

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

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 techn

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 cherrypicker, 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

"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

