

Factotum: Charles Bukowski Embodiment Of Worker Writer Alienation

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The Unrepentant Marxist

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Like the previous two films based on Charles Bukowski's fiction, *Factotum* is directed by a European—the Norwegian Bent Hamer. Now appearing in theaters everywhere, it features Matt Dillon in the role of Henry Chinaski, a stand-in for Bukowski who is the narrator and major character in all of his writings. Dillon also starred recently in *Herbie Fully Loaded*, a sequel to the preteen classic featuring a VW beetle with a human personality.

Charles Bukowski

Factotum follows in the footsteps of *Barfly*, the 1987 film directed by the Swiss Barbet Schroeder with a screenplay by Bukowski himself. It starred Mickey Rourke as Henry Chinaski, a casting decision no doubt inspired by the actor's well-known problems with booze and women. *Barfly* did not make much of an impression on me, despite Bukowski's involvement.

The earliest attempt to convert Bukowski's prose into film was Italian Marco Ferreri's 1981 *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, something I have never seen. It stars Ben Gazzara, one of the USA's more innovative actors and directors. For some odd reason, the Henry Chinaski character is renamed Charles Sirkin.

Stylistically, *Factotum* owes a lot to the minimalism of the American director Jim Jarmusch or Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki. While *Barfly* depicts Chinaski as a two-fisted, hell-raising lout, the character is far more subdued and laconic in *Factotum*. Scenes are chosen from the book not so much for their conventional cinematic appeal, but for their ability to serve as minimalist set pieces.

For example, after Chinaski has been hired for one of a string of dead-end factory jobs (factotum means somebody hired to different kinds of work), the boss discovers that he is an aspiring writer and calls him up to his office to talk to him with another manager, who is also some kind of writer. The scene mostly consists of the three men eyeballing each other. The boss asks Henry if the book he is working on deals with cancer. He answers that it does. The boss follows up by asking if there's something about his wife as well. Henry answers that she's in there too.

In another scene obviously chosen for its deliberately understated effect, Chinaski is fast asleep with his companion Jan with whom he has shared a typical night of heavy drinking. When they awake to general commotion in the hallway, Chinaski opens their door to discover fireman evacuating the building's dwellers. When Jan asks him what's going on, he replies that it is only a fire and they go back to sleep.

This scene occupies all of chapter 43 of Bukowski's novel:

I was too sick one morning to get up at 4:30 a.m. ? or according to our clock 7:27 and one half. I shut off the alarm and went back to sleep. A couple of hours later there was a loud noise in the hall. ?What the hell is it?? asked Jan.

I got out of bed. I slept in my shorts. The shorts were stained?we wiped with newspapers that we crumpled and softened with our hands?and I often didn?t get all of it cleaned off. My shorts were also ragged and had cigarette burns in them where the hot ashes had fallen in my lap.

I went to the door and opened it. There was thick smoke in the hall. Firemen in large metal helmets with numbers on them. Firemen dragging long thick hoses. Firemen dressed in asbestos. Firemen with axes. The noise and confusion was incredible. I closed the door.

?What is it?? asked Jan.

?It?s the fire department.?

?Oh,? she said. She pulled the covers up over her head, rolled on her side. I got in beside her and slept.

To get to the point of this review, it is simply impossible for the film to capture the essence of Bukowski?s prose, which is less about the event itself and more about his literary flourishes such as ?My shorts were also ragged and had cigarette burns in them where the hot ashes had fallen in my lap.? Those few words do more to sum up his character than an hour of film. Bukowski had an amazing ability to hone in on details that helped to illustrate his utter degradation. It is simply beyond the capability of film to have the same effect.

?Factotum? deserves to be seen despite this liability. Matt Dillon is far closer to capturing Chinaski?s character than Mickey Rourke, who was probably imitating himself. This far more introspective and unhappy character reflects the daytime misery of a factory worker unlike ?Barfly,? which is much more interested in the boozy nightlife adventures found in Bukowski?s tales.

In the final analysis, ?Factotum? is true to Karl Marx?s observation that ??the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working, he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working.?

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