer's film, *Factotum*, fails to address. Glaring evidence of this appears as early as the film's second scene where Chinaski identifies himself as a writer and we then see him writing (and drinking) in his rented room. In the novel, to be sure, Chinaski, aspires to be a writer; but this aspect of his life is given short shrift and this desire to be a writer is distinctly peripheral to his existence as a worker. As I've noted, the novel describes 22 jobs; Hamer's film, six. On the other hand there are 15 references, of one sort or another, to his writing. We see him writing in his room; we see him mailing a manuscript; we hear voice-overs commenting on writing/writers. In my opinion this is a fundamental mistake on Hamer's part. It changes the thrust of the novel, a powerful description of alienated and exploited work in mid-20th century America as it existed for quite possibly a majority of the population, into the film's portrayal of a disaffected man trying to become a writer. The precursors for Bukowski's *Factotum* were Knut Hamsun's 1890 novel, *Hunger*, and George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), not James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

A telling moment comes near the end of the film when Hamer rewrites one of Chinaski's jobs, that describing his employment as a janitor at the *L.A. Times*. It is a night-shift job (147-48):

"I was there at 9 p.m. The Superintendent showed me where the timeclock was. I punched in. He handed me three or four rags and a large jar. "There's a brass railing runs around this building. I want you to shine that brass railing." I walked outside and looked for the brass railing. It was there. It ran around the building. It was a large building. I put some polish on the railing and then rubbed it off with one of the rags. It didn't seem to do much good. People

walked by and looked curiously at me. I'd had dull stupid jobs but this appeared to be the dullest and most stupid one of them all."

In Hamer's version, Chinaski is assigned to dust a huge, perhaps 60-foot high, statue of an American Indian. The scene opens with such a tight shot that it is some moments of widening camera work before we know what's going on as Chinaski, rising in a kind of extended cherry picker, winds up dusting the Indian's head. The scene has a mild humor to it, nothing more. But the difference between the two scenes is telling. Hamer invents a job that effectively doesn't exist in the economy and thus has no relevance to work as it exists for tens of millions of American workers. It is a self-consciously absurdist moment and as such decidedly apolitical. Bukowski's version, on the other hand, depicts a job and a type of labor all too familiar to the many millions who are consigned by the capitalist system to such a job.⁵ Absurdist writing easily leads to the wry humor of helplessness and Hamer, here and elsewhere in the film, may have been overly influenced by what Bukowski himself once characterised as the "comic edge" he gives to his writing.⁶

But Hamer also seems to want to make his protagonist an appealing individual and perhaps his mild humor (as well as Matt Dillon's effective acting) achieve this. But, if so, it is a mistaken achievement. To the extent that we empathize with Chinaski it is in that narcissistic mode of being attracted to/repelled by unattractive traits in another that we ourselves share with them that Freud analyzed so effectively in his essay on narcissism. Hamer's mistake is irritatingly clear in a scene about writers (no surprise there). During an interview for a job as a "shipping clerk in a ladies' dress shop" Chinaski has mentioned that he's an aspiring writer. Sometime after he is hired, his boss calls him into his office and introduces him to a writer friend. After several minutes and, apparently no conversation, Chinaski leaves. A little later he reflects on the experience (62-3):

"That scene in the office stayed with me. Those cigars, the fine clothes. I thought of good steaks, long rides up winding driveways that led to beautiful homes. Ease. Trips to Europe. Fine women. Were they that much more clever than I? The only difference was money, and the desire to accumulate it."

Up to this point Hamer follows Bukowski pretty much step for step. In both versions we have an obvious, though, mild presentation of class divisions. Then the paths Bukowski and Hamer take diverge radically. Immediately following the last line quoted, Bukowski writes (63):

I'd do it too! I'd save my pennies. I'd get an idea, I'd spring a loan. I'd hire and fire. I'd keep whiskey in my desk drawer. I'd have a wife with size 40 breasts and an ass that would make the paperboy on the corner come in his pants when he saw it wobble. I'd cheat on her and she'd know it and keep silent in order to live in my house with my wealth. I'd fire men just to see the look of dismay on their faces. I'd fire women who didn't deserve to be fired.

One of the themes in the novel is the abuse of power that class divisions so easily lead to. And Bukowski's position is that such abuses do not reflect individual personality but class position. This is made clear at the end of the novel when, momentarily promoted into management, Chinaski humiliates his underlings, treating them in a far worse manner than he had ever been treated. But Hamer omits such aspects of the novel and by omitting the horrors of just how alienated labor deforms us vitiates much of the critical power of *Factotum*.

"Modern Industry has discovered the world market . . . The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls. . . ."7

In the end, one asks oneself what does Hamer's film, his rewriting of Bukowski's mean? Hamer's film, as does every artwork, primarily reflects the historical moment of its creation. Whereas Bukowski's novel though set in the 1940s/early 1950s clearly reflected the 1960s/early 1970s, Hamer's film, though set in the present fails to meaningfully reflect that present. As Marx and Engels indicated in 1848, capitalism is a global system; and since circa 1980 people have been writing, and writing increasingly, about the effects of globalization and its effects on the First-World working class: downsizing, outsourcing, off-shoring etc. Yet Hamer's film registers none of this. Nor does he register the shift within the First-World working class to a globalized working class as a result of the increased immigration, legal and illegal, that started, in the U.S., with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (which cancelled the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924). In fact he ignores references to the effects of this shift in the novel. At one of his jobs, Chinaski hooks up with Manny. "An intense and intelligent looking Chicano boy" (102). Manny shows up in the film but is in no way identifiably Latino and , judging from his name, might just as well be Jewish as Latino.

Though it seems a distinctly less important task, Hamer's *Factotum* can obviously be judged just as a film, an artwork, ignoring its relationship to Bukowski's novel. The acting is universally competent and in general the film is effectively cast. Mat Dillon is especially convincing as Henry Chinaski, far more so than Mickey Rourke in Barbet Schroeder's 1987 film of a Bukowski screenplay, *Barfly*. Dillon's proletarian nonchalance effectively registers the essential passivity of Chinaski. Lili Taylor is effective as Chinaski's working-class girlfriend (though the novel's Jan is not of proletarian provenance) but it is never clear what kind of work she does. The film seems a low-budget affair and this works to its advantage because of its subject matter. Yet there is one way in which this might have been a disadvantage. In the novel Chinaski travels back and forth across the U.S., working in St. Louis, Miami Beach and New York, as well as Los Angeles. Having the film take place in one city, St. Paul, lessens the universality of the critique of capitalist work relations.

It seems to me that Hamer does not take his subject matter, low-waged routine, degrading labor in the United States, seriously. He has taken one of the most important post-war American novels and without a doubt the most effective proletarian novel of the period and, good-humoredly, played it for absurdist laughs

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NOTES

¹ Gwynn, R.S. and April Lindner. 2005. *Contemporary American Poetry*. New York: Pearson: 15.

² Charles Bukowski. 1975. *Factotum*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press.

³ Braverman, Harry. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press: 57.

⁴ Charles Bukowski. 1981. "Guava Tree," in C.B., Dangling in the *Tournefortia*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press: 232.

⁵ Hamer may be overly influenced by his relatively mild, European, welfare-state experience, and the palliative effect of North-Sea oil on otherwise harsh capitalist relations of production, one metonymic, though for all that a significant, statistic follows: in 1999 the average yearly hours worked in Norway were 1395 as compared to the U.S.'s 1976 (Statistics Norway).

⁶ There are a number of such absurdist moments in the film. At one point in the novel, Chinaski finally gets a story accepted. He is pleased although it is clear that this is not going to materially change his situation. Hamer switches the incident to the end of the novel where, after Chinaski is no longer living in that rooming house, his former landlady receives his mail and opens and reads the acceptance letter. What had been a mildly interesting and realistic detail now becomes an absurdist moment suggesting the ultimate irrationality of life.

⁷ Marx, Karl. 1988. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Norton: 56, 59.