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Barflies, Tramps, Heroes and Whores: Charles Bukowski and the Cinema

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M.Phil. in Literature, Film and Visual Culture

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Thursday 15th November, 2012

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Charles Bukowski died in 1994 but many important examples of his writing – including 2,000 pages of poetry and 1,000 pages of correspondence – have only been published posthumously, resulting in no thorough academic investigations of his complete works, to date. My contention throughout is that Bukowski's entire oeuvre – from poetry to prose – would not be what it is without the major influence of cinema. Furthermore, much of Bukowski's work has been adapted to film since his death, resulting in a new focus on his contribution. I take into account all of Bukowski's primary work, including his prolific correspondence to friends, writers and directors, as well as further secondary sources on twentieth century cinema, literature and modernism to help place Bukowski within his wider cultural context. I examine the clear line of influence stemming from Charlie Chaplin to Bukowski and his peers, and show the many similarities between Chaplin's Tramp and Bukowski's literary alter-ego Henry Chinaski. Furthermore, I examine the major influence of key actors such as Humphrey Bogart and Marlon Brando on Bukowski's handling of male identity, and the somewhat parallel influence of actresses such as Elizabeth Taylor and Brigitte Bardot on his female characters. This analysis reveals that much of Bukowski's performative sexism is a direct reflection of what he saw in the cinema. I also examine Bukowski's screenplay *Barfly*, and the autobiographical novel *Hollywood* that the film adaptation of *Barfly* inspired. I pay particular attention to Bukowski's emphasis on narrative form over lyric, examining how this corresponds with the narrative structure of film; how Bukowski uses allusion to cinema to make his work immediately familiar and accessible; and how Bukowski's employment of enjambement is clearly intended to keep the eye moving, just like in a film.

DECLARATION

15th November 2012

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part unless credited to any other university for the award of any other degree.

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Jian.

For Oupa

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Introduction

Although Charles Bukowski died before the end of last century, much of his writing has only been published posthumously, resulting in very few thorough academic investigations of his complete works having been fully conducted, to date. In fact, the relationship between Bukowski and cinema – although empirically clear from even the most cursory appraisal of his work – has been hitherto almost totally overlooked by scholarship and given no sustained analysis whatsoever. While there are several key biographical accounts¹ of Bukowski’s life and work, much of his writing was only finally published *after* these were released, thereby rendering these studies per se no longer adequate. David Calonne observes in his introduction to *Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook*: “Only now, fourteen years after Charles Bukowski (1920-1994) typed his final words, has it become possible to fully fathom his protean creativity.”² And: “Because Bukowski was so prolific, scholars have been unable to keep up with his pace and there is still no adequate or complete biography of his works.”³ As there is still no all-encompassing study of Bukowski’s life and work, then, and no serious examination whatsoever of the specific influence of cinema on his writing, this thesis will be the first monograph dedicated specifically to Bukowski and cinema. I will take into account the entirety of Bukowski’s work published both before and after his death, with particular attention paid to his newer, posthumous publications. My contention throughout will be that Bukowski’s entire oeuvre – from poetry to prose – would not be what it is without the major influence of cinema.

Referred to in the popular press as “the laureate of American low life”⁴, “the Poet Laureate of Skid Row”⁵, “the liquor-laced laureate”⁶, “the godfather of lowlife

¹ Neeli Cherkovski, *Hank: The Life of Charles Bukowski*, Random House, New York (1991)
Gay Brewer, *Charles Bukowski*, Twayne Publishers, New York (1997)
Howard Sounes, *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life*, Rebel Inc., Canongate, Edinburgh (1998)

Barry Miles, *Charles Bukowski*, Random House, London (2005)

² David Stephen Callonne’s “Introduction” to *Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook: Uncollected Stories and Essays* by Charles Bukowski, City Lights, San Francisco (2008), xi

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pico Iyer, *Celebrities Who Travel Well*, Time Magazine (June 16, 1986)

⁵ Daniel Weizmann (ed.), *Drinking with Bukowski: Recollections of the Poet Laureate of Skid Row*, Thunder’s Mouth Press, New York (2000)

⁶ Margot Dougherty, *Boozehound Poet Charles Bukowski Writes a Hymn to Himself in ‘Barfly’, And Hollywood Starts Singing Too*, People Magazine (November 16, 1987)

literature”⁷, the “philosopher of the streets”⁸ and “the patron saint of punk”⁹, Bukowski is known for a body of work that focuses on the more unsavoury aspects of modern life. Constant themes throughout include alcoholism, drug abuse, sex, violence, vagrancy and gambling, with typical subject matter involving being arrested, being fired from jobs, dealing with parking tickets, paying taxes, repairing flat tyres, managing dysfunctional relationships and/or generally withstanding the tedious drudgery of daily work. Bukowski excels at documenting the more mundane details of everyday life. Typical Bukowski poem titles include: *the garbageman; reality; traffic ticket; on going out to get the mail; conversation on a telephone; 2:07A.M; trashcan lives; the drunk tank judge; the death of a roach; no grounding in the classics; self-destruction; a last shot on two good horses; photographs; the girl on the bus stop bench; and sex*. Furthermore, Bukowski invariably wrote in free verse, creating a vast body of work using solely the American idiom of everyday language and images. He was deliberately concise in reaction to what he believed to be the more ‘flowery’ literature of his predecessors. His style is characterised by economy and understatement and its representation on the page appears pared down into something spartan yet emotive – something that the uninitiated can find accessible. References to famous actors and popular films help Bukowski welcome such uninitiated readers into a literary world that therefore seems somehow all-the-more familiar.

Bukowski’s reaction against traditional semantics can be seen in a wider (and growing) tradition, such as in his imitation of e. e. cummings’ discarding of capital letters at the beginnings of sentences or names – something Bukowski generally employed throughout his poetry. Although now common in today’s internet-saturated society, writing composed entirely of lower case letters was an arresting textual sight in the mid to late twentieth century. This all indicates a rejection by Bukowski of traditional dogma and form, replaced by a movement towards simplicity and concision. He abhorred literary rules, exclaiming: “Always this is *right* and this is *wrong*, meanwhile not getting to the core at all.”¹⁰ Bukowski explained:

⁷ *Uncut* review: “[...] dirty realism from the godfather of lowlife literature” as quoted on cover of *Tales of Ordinary Madness* by Charles Bukowski, Virgin Books, London (2008)

⁸ Michael Fuchs, *Abschied vom B`uschen-Bier*, Die Welt (May 5, 1990)

⁹ Manfred Waffeneder, *Ein paar Flaschen mit Hank*, Twen (October 1981)

¹⁰ Charles Bukowski, *Living on Luck: Selected Letters 1960s-1970s, Volume 2*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1995), to John William Corrington (February 14, 1961), 14-15

I worked in my own way of telling it, of putting the line down. I liked Hemingway's clarity, I loved it, yet at the same time I didn't like the *literary* feel of it – for it all, there was a [sic] upper snobbishness attached – for me, that is. [...] When you come in from the factory with your hands and your body and your mind ripped, hours and days stolen from you, you can become very *aware* of a fake line, of a fake thought, of a literary con game.¹¹

Throughout his writing, such reference to (and imitation of) Hemingway is common. Indeed, Calonne observes of Bukowski: “He hews Hemingway's simple vocabulary and rapid dialogue, but moves beyond his model in his tremendous energy, humor, and gifts for caricature and exaggeration.”¹² Biographer Aubrey Malone records that Bukowski wanted “to create a new way of seeing things, to strip down tradition of its veneer of verbiage [...]. What he wanted more than anything else was to divest writing of its reputation.”¹³ Jules Smith qualifies this further by defining “Bukowski's authentic thesis that art must be informed by experience, that the artist who avoids involvement in human affairs is likely to produce mere word games.”¹⁴ Bukowski said of his own poetry: “I go at matters more directly, land on them and get out.”¹⁵ Hugh Fox simply suggests: “I think that one of the big reasons for Buk's popularity is his straightforward morality. It's a Hemingway-Bogartish morality, the morality of the purity of the inner man, the losing tough guy.”¹⁶ And thus, with this mention of Bogart, we have returned to the influence of cinema.

Biographer Neeli Cherkovski named Bukowski “the voice of Los Angeles”,¹⁷ and publisher John Martin championed him as “the 20th century Walt Whitman”.¹⁸ Outside of America, Bukowski's work is particularly popular in Germany (his country

¹¹ Charles Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun: Selected Letters 1978-1994 Volume 3*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1999), to John Martin (November 14, 1987), 95

¹² Calonne/Bukowski, *Portions from.*, xvi

¹³ Aubrey Malone, *The Hunchback of East Hollywood*, Critical Vision, Headpress, Manchester (2003), 40

¹⁴ Jules Smith, *Art, Survival and So Forth: The Poetry of Charles Bukowski*, Wrecking Ball Press, East Yorkshire (2000), 166

¹⁵ Charles Bukowski, in his “Foreword” to *The Roominghouse Madrigals: Early Selected Poems 1946-66*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1988)

¹⁶ Hugh Fox, *Second Coming*, as quoted by Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 168

¹⁷ Jacob Adelman, *Nazi claim may thwart Bukowski landmark*, AP News (November 28, 2007)

¹⁸ Larry Gordon, *New Home for Bukowski*, Los Angeles Times (June 15, 2006)

of birth) and is now translated into over fifteen languages. His prolific publications include poetry, prose, short stories, novels, journalism, essays, correspondence and a screenplay. Furthermore, much of his work has now been adapted to film. Film critic Rex Roberts confirms that Bukowski is best-known for a body of work “chronicling the misadventures of his sodden alter ego, Henry Chinaski, an unapologetic drunk, compulsive horseplayer and barroom lothario. Europeans love his work, perhaps because they read it as a lampoon of American culture”.¹⁹

Born in Andernach, Germany, on August 16th 1920, Heinrich Karl Bukowski was the son of an American army officer and a German national. He was moved by his parents to Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A., in 1923 when he was still only two years old, and then to Los Angeles, California, in 1926 where he spent most of the rest of his life. Moving from Germany to America after the First World War was somewhat traumatic for the Bukowski family, as Bukowski Sr. was forced to take on a new job (of seemingly low rank) as a milkman, while his despondent wife and precociously sensitive son were forced to adapt to a startlingly new culture and language. On arriving, his parents anglicised Bukowski’s Christian names Heinrich Karl to the more acceptable Henry Charles (in adult life his friends would call him ‘Hank’) to help him assimilate. It was from this newer, English name that Bukowski would create his literary alter-ego, Henry ‘Hank’ Chinaski (an unsubtle amalgamation of Henry Charles Bukowski), the protagonist of most of his adult writing.

Growing up in California from the 1920s onwards, it is perhaps unsurprising that Bukowski was duly influenced by a popular new medium which itself was also maturing from recent infancy. Much of Bukowski’s writing clearly reveals – and often explicitly states – that he was a well-informed viewer of cinema, and had been so since his most impressionable years. Smith concurs that in Bukowski’s writing, “emotionally the movies contribute a good deal. Hollywood was for him his youth”.²⁰ Bukowski’s poetry and prose are rife with cinematic allusions and/or direct quotations from films. The titles alone of many of his poems and short stories refer directly to well-known films, actors, actresses and/or filmmaking in general: e.g. *the World War One movies; show business; Casablanca; poem for Brigitte Bardot; the movie critics; picture show; the night i saw George Raft in Vegas; the film makers; our big day at the movies*. In his

¹⁹ Rex Roberts, *Factotum* (review of the movie), *Film Journal International* (February 22, 2007), found online at: http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/esearch/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1002952457

²⁰ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 153

prolific personal correspondence, too, Bukowski regularly mentions films and film stars, often using these references to perpetuate his own macho persona, such as when he tells a friend: “Me, I’m watching James Cagney. *White Heat*. and drinking white wine.”²¹ Or: “I am supposed to be the tough guy, the battered Bogart with a typewriter.”²² And, when writing of an ex-girlfriend: “I cut myself loose from that Marilyn Monroe”,²³ [...] “she was Marilyn Monroe[...], she modelled herself after her. she drove and whirled and gambled, wiggled her tits and ass, drove the men crazy.”²⁴ Furthermore, Bukowski often gives his critique of a particular actor, e.g. “Jackie Gleason – at his best he showed real showmansip”.²⁵ Jack Saunders recounts:

Bukowski cries at Judy Garland movies. Bukowski laughs at Frank Sinatra singing “My Way”. / Bukowski laughs at Gary Oldman singing “My Way” in *Sid and Nancy*. Bukowski is a student of popular culture, he wrote about it like George Orwell. [...] He walked down the center of the street smoking a Hav-a-Tampa cigar and whistling “Waltzing Matilda,” like Lionel Jeffries in *The Hellions*.²⁶

Thus Bukowski was clearly defining a role for himself – that of the sensitive-but-tough “Hemingway-Bogartish” anti-hero. However, he was also much more sensitive and deliberating than he is generally given credit for. Calonne points out that “Bukowski would develop a hard, comic, lyric realism, a toughness, but underneath an abiding sensitivity and a photographic, documentary fidelity to everyday horrors.”²⁷ This “photographic, documentary fidelity” in Bukowski’s writing is, I believe, a result of the direct influence of film. In his novels, Bukowski regularly wrote in short, film-like scenes rather than longer, more traditional chapters; his are concise and contained –

²¹ Bukowski, *Living on Luck*, to Hank Malone (January 16, 1977), 228

²² Ibid., to Gerard Malanga (October 27, 1972), 167

²³ Ibid., to Carl Weissner (July 25 1974), 194

²⁴ Ibid., 193

²⁵ Bukowski, *Screams from the Balcony: Selected Letters 1960-1970*, ed. Seamus Cooney, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa ((1993), to Steve Richmond (April 12, 1966), 254-255

²⁶ Jack Saunders, *Charles Bukowski*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (2001) 4-5 (*The Hellions* is a 1961 British adventure film directed by Ken Annakin, shot in South Africa with a similar premise to *High Noon*)

²⁷ Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Absence of the Hero - Uncollected Stories and Essays, Volume 2: 1946-1992*, ed. and with an “Introduction” by David Stephen Calonne, City Lights, San Francisco (2010), xviii

often comprising a single page or less – and generally confine their situations to a single room or building, much like the scenes of a movie. Furthermore, Bukowski's more aggressive short stories – plus his entire final novel *Pulp* (1994) – are clearly influenced by film noir. His autobiographical novel *Hollywood* (1989) is further testament to how greatly cinema influenced his work – a novel written in order to document the absurdities surrounding the film production of his original screenplay *Barfly* (1987).

Bukowski's immediate cultural context played an important role in his developing relationship with film, similarly to that of his peers. Throughout the twentieth century, movies had begun indelibly to influence Western literature, especially poetry. Laurence Goldstein discusses the advent of this new cinema-influenced poetry and the speed at which it became commonplace:

Readers of modern poetry will have noticed that a certain type of poem has become steadily more popular during the twentieth century. It is a poem that speaks about some favorite movie, or movie star, or the movies in general. It may refer glancingly to a cinematic figure, as when it says of some boys that they are "falling down a lot like Laurel and Hardy" (Maxime Kumin) or describes a woman "tossing her hair in imitation of Bacall" (Rita Dove). It may flaunt the terminology of cinema in a knowing way, confident that the reader shares its semantic comfort with this specialized field of knowledge.²⁸

Bukowski's poetry certainly falls within this bracket. As we shall investigate more fully in Chapters 1-3, there are many examples of Bukowski's referring to, say, Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando or Elizabeth Taylor, confident that the reader will share this knowledge of popular cinema and thereby appreciate the allusions. Goldstein continues:

For better or worse, the supposedly more ephemeral productions of the modern period have achieved a central status in our culture, and every poet of my generation knows that more nuances of meaning can be conveyed by

²⁸ Laurence Goldstein, *The American Poet at the Movies*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor (1994), v

an allusion to *Casablanca* or *Rebel Without a Cause* than to "King's Treasures" and the *Milesian Tales*.²⁹

Indeed, Bukowski specifically mentions *Casablanca* many times throughout his work (see Chapter 2) in order to create a particular mood, and by the mid-twentieth century he was far from alone in this new practice of weaving filmlore in amongst literature. The likes of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Frank O'Hara – all peers of Bukowski – grew up with cinema as a prominent medium of their youth, too, and their writing clearly reflects this. Much has been written of the influence of film on their work (see Chapter 1), as well as that of the generation of writers immediately preceding them, including James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane and Ezra Pound. In regard to the work of Ezra Pound, in particular, a poet whom Bukowski often cites as a major influence, the presence of cinema is truly pervasive. Frederick R. Karl suggests that Pound's "Cantos can be compared to a long-running film, or else a film with innumerable sequences, like some of those early silent serials."³⁰ Bukowski admits in much of his work to having been influenced by Pound, explicitly stating in a letter: "Pound is my man".³¹ Bukowski also conducted an eight-year correspondence with Pound's mistress, Sheri Martinelli, to whom he wrote: "when smoke has all cleared Pound will still be there".³² Biographer Howard Sounes notes that poet Neeli Cherkovski remembers Bukowski once reading a "poem, which commented on the death of Ezra Pound"³³ – thus Pound actually became a *subject* for Bukowski. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that we see evidence of the influence of cinema in Bukowski's work, when the people whose work he was reading were also similarly influenced. Karl notes the reciprocal pattern of influence between the many maturing art forms of the day, all entangled in a heady cultural brew:

[...] film developed parallel to other aspects of Modernism, so that reciprocity must be considered. For example, at the time we note

²⁹ Goldstein, *The American Poet.*, vi

³⁰ Frederick R. Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885-1925*, Atheneum, New York (1985), 382

³¹ Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli, *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli 1960 - 1967*, ed. by Steven Moore, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (2001), to Martinelli (January 13 1961), 163

³² Bukowski, *Beerspit Night.*, to Martinelli, "Lost Angels" (mid-June 1960), 41

³³ Sounes, *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms.*, 242

publication of *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, *The Good Soldier Svejk* [...] and the appearance of Schoenberg's *Serenade Op. 24* [...] and] Picasso's *The Three Musicians* [...] we find in film *Nanook of the North* by Flaherty, *La Roue* by Abel Gance, *A Woman of Paris* by Chaplin, followed in the next year by *Strike*, Eisenstein's first effort at cinema.³⁴

The inclusion of Chaplin here will become particularly pertinent to us in Chapter 1 where I will trace his direct influence on Bukowski, whose literary alter-ego Hank Chinaski is in many ways simply an updated and more aggressive version of Chaplin's Tramp. Chaplin is a huge figure in cinema whose massive influence on literature should not be overlooked. Goldstein observes: "The worldwide symbol of silent film, Chaplin cast a spell on many modern poets."³⁵ T.S. Eliot particularly admired Chaplin for his skill of transcending state and nationality: "Charlie Chaplin is not English, or American," noted Eliot, "but a universal figure, feeding the idealism of hungry millions in Czecho-Slovakia and Peru."³⁶ David Trotter remarks of Eliot's work:

Cinema does appear in *The Waste Land*; in the manuscript, at any rate, if not in the final version. We are introduced to the 'close' or 'sweating' rabble which 'sees on the screen' [...] a 'goddess or a star'; and in 'silent rapture' worships from afar.³⁷

Indeed, Bukowski had read the work of Eliot, too, and tells us explicitly that he "was somewhat affected by T.S. and Auden, but not so much in a sense of *content*, but in a clean and easy way of saying."³⁸ Bukowski adds: "And yet Eliot did leave us something, perhaps a clearer flowing diction."³⁹ I believe that what Bukowski is referring to as this "clean and easy way of saying" and "clearer flowing diction" is the direct evidence and result of the influence of film, which pushed poetry away from metonymy and lyric structure, and more towards a straightforward, narrative form. This, in turn, affected the literary criticism written in reaction to it, and it is patently clear that

³⁴ Karl, *Modern and Modernism.*, 382

³⁵ Goldstein, *The American Poet.*, 38

³⁶ David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford (2007), 182

³⁷ *Facsimile*, 29, as quoted by Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 146

³⁸ Bukowski, *Screams from the Balcony.*, to John William Corrington (January 14, 1963), 55

³⁹ Bukowski, *Living on Luck.*, to John William Corrington (April 26, 1961), 18

by the end of the twentieth century literary criticism was riddled with the language of film. Trotter suggests, however, that perhaps too many of these inquiries were unnecessarily committed to ‘argument by analogy’:

The literary text, this argument goes, is *structured like a film*, in whole or in part: it has its ‘close-ups’, its ‘tracks’ and ‘pans’, its ‘cuts’ from one ‘shot’ to another. [...] Moments in that text do seem to invite [...] analysis in terms of the ‘construction of imaginary space’ either through montage or through camera-movement (pan, track, lift).⁴⁰

Bukowski’s work contains many such film-like examples, as we shall examine throughout this thesis, and we shall see that much of his writing is, indeed, “structured like a film”, especially his novels *Hollywood* and *Pulp* (see Chapters 3 & 4). Furthermore, we must also remember that Bukowski did ultimately write a screenplay, which perhaps, too, will seem unsurprising once we have seen how much cinema permeates his other writing. Montage, close-ups, tracks, pans and cuts all fixate on (and improve) vision. Similarly to Trotter, Laura Marcus observes of this period: “The focus on vision, on seeing, as the condition of modernity was all-encompassing.”⁴¹ This focus on vision is immediately apparent in almost any sample of Bukowski’s work. I believe that Bukowski’s striking use of imagery – often vulgar and shocking – can be traced back to a childhood of cinema-going where fast-moving, action-packed imagery was part of the norm; especially war movies, gangster films and film noir (as we shall examine in Chapter 2). Furthermore, Bukowski’s ‘visual’ style is precisely what filmmakers such as Marco Ferreri and Barbet Schroeder have explicitly stated drew them to his work (see Chapter 4). Trotter continues:

I do also believe that recent criticism has been at once too loose, in its attribution to the modernist literary text of just about any cinematic technique going (including some which were not going at all when the work in question was written [...]).⁴²

⁴⁰ Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 1-2

⁴¹ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2007), 249

⁴² Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, 2

As the young Bukowski grew up near Hollywood during what is generally described as its ‘Golden Era’ of stars and studios, he was perfectly placed (culturally, chronologically and geographically-speaking) to have been influenced by popular cinema – something he attests to in the myriad descriptions of films he saw as a child – thus passing Trotter’s test of time and place. Smith concurs: “Bukowski lived most of his life on the doorstep of Hollywood. His much-maligned parents, at least to judge from ‘The movie critics’, were keen film-goers during the Depression [...]”⁴³ Bukowski himself confirms this in *Ham on Rye*, the autobiographical novel of his childhood: “My parents went to the movies every Wednesday night.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the poem *The movie critics* recounts an argument between Bukowski’s parents in which his mother refers to the macho actor George Raft as “a disgusting / man!” to which his father retorts, “he’s no / phoney”.⁴⁵ Smith suggests: “The exchanges in the poem seem to favour the father, even though the speaker claims to have had nothing in common with his family “in or out” of the movies.”⁴⁶ Biographer Gay Brewer further notes of Bukowski’s childhood:

Henry Bukowski Sr., who lost his job as a milk deliveryman during the depression, grew increasingly abusive toward his son, frequently taking the boy into the bathroom and beating him with a razor strop. Bukowski documents this abuse by his father in horrible detail in the novel *Ham on Rye*, and throughout Bukowski’s work the figure of the menacing, mean-spirited father, misshapen and made cruel by a failed American dream of wealth and progress is predominant.⁴⁷

Bukowski felt stifled by his father's strict military discipline and oppressive reign over family life, and it is precisely this feeling that imbues almost all of Bukowski’s work with a constant rooting for the underdog, an often-times antagonistic

⁴³ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 155

⁴⁴ Bukowski, *Ham on Rye*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1982), 114

⁴⁵ Bukowski, *The movie critics*, published as a New Year’s greeting card by Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1988)

⁴⁶ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 158

⁴⁷ Gay Brewer, *Charles Bukowski*, Twayne Publishers, New York (1997), 1

bravado and a blatant disregard for authority and conformity. Brewer records of the year in which the young Bukowski first enrolled at Los Angeles High School:

An acute case of *acne vulgaris*, manifesting itself as large disfiguring boils, appeared on the boy's face, shoulders, and back. In 1935 he underwent lengthy and painful treatments of drilling and radiation at Los Angeles County Hospital, during that period missing a semester at school.⁴⁸

The wretched self-pity that the young Bukowski felt as a result is clear throughout much of *Ham on Rye*, especially in his account of feeling too embarrassed to attend the highschool prom, and may help to explain the creation of his burgeoning literary persona – that of the outwardly cynical lothario with an inwardly sensitive core. The constant feelings of rejection and alienation, both at home and at school, seemed to have simultaneously created both a narcissism and self-loathing in the young Bukowski. Aubrey Malone suggests that, perhaps inevitably for Bukowski, the “bar was an escape from the straitjacket of home and school, [...] somewhere you went to escape the unbearableness of your situation.”⁴⁹ I believe that this in turn exacerbated the eccentricities of the persona that Bukowski was creating. Calonne recounts that Bukowski “began to refine his image/mask as a rambunctious, wily, lusty survivor who shamelessly drinks, fights, pursues sexual intercourse, and writes poems and stories while listening to Mozart, Bach, Stravinsky, Mahler, and Beethoven.”⁵⁰ Bukowski's carefully sculpted alter-ego, Hank Chinaski, therefore, is a distinctly separate entity from the real-life Charles Bukowski, as we shall see repeatedly throughout this thesis. The notion of persona constantly recurs throughout Bukowski's writing and it should be patently evident by the end of this monograph that there is a clear dichotomy between Chinaski's literary persona and Bukowski's actual person.

Perhaps due to his stark childhood and the brutal reality of both home and school-life, then, Bukowski turned to cinema as a means of escape. Smith reports:

⁴⁸ Brewer, *Charles Bukowski*, 1

⁴⁹ Malone, *The Hunchback..*, 18

⁵⁰ Calonne/Bukowski, *Portions from..*, xv

Cinematic sources can [...] be identified for his male characters, and his dramatisation of their attitudes. Bukowski chose his masculine role models from the stock available via literature and the movies, having psychologically rejected his own father. Screen stars of the period provided appealing templates: Bogart, Cagney, W.C. Fields.⁵¹

Bukowski has specifically cited war movies, gangster films, noir thrillers and the early films of Charlie Chaplin as definite sources of influence on his writing (see Chapters 1 and 2), and even his first short story, written in childhood about an injured German fighter pilot, was clearly a response to what he was seeing in cinema. That first story also makes clear Bukowski's burgeoning fascination with the flawed anti-hero. Bruce Crowther observes: "The gangster films offered an uneasy alliance between hero and villain in which edges blurred and essentially evil characters became popular thanks to engaging portrayals by Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Paul Muni and Edward G. Robinson."⁵² Bukowski was certainly watching and, indeed, Bogart soon became his favourite. Crowther adds:

The advent of *film noir*, while blurring the edges still more, at least removed from centre stage the gangster as hero, making room for men who had all the imagined virtues of the frontiersman and the cowboy but were visibly very much urban men of today. [...] The leading men in *film noir* were not heroes in the old Hollywood sense, but they did achieve a curious kind of stature. The traditional American hero, in real life as well as in the movies, has always been a loner.⁵³

And, as Bukowski often tells us: "I am a loner."⁵⁴ Roberto Porfirio believes "the European émigrés brought to Hollywood a mordant sensibility drawn from their

⁵¹ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 157

⁵² Bruce Crowther, *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington (2000), 69

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 69

⁵⁴ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, To Luciana Capretti (February 6, 1990), 138

homelands, which were being decimated by a Second World War. This in turn could partially explain the bleak outlook of the *film noir*”.⁵⁵ Smith notes:

Émigré directors such as Fritz Lang tackled explosive social issues in *Fury*. Bukowski will certainly have seen many of these movies, with and without his parents, and enjoyed – like the masses – a surrogate existence in which he spoke like Bogart, postured like Flynn, and had women who vamped like Dietrich.⁵⁶

In Bukowski’s first published story, *Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip*, in the prestigious *Story* magazine, he was already aware of the influence of his Eastern European roots and the place he expected (or at least hoped) to occupy in literature:

But Millie, Millie, we must remember art. Dostoevsky, Gorki, for Russia, and now America wants an Eastern European. America is tired of Browns and Smiths. The Browns and Smiths are good writers but there are too many of them and they all write alike. America wants the fuzzy blackness, impractical mediations, and repressed desires of an Eastern European.⁵⁷

Throughout his work, Bukowski continuously reinforces the self-made myth of himself as a deep-thinking, Russian-influenced, Eastern European outsider, the latest incarnation in a longer tradition. Calonne concurs: “Bukowski is dark and brooding in the tradition of his Russian masters [...] at the furthest reaches of spiritual solitude, scrawling anguished notes from the underground.”⁵⁸ He also suggests that “for Bukowski there is a nexus between pain, laughter, and quasi-German-Expressionist extreme states of emotion.”⁵⁹ This darker European temperament at time of war may well have inspired a more introspective edge in Bukowski than contemporary American writers; those tiring “Browns and Smiths”. Indeed, there are a myriad of dark, film-like

⁵⁵ Roberto Porfirio’s “Introduction” to *Film Noir Reader 3: Interviews with Filmmakers of the Classic Noir Period*, Limelight Editions, New York (2002), 4

⁵⁶ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 154

⁵⁷ As quoted and collected in Calonne/Bukowski, *Portions from.*, 2

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, xi

⁵⁹ Calonne/Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Absence of.*, xxi

passages in Bukowski's writing where he often suggests things are "like a movie". For example, the following, from *my nudie dancer*, has a definite sense of film noir:

again the
black Cadillac came
by
just like
in a movie
fat boy driving,
Isabel
laughing and
lighting a
cigarette.⁶⁰

There are many such examples, as we shall see. For Bukowski, context was everything. By the final quarter of the twentieth century, the changing social zeitgeist taking place across America made the rise of a writer such as Bukowski perhaps inevitable. Smith suggests: "It was, in retrospect, exactly the right moment at which a hard-bitten, rambunctious 'Dirty Old Man' of literature could find an increasingly receptive audience."⁶¹ Calonne qualifies this further:

Bukowski's "defence mechanism" to ward off psychic anguish is of course laughter. [...] He could also be sardonic, which was in perfect accord with the *Zeitgeist*: black humour would mark the counter-culture of the '60s and '70s. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and *Eraserhead* (1978) were among his favorite films – humor and madness in close and delicate counterpoint.⁶²

As Bukowski matured, his tastes developed. By manhood he was more interested in attending the racetrack than the cinema, although both venues still inspired him; both

⁶⁰ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (2001), 196-7

⁶¹ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 73

⁶² Calonne/Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Absence of.*, xx-xxi

act as microcosms within which Bukowski frames his work. Smith points out an important link between Bukowski's early love of the cinema and his later love of the track, in that both of "these undoubtedly colour and flavour his work; they are where much of the 'action' takes place. Those early Hollywood movies are, I contend, the major source of his characters."⁶³ This is crucial. Much of Bukowski's 'blueprints', so to speak, for character formation, were clearly in direct imitation of what he saw at both the track and the cinema. Smith continues:

The drama of the track – triumph and tragedy, winning and losing – also suggests the link between Hollywood Park and Hollywood. This is implicitly made throughout his works, which literally ended up with the Film Industry.⁶⁴

Not only were films a source of inspiration for his characters but they also contributed to Bukowski's fantasies about himself. Smith suggests: "His early immersion in popular cinema was vital in his later fictional construction of male and female identity. Further, he takes much of his own persona of laconic, worldly-wise masculinity from role models at large in the cinema of the 1930s-40s."⁶⁵ There is ample evidence of this throughout Bukowski's work. Smith also suggests:

[...] there is nothing esoteric about his movie poems. He uses these stars for elegiac observations on the fleeting nature of beauty and the ravages of time and death. One example is 'For Marilyn M.': Marilyn Monroe "brought us something / some type of small victory" [...].⁶⁶

Smith suggests of Bukowski: "Film stars – especially those of the early to middle twentieth century – were regarded by him as heroic figures, many of whom he later missed."⁶⁷ An excellent example of Bukowski's explicit reference to such film stars is the poem *Sit and endure*, which records a moment of fond nostalgia for the ageing poet, written in later life and published posthumously (2001):

⁶³ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 149

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 156-157

⁶⁷ Ibid., 154

well, first Mae West died
and then George Raft,
and Eddie G. Robinson's
been gone
a long time,
and Bogart and Gable
and Grable,
and Laurel and
Hardy
and the Marx Brothers,
all those Saturday
afternoons
at the movies
as a boy
are gone now⁶⁸

The incantation of the names, and their orders, is intended to create both a nostalgic atmosphere and a sense of rhythm, much like that of a traditional eulogy ballad. Bukowski notes the death of actress Mae West (who was mainly famous for playing sexually aggressive women), then moves onto male (and famously macho) stars such as Raft, Bogart and Gable, leading us directly into the familiar Bukowskian territory. The rhyming of "Gable" with "Grable" (the only other female other than West to make the list) is one of the only examples of rhyme anywhere in Bukowski's oeuvre and, as it also employs alliteration and anaphora, again adds to the feeling of a traditional ballad. Of course, Bukowski still doggedly sticks to his free verse form throughout the bulk of the poem, and his insistence on narrative form over lyric can well be seen to relate more to film structure than traditional lyric eulogy. By listing great actors and comedians who had caught his early attention, Bukowski is of course admitting to their influence upon him. However much he eventually grew disillusioned with cinema, finally calling "Hollywood

⁶⁸ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 107

a hemorrhoid on the asshole of art”⁶⁹, it is clear that Bukowski’s youth was spent in its thrall. Colin MacCabe directs us to:

[...] look at the worlds of film and literature. The twentieth century – and the twenty-first is so far no different – saw an ever greater interpenetration of these two worlds. From Graham Greene’s film criticism to Salman Rushdie’s claim that *The Wizard of Oz* was his greatest literary influence, writers have thought and written about the cinema in ever greater numbers. At the same time cinema has from its second decade sought much of its source material in literature and there is almost no major novelist or dramatist in the last century who has not earned part of his or her living either from the direct sale of their work or by the writing of a screenplay.⁷⁰

This is certainly the case with Bukowski who only wrote his screenplay after having already achieved success as a poet and novelist (and after being offered a cash sum for it by a director – see Chapter 4). It should also be noted that Bukowski’s writing holds a stronger attraction to filmmakers than the work of most of his contemporaries. Jack Sargeant confirms that “Charles Bukowski is the ‘post-Beat’ author whose work has proved most popular with filmmakers”⁷¹. This is evinced not only by the films that were adapted from Bukowski’s work during his lifetime but also by the many projects that have appeared since his death. Smith concurs:

All of Bukowski’s novels have been optioned for movie production. These include *Post Office* (sold several times), and *Women* bought for \$300,000 by Paul Verhoeven, a prominent Hollywood operator, the Dutch-born director of *Robocop*, *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls*. At the time that the latter was released, Verhoeven was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying that he planned to make a low-budget version of the novel: “It’s all

⁶⁹ As quoted by Ben Pleasants, *Visceral Bukowski: Inside the Sniper Landscape of L.A. Writers*, Sun Dog Press, Northville, Michigan (2004), xv

⁷⁰ In the “Foreword” by Colin MacCabe, *Cinema and Modernism* by David Trotter, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford (2007), ix-x

⁷¹ Jack Sargeant, *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema*, Creation Books, London (1997), 231

about fucking, isn't it. Forty women. We might reduce it to 10. It would be the ultimate 18 cert hard porno flick".⁷²

That the director of *Showgirls*, *Basic Instinct* and *Robocop* wants to direct Bukowski's *Women* should immediately suggest to us that this is, indeed, 'macho man' territory. Other than *Barfly* (1987) directed by Barbet Schroeder (co-starring Mickey Rourke and Faye Dunaway), the most notable feature films adapted from Bukowski's work so far include *Tales Of Ordinary Madness* (1981) directed by Marco Ferreri (starring Ben Gazzara); *Love is a Dog from Hell* (1987) directed by Dominique Deruddere (starring Josse De Pauw); and *Factotum* (2005) directed by Bent Hamer (starring Matt Dillon). There are also several noted documentaries: *Bukowski* (1973) directed by Taylor Hackford; *The Charles Bukowski Tapes* (1987) directed by Barbet Schroeder; and *Bukowski: Born Into This* (2003) directed by John Dullaghan.

Due perhaps in part to his deliberately macho and anti-establishment stance – and the subsequently vociferous and loyal following that this has encouraged – hagiography has become a major symptom of much of the current literature on Bukowski. There is, however, some scholarly critical analysis of Bukowski's work, but little of it examines the influence of cinema per se. Several scholars have mentioned Bukowski (in passing) amongst other writers in their critiques of the wider relationship between cinema and literature, but none have solely focused on Bukowski. Sargeant's *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema*, for example, although thorough in its analysis of filmmaking in regard to the Beats proper, only awards Bukowski a mere six pages in a book comprising 251. Jules Smith, similarly, in *Art, Survival and So Forth: The Poetry of Charles Bukowski*, contributes a detailed insight into Bukowski's interest in film, but limits it to a single chapter entitled *At the Movies and the Racetrack*⁷³ (thus sharing it with Bukowski's interest in gambling), and awards it only twenty-six pages in a book of 244. Russell Harrison's collection *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*, despite chiding the lack of scholarly attention to Bukowski in modern criticism, provides no chapter at all on cinema. Harrison correctly notes: "Bukowski's poetry has not received much of a critical response"⁷⁴ and "the fact that Bukowski has

⁷² Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 149

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 149-177

⁷⁴ Russell Harrison, *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1994), 29

not appeared in any of the large mainstream anthologies that include American poetry of the last 30 years is remarkable.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, all three of these works were written and published well over a decade ago. In the meantime, many of Bukowski’s final poems have been published posthumously in several large collections, specifically: *Betting on the Muse: Poems and Stories* (1996); *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire: New Poems* (1999); *Night Torn Mad With Footseps: New Poems* (2001); *Sifting Through the Madness for the Word, the Line, the Way: New Poems* (2003); *The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain* (2004); and *Come On In! New Poems* (2006). It is in these works that I detect a much more nostalgic tone, revealing Bukowski’s willingness to reflect more openly on what had influenced him all those years ago – i.e. *cinema* – most of which have received no serious scholarly attention at all.

Now, therefore, is a more pertinent time than ever for Bukowski’s work finally to be considered more critically. I propose a serious and sustained look at the influence of cinema upon Bukowski’s writing, which, I contend, as well as affecting his work, also *improved* it. By drawing from his broad knowledge of films, Bukowski’s intention is to complement his readers’ similar knowledge, an audience who (by the end of the twentieth century and, certainly, in the early twenty-first century) is already well-versed in cinema. By doing so, Bukowski effectively creates a literary forum of shared experience and emotion in which to meet his readers.

Alongside Bukowski’s primary texts, plus all the biographies and scholarly critiques written of him to date, I shall be drawing my research from his prolific correspondence to friends, writers, poets and directors, as well as many secondary sources of work on twentieth century literature, cinema and modernism, and journalism. Bukowski’s letters, published in four volumes (comprising some 2,000 pages), have been especially helpful, particularly the three posthumous volumes: *Living on Luck: Selected Letters 1960s-1970s (Volume 2)* (1995); *Reach for the Sun: Selected Letters 1978-1994 (Volume 3)* (1999); *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli, 1960-1967* (2001). These letters, in which Bukowski often discusses both filmmaking and poetics, have been invaluable to my research. With all this in mind, then, I propose to investigate Bukowski’s work in the following four chapters:

⁷⁵ Harrison, *Against the American Dream.*, 29

1) *Bukowski's Chaplin*: Here I shall explore how Charlie Chaplin influenced Bukowski and his peers, and why this is significant. I shall investigate the similarities between the personae of Chaplin's Tramp and Bukowski's Chinaski, and show that Chinaski does indeed follow a similarly meandering-yet-entertaining path, although often venturing into more tragic and painful areas. I shall compare the thematic and stylistic similarities between Bukowski's novels *Post Office* (1971) and *Factotum* (1975), plus several key poems, with Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921), *The Gold Rush* (1925), *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936). I will include a variety of modernist figures who have similarly engaged with Chaplin, such as Hart Crane and Allen Ginsberg, to help illustrate the spectrum and range of Chaplin's influence on literature. I will show that, perhaps, ultimately, it should be unsurprising that Bukowski displays such a Chaplinesque style, considering Chaplin's now well-documented influence on so many others.

2) *Bukowski's Men*: Here I shall focus on the sections of Bukowski's writing – much of it published posthumously – where he explicitly refers to and/or quotes from films and their characters, especially in regard to male identity. We will see exactly which actors Bukowski draws upon for the creation of his male characters: from Humphrey Bogart to Marlon Brando. I shall investigate Bukowski's refusal of lyric poetry, his insistence on narrative form and its relation to cinema and how this affects our reading of his work. I will explore Bukowski's use of the genre movie, such as war movies and boxing films, and we will see that Bukowski often employs cinematic tropes to create a mood. I will show that Bukowski's performative sexism and machismo nonchalance are in direct imitation of what he sees in the cinema; an imitation which he carries out both for the efficacy of his writing as well as for the self-perpetuation of his own personal legend.

3) *Bukowski's Women*: Here I will discuss how Bukowski's formation and handling of female identity is directly influenced by cinema. I will examine Bukowski's seemingly nonchalant and often sexist stance towards female

characters and explore its cinematic roots. I shall particularly examine his novels *Women* and *Pulp*, and several key poems. I will show that actresses such as Elizabeth Taylor and Brigitte Bardot provided a similar catalyst for Bukowski's creation of female identity as Bogart and Brando did for his male identity. I believe that much of Bukowski's performative sexism was often a reflection of what he saw in the cinema – a cinema which is itself sexist – and discover via his more honest letters and poems that he may not have been the misogynist that his literary persona would have us believe.

4) Bukowski's *Hollywood*: Here I shall concentrate specifically on the period immediately preceding, during and just after Bukowski's writing of *Barfly* and his subsequent documentation of its adaptation to film in his autobiographical novel, *Hollywood*. By examining these two key texts alongside Taylor Hackford's *Bukowski* documentary and Marco Ferreri's *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, among others, I will show that over time Bukowski's feelings towards cinema turned from youthful admiration to middle-aged apathy and disgust. I will also investigate his later re-embracing of Hollywood in his final, happier years, and examine the recurring hypocrisy and ambivalence that this reveals. I will show that Bukowski's prolific and insightful personal correspondence from this period has been particularly revealing of his changing attitude towards cinema.

1

Bukowski's Chaplin

By the 1930s and '40s, cinema was an entrenched and significant part of American culture, and by far the single most popular figure in films had long been Charlie Chaplin. Charles J. Maland reports that Chaplin was undoubtedly “the world’s most famous movie star” and from “the Thames to Tokyo, from Berlin to Bali, Chaplin had been celebrated by court and commoner alike.”⁷⁶ Perhaps, then, Chaplin’s massive influence as a filmmaker on the budding literary generation beneath him – as well as on his own peers – is unsurprising. David Robinson observes of Chaplin’s global appeal that “indeed there was a popular rumour in Germany in the early thirties that Hitler had quite deliberately adopted a Chaplin moustache to cash in on a little reflected popularity”.⁷⁷ Bukowski, therefore, having been born in Germany but raised in America (specifically near Hollywood) saw many of Chaplin’s films whilst still at an impressionable age and tells us so himself. Smith maintains of Bukowski:

Clearly, watching movies marked his imagination. There are literally dozens of invocations scattered throughout his collections. Movie stars are used as a kind of shorthand for an entire vanished era. ‘Lilies in my brain’, for instance, alludes to Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Clara Bow, and “the rest”.⁷⁸

Harrison somewhat concurs, pointing out that Bukowski specifically cited Chaplin as an influence in a 1983 letter to Loss Glazier, in which Bukowski provides one of the most comprehensive lists of his influences on record:

I’m not all that isolated. I’ve had my crutches: F.Dos, Turgenev, some of Celine, some of Hamsun, most of John Fante, a great deal of Sherwood

⁷⁶ Charles J. Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey (1989), xiii

⁷⁷ David Robinson, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion*, Secker & Warburg, London (1984), 119

⁷⁸ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 156

Anderson, very early Hemingway, all of Carson McCullers, the longer poems of Jeffers; Nietzsche and Schopenhauer; the style of Saroyan without the content; Mozart, Mahler, Bach, Wagner, Eric Coates; Mondrian; e.e. cummings [...]; Jack Nicholson; Jackie Gleason; Charlie Chaplin, early, Baron Manfred von Richtofen; Leslie Howard; Bette Davis; Max Schmeling; Hitler . . .⁷⁹

That Bukowski explicitly cites Chaplin as an influence, and in particular his “early” films – which the Tramp generally dominated – is useful. It helps to explain much that we observe in Bukowski’s writing, such as the similarities between Hank Chinaski and the Tramp, which we will investigate shortly. Harrison continues:

This is a fascinating list. A detailed analysis would reveal how accurate a summation it is, that is, how wide and varied have been the cultural practices upon which Bukowski has drawn, and would also lay to rest any notion of Bukowski as a “naïve” artist [...]. While some of the references might seem facetious or exaggerated and, in the case of Hitler, thrown in to shock, this is not really the case (with the possible partial exception of this last).⁸⁰

Although this list may well dispel the notion of Bukowski as a “naïve” artist, or indeed an “anti-intellectual”, it certainly reminds us that he likes to play the clown by his seemingly nonchalant yet mischievous inclusion of Hitler. This is typical of Bukowski, who – especially in moments of seriousness – often reverts to clown mode. This is, of course, similar to Chaplin, too, who was famous for being a modern-day clown and who even made a film about Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (1940). We are therefore reminded of another affinity between Chaplin and Bukowski: their shared ability to be at any one time what Goldstein has described in Chaplin as the “hybrid of clown and poet”.⁸¹ Bukowski is often referred to as a clown, such as when Ben Pleasants refers to “the Bukowski I knew: Bukowski the writer, Bukowski the man,

⁷⁹ Charles Bukowski, to Loss Glazier (February 16, 1983), as found in *All’s Normal Here: A Charles Bukowski Primer*, ed. by Loss Glazier, Ruddy Duck, Fremont (1985), 108-110

⁸⁰ Harrison, *Against The American Dream.*, 218

⁸¹ Goldstein, *The American Poet.*, 47

Bukowski the clown and Bukowski the devil.”⁸² Maurice Bessy writes of Chaplin and his Tramp: “For the first time a film-maker had invented a character who ranked with the great clowns of all time.”⁸³ Calonne suggests that in Bukowski’s work, “allusions to cultural figures serve to “equalize” “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture to comic effect and are a kind of “winking” by the narrator to the reader, signalling that our hapless anti-hero may be a clown, but he is smarter than he lets on.”⁸⁴ Thus Chaplin and Bukowski clearly share a similar skill for mischief as well as a similarly dexterous use of persona. Both Chaplin’s and Bukowski’s working class experiences clearly helped them to choose and create a specific type of persona: that of the impoverished clown who acts dumb, yet who is simultaneously self-aware and (in actual fact) intelligent enough to be deliberately complicit in this act of dumbness, in order (I believe) to highlight the similar hypocrisies of society.

Although much of Bukowski’s material can appear at first glance somewhat gloomy (just like Chaplin’s), he almost always buoys it up with a boisterous comic verve. Jim Christy claims:

[...] what would eventually set Bukowski apart from the rest of them – the Knut Hamsuns, Jack Londons, Maxim Gorkys, and Jim Tullys – was that Bukowski was funny. Sometimes the humor was black, sometimes it was near slapstick, but he was nearly always funny.⁸⁵

And humour, alongside vulgarity, is one of the most commonly reported qualities found throughout the works of Bukowski and Chaplin. Correspondingly, however, some of the most negative reactions to both men’s works revolve around their similar use of vulgarity. Maland tells us: “Chaplin was funny despite his vulgarity – it would be difficult for a movie reviewer to react otherwise – more genteel observers were not so tolerant”⁸⁶ [... due to the] “grotesque and vulgar antics of that product of the slums of Whitecastle.”⁸⁷ Bukowski received many similar critical responses,

⁸² Pleasants, *Visceral Bukowski.*, xvi

⁸³ Maurice Bessy, *Charlie Chaplin*, Thames and Hudson, London (1985), 10

⁸⁴ Calonne/Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Absence of.*, xix

⁸⁵ Jim Christy, *The Buk Book: Musings on Charles Bukowski*, ECW Press, Toronto (1997), 26

⁸⁶ Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, 15-16

⁸⁷ Ibid.

although he clearly revelled in it, claiming “it’s nice to be accused of “obscurity” [...] it puts me in the same camp as a lot of immortals.”⁸⁸

Thus Bukowski and Chaplin shared both themes *and* responses, and alongside their being thought of as clowns as well as progenitors of vulgarity, both men are often accused of wearing a ‘mask’. Seldes observes of Chaplin: “Like every great artist in whatever medium, Charlie has created the mask of himself – many masks, in fact – and the first of these, the wanderer, came in the Keystone comedies.”⁸⁹ Similarly, Calonne tells us Bukowski “put on the outer mask of the tough guy misanthrope to hide his essential tenderness.”⁹⁰ Steven Moore suggests that “Bukowski’s persona as the Dirty Old Man of American Literature is just that: a persona, a mask beneath which there was a man better read and more cultured than most people realize.”⁹¹

There are other similarities between Bukowski’s and Chaplin’s lives that are worth acknowledging: primarily, both men emigrated from Europe to Los Angeles. Indeed, one of Chaplin’s 1917 films is entitled *The Immigrant*, a label with which Bukowski would find affinity. So both men had suffered from patriotic deracination, which, I believe, catalysed their interest in the universal Everyman. Like Bukowski and Chaplin in real life, there are many similarities between the fictional figures of Chinaski and the Tramp: both characters are depicted as shambling vagrants who bumble around Los Angeles from one tragi-comic episode to the next; both find themselves embroiled in squalid scenes with only their humour for salvation; both punctuate periods of vagrancy with brief spells of employment, ill-advised adventures, awkward social misunderstandings and the inevitable run-ins with the police. Bukowski’s novel *Post Office* (1971) depicts a monotonous working hell often reminiscent of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), and the entirety of the novel *Factotum* (1975), charting Chinaski’s luckless move from job to job, is strikingly similar to the Tramp’s meanderings in films such as *Police* (1916), *Easy Street* (1917), *The Idle Class* (1921), *The Gold Rush* (1925) and, again, *Modern Times*. Furthermore, both Bukowski and Chaplin were investigated by the FBI: Chaplin for supposed connections to the Communist Party, with the US eventually rescinding his residency status; and Bukowski for exactly the same after publishing unorthodox political views in his *Dirty*

⁸⁸ Bukowski, *Living on Luck.*, to Carl Weissner (May 21, 1979), 266

⁸⁹ Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts*, 36-7, as quoted by Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse*, 232

⁹⁰ Calonne, Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Absence of.*, xvi

⁹¹ Steven Moore’s “Introduction” to Bukowski/Martinelli’s *Beerspit Night.*, 7

Old Man column for Open City. Thus their politics had similarly landed themselves in trouble alongside their art. Harrison notes of Bukowski:

Bukowski has brought into contemporary American poetry an experience which is neither elitist, bohemian nor overtly political, but working-class. [...] By mainstreaming such experience, by stripping it of its privileged status, Bukowski has performed a cultural and, in the broader sense of the word, political service and this in part constitutes his significance [...].⁹²

This summation of Bukowski's contribution could just as aptly describe Chaplin's if we replace "poetry" with "film", so strong is the affinity between the two men. Harrison also maintains of Bukowski: "More than anything else, he is a proletarian poet, but a proletarian poet of a special sensibility."⁹³ That Bukowski is referred to as the "proletarian poet" who is "neither elitist [...] nor [...] working-class" is key, and is similar to how Goldstein defines Chaplin's "low figure of the Tramp as a putative everyman".⁹⁴ i.e. both Chaplin's Tramp and Bukowski's Chinaski are the Everyman, unconstrained by national borders, whose universal clown-like behaviour encourages their global appeal.

Chaplinesque

A good example of a Chaplin-influenced forerunner to Bukowski is Hart Crane, whose 1921 poem *Chaplinesque* includes direct references to such typical Chaplin imagery as "torn elbow coverts" (l.8); the "sidestep" and "smirk" (l.9); "the pirouettes of any pliant cane" (l.15); "lonely alleys" (l.20); the "grail of laughter of an empty ash can" (l.21) and "the fury of the street" (l.7) – images often found in Bukowski's work, as we shall see. The poem comprises five stanzas and, as the title suggests, the main metaphor of the poem is Chaplin himself, whose Tramp is employed to highlight the dramatisation of the difficult position of those excluded by modern society. Bukowski had likely read Crane's *Chaplinesque* as he includes Crane in a list of poets he jokingly

⁹² Harrison, *Against the American Dream.*, 30

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 29

⁹⁴ Goldstein, *The American Poet.*, 47

refers to in a letter as “so-called good company: Shakespeare, Keats, T.S. Eliot, Tennyson, Auden, [...] Cummings, Graves, Hart Crane, [...] and so forth.”⁹⁵ Goldstein points out:

Hart Crane [...] saw something different in Chaplin’s sportive comedies. [...] an animated performer whose “fine collapses” and “pirouettes” distinguished his activity from the quotidian body language of his contemporaries. [...] the excess of gesticulation, the bravura gestural performance that bewilders his coactors and surprises his audience into a pleased alertness. The continuous stream of invention in the films cannot help but impress the poet as similar to the linguistic play he practices [...].⁹⁶

Thus Chaplin’s work is equated with poetry in general. Indeed, Robinson reports that within merely a couple of years of Chaplin’s debut in cinema “his work attracted the word ‘art’ for the first time to the lowly form of film comedy; and he was being compared with Shakespeare, Dickens, Aristophanes.”⁹⁷ Goldstein adds:

Crane wrote that he was so moved by the film *The Kid* that he felt compelled “to put Chaplin with the poets (of today); hence the ‘we’.” Crane will adopt Chaplin’s repertoire of idiosyncratic props – “the ample pockets [...] pliant cane” – as signs of artistic privilege and social concern. By doing so Crane effects a community of purpose that permits him to share vicariously in the mythology Chaplin created, a mythology in which he reigned as the working-class hero” [...].⁹⁸

Thus Chaplin was no longer simply a symbol for film but, also, for the working class itself, *exactly* how Bukowski portrayed himself, too. With Chaplin’s *The Kid* (1921) in mind, then, alongside Crane’s *Chaplinesque*, I will now examine Bukowski’s 1969 poem *family, family*, which, I believe, bears Chaplinesque symptoms:

⁹⁵ Bukowski/Martinelli, *Beerspit Night.*, Bukowski to Martinelli (April 22, 1961), 222

⁹⁶ Goldstein, *The American Poet.*, 42

⁹⁷ Robinson, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion*, viii

⁹⁸ Goldstein, *The American Poet.*, 45-7

I keep looking at the
kid
up
 side
 down,
and I am tickling
her sides
as her mother pins new
diapers
on,
 and the kid doesn't look like
 me
-upsidedown⁹⁹
 so I get ready to
kill them both
 but
 relent:

I don't even
look like
 myself-
 rightsideup, so.
shit on it!
I tickle again, say
crazy
 words, and and and and
hope
 all the while
that this
 very unappetizing
world

⁹⁹ Note: the word "upsidedown" literally appears upsidedown in the original text.

does not blow up
in all our
laughing
faces.¹⁰⁰

When Bukowski writes “I keep looking at the/ kid”, what he could also be saying is, “I keep watching *The Kid*” – i.e. Chaplin’s film. This seems, to me, a potential play on words. Robinson tells us of *The Kid*: “The film embodies poignant memories of Chaplin’s own troubled childhood.”¹⁰¹ This, of course, immediately draws a parallel with Bukowski’s own childhood which was, by all accounts, highly troubled. Words like “tickling”, “tickle”, “crazy” and “laughing” also set a Chaplinesque tone. In reality, Bukowski had a daughter who lived separately with her mother although he regularly helped with her upbringing and by all accounts loved her greatly (as we shall see in Chapter 3). When Bukowski says “the kid doesn’t look like / me” this draws another parallel with Chaplin’s film, therefore, in which ‘the kid’ is not Chaplin’s either. In the film, Chaplin adopts an abandoned child, famously played by the five-year-old Jackie Coogan, although by the end of the film the boy’s mother returns to reclaim him. Chaplin himself never lived with his father as a child, but stayed mainly with his mother, so this is potentially a further parallel with Bukowski’s “kid” in the poem. Indeed Bukowski himself had a heavily fractured relationship with his own father; thus yet another link in that both Chaplin and Bukowski still make the effort to look after a child as fathers in both the film and the poem respectively, despite their own fathers effectively having rejected them. The inclusion of autobiography by both men, in the poem and in the film, draws a further parallel between the two artists: John D. Thomas reminds us that “Bukowski [...] claimed that his writing was 93 percent autobiographical”,¹⁰² and Maurice Bessy notes: “With Chaplin, legend is already indistinguishable from fact.”¹⁰³

Bukowski’s repetition of “and and and and” immediately brings to mind a snapped roll of film as the unwitting film reel continues to revolve, similar in a sense to the sound effect created by a stylus stuttering on a broken revolving record. This frozen

¹⁰⁰ Bukowski, *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1969), 174-5

¹⁰¹ David Robinson, *Chaplin*, ed. by Paul Duncan, Taschen, London (2006), 97

¹⁰² John D. Thomas, *Barfly*, New York Times (May 2, 1999)

¹⁰³ Bessy, *Charlie Chaplin*, 9

image, so to speak, paused on the cusp of its climax is then, finally, enjambed with the next line and the poem continues; so that “crazy / words, and and and and” is enjambed with the word “hope” in a particularly delightful way after the momentary gloom created by the stuttering, creating the sense or rhythm of a continuous film. We must also note the very Chaplinesque appearance of the poem’s text itself; its chaplinesque shape as it meanders haphazardly around the page, somewhat similarly to the Tramp’s wobbly gait as he trundles along a sidewalk. Also, unusually for Bukowski, he turns the word “upsidedown” quite literally upsidedown, then claims that even he himself is not recognisable “rightsideup” thus potentially making a joke about his (and Chaplin’s) rejection of correct form and tradition as well as the notion of identity vs. imitation. The fact that the poem ends with “all our / laughing faces”, immediately brings to mind an audience in a cinema, and is thus a further link to almost any Chaplin film at the end of which everyone was invariably laughing.

Post Office

Another Chaplinesque work by Bukowski is his 1971 novel, *Post Office*, which we will look at briefly before examining more fully Bukowski’s 1975 novel *Factotum*. Bukowski based *Post Office* on his twelve-year stint at the U.S. Postal Service. Notable for its concise, film-like chapters (scenes, basically), the novel shows how brow-beaten Bukowski became under the repetitious daily drudgery of monotonous work, made worse by a malevolent manager. The novel begins with the prophetic and ominous line, “It began as a mistake” and goes accordingly downhill. Neil Schiller remarks of Chinaski at work in *Post Office*:

As he sits filling a tray with mail, he is told along with the other new clerks that they have to complete their duties in a specified time frame. Immediately, those around him begin to pack trays as quickly as they can, “arms... flying” with “fear of failure”, while he takes his time, figuring right away that the target is unrealistic. And it pays off: he is so far behind the others that the supervisor presumes he is in fact on his second tray and

is “making production”, to which Chinaski’s response is to “slow... down a little more”.¹⁰⁴

This scene is immediately recognisable as one from a number of Chaplin films, in particular *Modern Times* (1936). The “arms... flying” and “fear of failure” are similar to what we see at the start of *Modern Times* when Chaplin’s Tramp is attempting to fit in with the other workers along the assembly line – they are all working quickly and efficiently while he falls behind. However, the Tramp’s behaviour whilst working in the factory is actually often amusing, despite the drudgery of the job, and even a joy to behold in some parts due to the more balletic and detailed choreography of, for example, his body moving through the cogs of the factory’s giant mechanism. Bukowski’s more monotonous descriptions of work, however, are less whimsical but do thereby increase our sense of elation when he (Chinaski) gets away with something (like appearing to his supervisor to be ahead of his co-workers). Calonne notes of this period that “Bukowski’s prose now exhibited a remarkable degree of self-assurance and control; it is sharp, lively, funny, quirky, steely, constantly on the move.”¹⁰⁵ This description of Bukowski’s prose is strikingly similar to Chaplin’s narrative film style and the Tramp’s actual physical movements. *Post Office* is also notable for its predominant use of dialogue and points towards cinema’s influence, signalling that Bukowski’s later writing of a screenplay was probably not such a surprising progression afterall. (His final novel *Pulp*, written after the screenplay *Barfly*, is composed almost entirely of dialogue and shows distinct similarities to a screenplay.) Regardless, it is in Bukowski’s second novel *Factotum* (1975) that we see the most obvious Chaplinesque influence.

Factotum

After graduating from highschool, Bukowski briefly studied journalism at Los Angeles City College, before drifting between numerous menial jobs across the west

¹⁰⁴ Neil Schiller, *Social Mechanics and American Morality: the meanings of nothingness in the prose and poetry of Charles Bukowski*, essay collected in *Bukowski Unleashed! “Essays On A Dirty Old Man” Bukowski Journal Vol. 1*, ed. by Rikki Hollywood, Little Lagoon Press, London (2000), 34

¹⁰⁵ Calonne/Bukowski, *Portions from.*, xv-xvi

coast of America, often resulting in self-destructive cycles of alcoholism, unemployment, poverty, violence and vagrancy. According to his FBI files, Bukowski was arrested seven times during this period, once for draft dodging during World War Two (followed by a psychiatric 4-F exemption), and the others almost always for being drunken and disorderly. Bukowski was employed in numerous low-wage menial positions including warehouse packer, slaughterhouse worker, shipping clerk, docker, railway repairman and ambulance driver – already highly similar to the numerous low-paid jobs that Chaplin’s Tramp takes on, and the term *factotum* could just as aptly describe either character. Bukowski would later draw upon these experiences to write his autobiographical novel, *Factotum*. Its opening page sets the Chaplinesque tone perfectly:

I had a cardboard suitcase that was falling apart. It had once been black but the black coating had peeled off and yellow cardboard was exposed. I had tried to solve that by putting black shoepolish over the exposed cardboard. As I walked along in the rain the shoepolish on the suitcase ran and unwittingly I rubbed black streaks on both legs of my pants as I switched the suitcase from hand to hand.¹⁰⁶

The line between the serious and the comical is toed and crossed with deliberate precision by both Chinaski and the Tramp, combining a sense of comic timing and anti-climax that creates a certain ‘rhythm’. Although when the Tramp makes faux-pas such as sitting on paint, Chinaski’s mishap with the shoepolish seems all the more miserable as we have no direct visual gag to release us (or him) from the gloom. In this regard, then, Bukowski is not only continuing the same themes of Chaplin but is pushing them further, into more desperate territory. The periods following the inevitable occasions that Chinaski is fired are also often quite miserable: “In the daytime I took long slow walks. I sat for hours staring at pigeons. I only ate one meal a day so my money would last longer.”¹⁰⁷ Bukowski states of this period:

I would get a common laborer’s job somewhere for a week or two and then live in a cheap room and type. [...] I used to live on one candy bar a day.

¹⁰⁶ Bukowski, *Factotum*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1975), 11

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 12

Cost a nickel. I always remember the candy bar. It was called ‘Payday’. That was my Payday at five cents. And that candy bar tasted so good. I’d have it at night. I’d take one bite and it was so beautiful.¹⁰⁸

This is reminiscent of many lonely scenes of the hapless Tramp, hungry and alone, observing society as an outsider, and in particular the famous scene in *The Gold Rush* (1925) in which Chaplin’s starving prospector is so hungry he is forced to eat his own boiled boot. Robinson points out that “Chaplin knew hunger as a child and many of his films show him eating.”¹⁰⁹ This is of course true of Bukowski too, and we often see both Chinaski and the Tramp doing whatever they can to be fed. Chinaski even refers to food as “fuel” several times in *Barfly*, thus paring it down to its most essential use. Although the eating is often miserable, as in the scene above, Chaplin sometimes employs comical twists for opposite effect, such as in *Modern Times* when the automated feeding machine malfunctions and violently forcefeeds Chaplin *too much* lunch instead.

In a similar way to how the two men share their chosen interests, I detect a further similarity between Chaplin and Bukowski in precisely the kind of subject matter that they choose *not* to represent, i.e. elitism. Bukowski said of Shakespeare:

These kings running around, these ghosts, that upper-crust shit bored me. I couldn't relate to it. It had nothing to do with me. Here I am lying in a room starving to death – I've got a candy bar and half a bottle of wine – and this guy is talking about the agony of a king.¹¹⁰

This is exactly the kind of churlish comment that has kept Bukowski alienated from serious scholarship, but shows another striking correlation between Bukowski’s and Chaplin’s themes. Indeed, Chaplin deliberately projected his ‘everyman’ persona via the usual figure of a Tramp who is literally the *exact opposite* of a king – thus a clear link with Bukowski. Bukowski explained his approach further:

¹⁰⁸ From the film documentary *Bukowski: Born Into This*, directed by John Dullaghan (2003)

¹⁰⁹ Robinson, *Chaplin*, 113

¹¹⁰ Bukowski, *Bukowski on Bukowski*, ed. by Rikki Hollywood, Little Lagoon Press, London (1998), 4

What I've tried to do, if you'll pardon me, is bring in the factory worker's aspect of life. The screaming wife when he comes home from work. The basic realities of the everyman existence. Something seldom mentioned in the poetry through the centuries. Just put me down as saying that the poetry of the centuries is shit.¹¹¹

This is a dismissive and grandiose statement but, once again, is an opportunity taken by Bukowski to consolidate his self-appointed role as the 'everyman' poet. Again, Bukowski is revealing (consciously or not) his affinity with Chaplin by claiming to "bring in the factory worker's aspect of life", exactly as Chaplin had done before him. (Indeed, Bukowski's poetry is often full of such imagery: e.g. the poem *200 years* in which Bukowski describes typically Chaplinesque scenes as "the factories, / the production lines, / the warehouses, / the time clocks," and "the assembly line"¹¹².) Thus Bukowski's and Chaplin's subject matter is shared. We are also presented with an ambivalence or hypocrisy on Bukowski's part, in that he believes poetry to be "shit" yet he aspires to be a poet. He wants to take part in a tradition of those who reject tradition, so of course his tradition is a tradition in itself. He never wants to keep these awful menial jobs he applies for, yet he needs to keep applying for them in order to be able to claim authenticity in his role as the everyman proletarian poet. Tamas Dobozy notes a "dirty realist hypocrisy aesthetic"¹¹³ demonstrated in Bukowski's *Factotum*:

Bukowski not only "discards [...] logical contradiction," but flaunts his disdain for consistency, logic, and accountability. He is not only conscious of contradiction within his text, but celebrates a willful hypocrisy, indiscriminately exhibiting (and conscripting to his own ends) the incongruities of postindustrial capital. Bukowski turns passivity into a subversive practice by self-consciously displaying his subjection to capital's

¹¹¹ Bukowski, *Bukowski on Bukowski*, 5

¹¹² Bukowski, *Come On In! New Poems*, ed. by John Martin, Ecco, Harper Collins, New York (2006), 12

¹¹³ Tamas Dobozy, *In the Country of Contradiction the Hypocrite is King: Defining Dirty Realism in Charles Bukowski's Factotum*, *Modern Fiction Studies* Volume 47, Number 1, Spring (2001), 43

indeterminacy, in effect replicating and co-opting that indeterminacy to empower himself.¹¹⁴

Discarding “logical contradiction” and celebrating “wilful hypocrisy” in order “to empower himself” sums up Chinaski’s behaviour quite aptly, and of course would suitably describe the Tramp’s, too. Similarities aside, however, it seems we are presented with a serious distinction between Chaplin and Bukowski. Whereas Bukowski is happy to rail against the erudite world of Shakespeare and highbrow literature, yet still aspire to be a poet, Chaplin, on the other hand, (and with opposite intent) is much shrewder in his embracing of the more sophisticated audience, and very keen to portray himself as not only a filmmaker and actor, but also a thinking-man’s poet. Goldstein records:

Chaplin made himself available to the intelligentsia as a kind of kindred spirit, [...] a special case, a hybrid of clown and poet. Poet is the word used constantly in the panegyrics of the period regarding Chaplin, even in the mass media. The poet Benjamin de Casseres, for example, conducted an influential interview in the New York Times in 1920 in which he calls Chaplin “a poet, an esthete [...] a man infinitely sad and melancholy [...] a Puck, a Hamlet, an Ariel.” Chaplin fills the interview with sentiments designed to endear him to that elite audience [...]: “the dream-world is [...] the great reality; the real world is an illusion,” he remarks, and later, “I am oppressed [...] by world-weariness.” He wants only to retire to an Italian lake with volumes of Keats and Shelley.¹¹⁵

Thus we finally see the real difference between Bukowski and Chaplin – that Chaplin has the ability to hop back and forth between the streets and the ivory tower, so to speak, whereas Bukowski sticks adamantly to the streets. While Chaplin’s Tramp might sometimes attend a ballet or an opera, to comic effect, Bukowski’s Chinaski wouldn’t be seen dead in such a forum. If *Factotum* tells us anything, it repeatedly

¹¹⁴ Dobozy, *In the Country of*, 43-44

¹¹⁵ Goldstein, *The American Poet*, 47

reiterates how seriously Bukowski is committed to low culture and vulgar content. Accordingly, then, it is also in *Factotum* that we find the following scene in which Martha, a fellow-lodger in the same roominghouse, sexually assaults Chinaski:

Suddenly her eyes narrowed. I was sitting on the edge of the bed. She leapt on me before I could move. Her open mouth was pressed on mine. It tasted of spit and onions and stale wine and (I imagined) the sperm of four hundred men. She pushed her tongue in my mouth. It was thick with saliva, I gagged and pushed her off. She fell on her knees, tore open my zipper, and in a second my soft pecker was in her mouth. [...] Sucking sounds filled the room [...]. I felt as if I were being eaten by a pitiless animal. My pecker rose, covered with spittle and blood. The sight of it threw her into a frenzy. [...] If I come, I thought desperately, I'll never forgive myself.¹¹⁶

Thus Bukowski represents Chinaski not as the aggressor but as the victim. Although mentally he is unconsensual, he allows his body to be used by Martha, almost out of sympathy after his negative appraisal of her. Harrison states:

[...] while the scene is comic, it is the comic transformation of the male's ultimate nightmare: he – or at least his penis – has fallen prey to a sexually devouring woman. The depiction of a wounded and terrified Chinaski radically contravenes our traditional expectations.¹¹⁷

This scene, too, has a sense of comedic cinema about it, in that we are provided with a voiceover that runs contrary to the stream of visual action including the dramatic close-up “sight” of Chinaski’s penis “covered with spittle and blood”. Of course, the setting itself, yet another worn room in a cheap roominghouse, is indeed Chaplinesque, but more than merely the setting itself, we are presented with an extreme case of pathos-cum-comedy here in the truest clown-like Chaplinesque tradition, although pushed to a much more vulgar degree than even Chaplin would have dared.

¹¹⁶ Bukowski, *Factotum*, 37

¹¹⁷ Harrison, *Against the American Dream.*, 187-188

City Lights

In the work of Bukowski's peers, the Beats, the Chaplinesque 'everyman' protagonist is ubiquitous. Beat writing is clearly indebted to Chaplin, and many of the Beats (such as Kerouac and Cassady), like Bukowski, led lives that included periods of vagrancy and violence with numerous arrests. Their literature crossed paths, too. Calonne notes:

One area of common ground with the Beats was Bukowski's development of his own style of "spontaneous prose composition," which sought to depict everything about the human body and imagination normally ignored, shunned, and rejected as "vulgar."¹¹⁸

Thus we have returned to the recurring theme of vulgarity shared by Chaplin, Bukowski and the Beats, a group whose members all created work in the same country within the same century. Sargeant observes: "Although not expressly identified as a Beat writer, Charles Bukowski has come to be identified in the popular imagination with the Beat Movement."¹¹⁹ He was of a similar place and time, and although he would publicly divorce himself from their group, Bukowski could not deny that he was affiliated with the Beats via this shared cultural milieu. Poet Anne Waldman suggests:

All these people were on the same wavelength, acting in the same interesting period of time, so culturally informed by the same kind of impulses... Bukowski was not linked to that community, he was not hanging around with Cassady and William Burroughs and so on, but he is kind of informed by, and, in terms of what is going on culturally, artistically, psychologically, he is very much on the same kind of wavelength.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Calonne/Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Absence of*, xvii

¹¹⁹ Sargeant, *Naked Lens*, 225

¹²⁰ Anne Waldman, as quoted by Jean-Francois Duval in *Bukowski and the Beats: A Commentary on the Beat Generation*, Sun Dog Press, Northville, Michigan (2002) 95-96

Sargeant further suggests that similarly to those of the Beats, Bukowski's books "share a recognition and celebration of the outsider, who exists at the margins of society, and often are based on autobiographical – or quasi-autobiographical – experiences."¹²¹ So, again, where Chaplin celebrated the 'outsider' on the 'margins of society', Bukowski and the Beats followed. Sargeant also adds, "like Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, [...] and Neal Cassady – Bukowski was published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Books of San Francisco".¹²² City Lights Books was founded in 1953 by Peter Martin and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and quickly became an invaluable force in the Beat movement. It is especially pertinent that they chose to name their press after Chaplin's film *City Lights* (1931), thereby testifying to the extent of Chaplin's influence upon them.

With such a shared cultural foundation, then, it is perhaps inevitable that the work of the Beats – like Bukowski's – shows evidence of cinema's influence. David Sterrit believes that "cinema [...] played an important role in shaping and crystallizing Beat notions of creativity."¹²³ He describes how John Clellon Holmes recounted once seeing Kerouac sitting at a typewriter, "staring into the blankness of the space in front of him, careful not to will anything, and simply recording the 'movie' unreeling in his mind."¹²⁴ This reaffirms Kerouac's own assertion that the "Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form".¹²⁵ Furthermore, all of this is reminiscent of A. Monk's reportage of Bukowski's method:

Bukowski often referred to moments when the writing was going well and he was hitting his stride on the type writer or computer as "Magic" and [...] would often find it pouring out of him into words as he hammered away at the page. He drank and 'would just let it come' [...] Bukowski would be trying to *see* something. The truth or at least how he saw it from his angle in *that* moment, be it a fist thrown at him

¹²¹ Sargeant, Jack, *Naked Lens*, 226

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ David Sterrit, *Mad to Be Saved: The Beats, the '50s, and Film*, Southern Illinois University Press (1998), 9

¹²⁴ John Clellon Holmes as quoted by Sterrit, *Mad to be Saved.*, 193

¹²⁵ Evergreen Review piece by Kerouac called *Belief & Technique for Modern Prose* (1959), as quoted by Sterrit, *Mad to be Saved.*, 9

unannounced to a land lady's footsteps getting heavier the more money owed.¹²⁶

Thus Bukowski's intention to "let it come" and just "see something" was culturally of its time. Kerouac was not the only writer being "careful not to will anything, [...] simply recording the 'movie' unreeling in his mind." Fellow Beat author William Burroughs somewhat concurred when he wrote: "Writers are potentially very powerful indeed. They write the script for the reality film."¹²⁷ What is clear, then, and fair to say of both Bukowski and the Beats as a group, is that they were not limited to a single form of writing but shared the ability to think between genres – an ability catalysed and encouraged by their shared cultural context with cinema and, of course, Chaplin.

Allen Ginsberg

We should now look more closely at the work of Allen Ginsberg whose connections to both Chaplin and Bukowski are manifold. Ian Hamilton reminds us that Ginsberg thought of himself as a "famous old 'clock of meat bleakly pining for the sweet immaterial paradise' [...]"¹²⁸ whose poetry "on page after apostrophizing page [...] came 'roaring down' on us 'in a haze of hot cars and garbage – with a mouthful of shit'"¹²⁹. So far this could well be describing Bukowski, and, indeed, there are many similarities between the two poets. Both men were contemporaries and both (like Kerouac) had grown up amid the heady cultural milieu of cinema and modernism. Indeed, Bukowski recounts a story of travelling to poetry readings in Detroit, Riverside and Santa Cruz with Ginsberg: "Been on the reading kick [... with] Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Snyder [...] There was a bomb threat and old Allen's ears jumped. He got on stage and improvised a poem about the situation. [...] Ginsberg was all right, he

¹²⁶ A. Monk, *A Drunken Sage?* essay collected in *Bukowski Unleashed! Bukowski Journal Vol. I*, ed. by Rikki Hollywood, 11-12

¹²⁷ William S. Burroughs, *Kerouac: A Historic Memoir of America's Greatest Existentialist*, essay collected in *High Times* No. 43 (March 1979), 52-55

¹²⁸ Ian Hamilton, *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets*, Penguin, London (2003), 264

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 262

seemed a good sort.”¹³⁰ So it is clear that Bukowski and Ginsberg shared a stage, quite literally, at various points throughout their careers. It again becomes less surprising, then, to discover that their work shared so many similarities, including the influence of Chaplin and cinema.

Daniel Kane suggests that “an analysis of Ginsberg’s relationship to cinema will show the very real and significant influence film had on his growth as a poet”.¹³¹ Kane adds that “Chaplin appears to have been especially beloved by the poet.”¹³² And: “Ginsberg collaborated on “A Letter to Chaplin from Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky,” a practically epic ode or “love letter” to Chaplin published in the spring 1966 issue of *Film Culture*.”¹³³ The poem featured lines such as: “Why don’t you go ahead & make another picture & fuck everybody. If you do / could we be Extras.”¹³⁴ It also refers to another of Bukowski’s favourite writers, Louis Ferdinand Celine, as someone who “vomits raspberries” and “wrote the most Chaplin-esque prose / in Europe”¹³⁵. Bukowski often cites Celine’s *Journey to the End of the Night* and *Death on Credit* as two works of major influence, again suggesting the pervasive nature of Chaplin’s influence on this larger school of writers who, in turn, reciprocally influenced each other. Indeed, Bukowski tells us in a letter: “I know what you mean about a writer saving your ass. There was this fellow, Céline, *Journey* [...] I read the novel straight through, actually laughing out loud. He lent me some guts to go on with.”¹³⁶

Kane notes that “Ginsberg’s published statements on Chaplin overall suggest that he finds Chaplin anticipating the improvisatory, madcap, and non conformist sensibility so crucial to the formation of what we can tentatively call the Beat aesthetic”¹³⁷. Kane adds that “rethinking Ginsberg’s lines partly in light of the Chaplinesque influence (what Ginsberg referred to as “running along making awkward combinations”) goes some way to helping readers see “Howl” as a comedic if simultaneously bardic work.”¹³⁸ Furthermore:

¹³⁰ Bukowski, *Living on Luck*, to A.D. Winans (November, 1974), 198

¹³¹ Daniel Kane, *We Saw the Light: Conversations Between the New American Cinema and Poetry*, Univeristy of Iowa Press, Iowa City (2009), 111

¹³² *Ibid.*, 112

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 115

¹³⁶ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Clive Cardiff (March 8, 1991), 160

¹³⁷ Kane, *We Saw the Light.*, 112

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113

The form that lines in “Howl” take is analogous to the Chaplinesque comedic trajectory, where practically each step the Little Tramp makes boosts him into a series of ever-expanding ridiculous situations that lead him to swerve away from anything approaching sensible linearity.¹³⁹

This is strikingly similar to Bukowski’s own Chaplinesque description of Ginsberg’s poetry in a letter: “Hope Ginsberg isn’t screwing up your brain cells too much. With that guy it’s one line at a time, then forget that line and go to the next, which will have nothing to do with the line which preceded it or the one to follow [...]”¹⁴⁰ This is particularly observant of Bukowski, and Calonne points out that for Bukowski “it is no accident that he felt a great affinity for the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, correctly perceiving the connection between Howl and the gifted young poet’s early work”.¹⁴¹ Calonne adds of a Bukowski short story: Bukowski’s “mastery of rhythm, timing, and comic surprise is evident in *The Night Nobody Believed I Was Allen Ginsberg*, in which his driven, breathless, zany narrative moves swiftly from one improbable scene to the next.”¹⁴² This driven, zany, narrative that moves from one improbable scene to the next could just as aptly describe almost any order of episodes from any Chaplin comedy, again revealing the shared tradition between Bukowski, Ginsberg and Chaplin.

In this chapter, therefore, we have seen the complex but clear network of influence between Charlie Chaplin, Bukowski and the Beats. Like Eliot, Joyce, Crane, Pound and Celine before them, Bukowski and the Beats owe a debt to Chaplin. Chaplin’s life itself contains direct parallels with Bukowski’s, inasmuch as both came to America and used their primary skills as a writer to create work that would take them both out of their previous ‘slum’ existence and push them both literally into the ‘limelight’. Andrew Sarris claims that Chaplin was:

[...] an artist who for more than half a century had used the screen as his personal diary. As he had outgrown Sennett, he had outlasted Hitler, and he

¹³⁹ Kane, *We Saw the Light.*, 114

¹⁴⁰ Bukowski, *Living on Luck.*, to Carl Weissner (November 3, 1978), 253

¹⁴¹ Calonne/Bukowski, *Portions of.*, xiv

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, xvi

had aged with extraordinary grace. He had even got around to recording his awareness (in *Limelight*) that he had lost his mass audience. He remains the supreme exemplification of the axiom that ‘lives and lenses stand at the centre of cinematic creation’.¹⁴³

Chaplin’s use of his work as his “personal diary” is, again, similar to that of Bukowski’s approach whose works such as *The Captain is Out to Lunch and the Sailors Have Taken Over the Ship* and *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* are often quite literally diary entries. Chaplin’s *My Autobiography* draws parallels with Bukowski’s childhood autobiography *Ham on Rye* in its focus on Dickensian poverty, war and general youthful disillusionment; and Chaplin’s film *Limelight* and Bukowski’s novel *Hollywood* also contain striking similarities in the expression of celebrity-angst displayed by both artists approaching their twilights. Bessy aptly concludes:

Cinema is the only art the twentieth century has created, and Chaplin was one of its most distinguished practitioners – indeed he embodied all the skills the cinema stood for, since he was screenwriter, director, actor, composer and producer all rolled into one. Individual creativity is paramount in film as in the other arts, and Chaplin stood alone in the completeness – the perfection – of his contribution.¹⁴⁴

This is a clear link to Bukowski’s own belief about filmmaking which he expounds in a letter: “I think that the only way a great movie can be made is for the same man to write it, direct it, produce it and maybe even act in it [...]”¹⁴⁵ Thus he is actually defining Chaplin’s model of filmmaking. Even in death, the responses to the news of both artists drew similar responses: Robinson claims “Chaplin had created in the silhouette of his Tramp the most universal representation of foolish, fallible mankind that human art had ever achieved.”¹⁴⁶ Summing up Bukowski’s work after his death, the *New York Times* observed: “Not since George Orwell has the condition of

¹⁴³ Andrew Sarris, *Chaplin*, essay collected in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, edited by Richard Roud, as quoted by David Robinson in *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion*, 179

¹⁴⁴ Bessy, *Charlie Chaplin*, 10

¹⁴⁵ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to John Martin (March 29, 1987), 92

¹⁴⁶ Robinson, *Chaplin: The Mirror of Opinion*, viii

being down-and-out been so well recorded.”¹⁴⁷ I’m confident that, as time passes, Chinaski and the Tramp will remain the two most recognisable figures of the down-and-out anti-hero of the twentieth century. I believe that as Chaplin represented the role in the first half of the twentieth century, Bukowski will come to be seen as having carried on the baton, so to speak, into the second half.

¹⁴⁷ New York Times, as quoted on jacket of Virgin Books edition of *Factotum*, London (2009)

2

Bukowski's Men

Here I will examine how Bukowski's formation of male identity is influenced by cinema. Smith notes of Bukowski: "A major component in his work is American cultural mythology: and this comes out in the free play of larger-than-life male and female sexual stereotypes and archetypes."¹⁴⁸ Bukowski was particularly influenced by war movies as a child, and, indeed, the sadness of Bukowski's youth, ranging from his feelings about his physical disfigurement (as the result of his particularly severe case of *acne vulgaris*) to the troubled relationships with his parents and peers, may well have been the driving force behind this initial foray into writing. Biographer Gay Brewer records of 1935, the year when Bukowski was undergoing regular syringing and radiation for his boils and acne: "Isolated and self-conscious about his physical appearance, Bukowski apparently wrote his first short story later that year, featuring the exploits of the World War 1 flying ace Baron Manfred Von Richthofen."¹⁴⁹ Howard Sounes concurs that, one of his "first stories was about the daring adventures of a World War One German air ace"¹⁵⁰ This particular story described an account of the Red Baron being shot in one hand yet still managing to continue an airborne dogfight. That the teenage Bukowski wrote his first short story about a wounded fighter pilot clearly attests to the influence of the ubiquitous World War One movies that he and his generation were undoubtedly watching as children growing up in California.

War Movies

Bukowski's early interest in war movies probably stemmed from two things: firstly, he was growing up in a period immediately after the First World War, in which his own father had himself taken part as a soldier; and, secondly, because Bukowski

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 151

¹⁴⁹ Brewer, *Charles Bukowski*, 1

¹⁵⁰ Sounes, *Charles Bukowski: Locked In The Arms.*, 13

had been born in Germany but raised in America he therefore felt an affinity with those on both sides (especially during the Second World War in which he refused to fight for the U.S.). Furthermore, it is revealing that Bukowski chose to make the protagonist of his first short story a German pilot rather than an American, thereby illustrating Bukowski's ambivalence and/or confusion in regard to his own identity and already burgeoning feeling of alienation amongst his peers. Still, the excitement of aeroplanes in combat was enough to appeal to all of his generation, as Bukowski recalls in the following nostalgic poem written in later life and published posthumously (1999):

the World War One movies

were best, the aviators drank at the bar
every night, fighting over the one or two blondes,
and it was gallant because in the dawn they
might die going after those Fokkers with their
Spads, so they lined up along that bar
and slugged them down.

we kids loved those movies, the men weren't
like our fathers, those men laughed and fought
and loved slinky blondes in tight long dresses.

each dawn was glorious, they'd go to their Spads,
pulling on their goggles, a quick wave of the hand and
a long white scarf flowing out behind them. They
grinned and flew off into the blue.¹⁵¹

That these aviators "drank at the bar / every night, fighting" is crucial as it is exactly how Bukowski would later behave as an adult, and is exactly what he wrote about in his own screenplay *Barfly* (see chapter 4). Bukowski's glamorising of the "gallant" aviators who "laughed and fought" is consistent with his rose-tinted reverie of youthful escapism and the enjoyment he took from such films. The fact that the drinks

¹⁵¹ Bukowski, *Betting on the Muse: Poems and Stories*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1999), 46

“at the bar” were “slugged” down is also important to Bukowski whose macho image as a big drinker is a key part of his projected persona. Furthermore, the dynamic phrase “slugged them down” can also refer to shooting down the “Fokkers” as well as the drinks. Words like “loved”, “glorious”, “flowing”, and “grinned” all paint a positive picture of the pilots – men whom the young Bukowski clearly admired. Bukowski also tells us that the “kids loved those movies” because “the men weren’t / like our fathers” who were Depression era fathers, often unemployed, irate and seemingly without purpose in comparison to the vivacious, heroic pilots who were quite literally on a mission. The women are sexualised as “slinky blondes in tight dresses” and although their descriptions are positive, they are brief, and the focus remains on the men who are clearly more important in Bukowski’s eyes. The alliteration of “glorious”, “goggles” and “grinned” also adds to the epic grandeur of the atmosphere. Bukowski explains how he noticed that all of these war movies employed the same plot-line and formula. After the American pilots had successfully taken off and were well into the air, suddenly a fleet of German planes would appear ominously on screen, “high above the clouds”, gunning straight for the Americans:

one of the planes would be hit
and roar down in flames – usually
the guy with the sense of humour, the guy who
had made everybody laugh at the bar –
there he’d go, his hands rising in the
flames, then oil splashing his goggles, he’d
wiggle trying to free himself to parachute to safety
but it was always too late¹⁵² [...]

The two phrases “usually / the guy who made everybody laugh” and “but it was always too late” (specifically the two words “usually” and “always”) implicitly tell the reader that Bukowski is drawing upon a wealth of movie-watching, enough for him to be able to make confident generalisations about the formation of their plots and characters and thus invite the reader to join him in this presumed shared knowledge. Bukowski is potentially self-identifying with the pilot “with the sense of humour” who

¹⁵² Bukowski, *Betting on the Muse.*, 46

“had made everybody laugh at the bar” – after all this is exactly how he describes himself in *Barfly* (chapter 4), thus writing about himself in film in the same way he has seen other heroic characters depicted in film. He continues:

the dogfight was a real spectacle, the hero
would have a Fokker on his tail, have to pull
an Immelman to get him off.
then he'd be on the other guy's tail
and the bullets would rip through
the German, his mouth would open, a
spurt of blood and his plane would head
toward the earth with a WHINING roar.¹⁵³

Bukowski's pointing out of the dogfight as being the “real spectacle” signals (again) his intrinsic understanding of the filmmakers' intentions and that this is the climactic scene that the director has been working towards. Everything else so far is purely a pre-amble in order to make the viewer care for the American pilots; their socialising at the bar on the previous night; and the one “with the sense of humour” being shot first. All of this has brought us to what Bukowski knowingly refers to as the “real spectacle”, where cinema can create the most excitement: the action scene. When Bukowski describes how the hero would “have to pull an Immelman”, he is again inviting the reader to meet him (Bukowski) and his childhood friends in a forum of shared experience, presuming that the reader shares this knowledge of fighter pilot terminology, as garnered from movies. An ‘Immelman Manoeuvre’ was a dogfighting tactic popular in World War One, named after the German fighter pilot Max Immelman. For a child of the time, these films must have been an incredible thrill. Words like “rip through”, “spurt of blood” and “WHINING roar” (especially the deliberate use of capitals in the latter) increase the sense of drama, noise and spectacle, much like that of a film. Bukowski confesses:

all we boys loved those World War One
movies

¹⁵³ Bukowski, *Betting on the Muse.*, 47

and we built our own balsa wood
model airplanes, Spads and
Fokkers.
most kits cost 25 cents
which was a lot of money in the
1930s but somehow
every kid had his own
plane.

we were in a hurry to grow
up.
we all wanted to be
fighter pilots,
we wanted those slinky
blondes, we wanted to lean
against that bar and gulp
down a straight whiskey
like nothing had
happened.

we had dogfights with our
model planes and they
sometimes developed into
fist fights.
we fought until we were
bloody and
torn.
we fought for our
honor

while
our fathers watched us
and

yawned.¹⁵⁴

Bukowski informs us that it was indeed a generation-wide cinephilia with: “all we boys loved those World War One / movies.” He is enjoying reminiscing about the impact these films had on their imagination, inspiring them to the point that “we all wanted to be / fighter pilots”; each bought their own balsa plane and “had dogfights” with them in order to imitate these pilots and what they saw in the cinema. Throughout Bukowski’s work there are many similar references to such scenes from war films (such as the poem *dogfight over L.A.*¹⁵⁵). That Bukowski says “we were in a hurry to grow up” is interesting as he is writing this poem as an old man, probably knowing that it would be published after his death, yet it is a poem about youth. It feels, therefore, that despite his pejorative recounting of his childhood elsewhere, these war movies and the effect they had on him (and his friends) actually constitute a happy memory for Bukowski and reveal his developing macho self-identity as brought about by cinema – his one true escape as a child. He and his friends “wanted those slinky blondes” and “to lean / against the bar and gulp / down a straight whiskey like nothing had happened”, revealing again his admiration of the nonchalant male who often conflates women and alcohol, as seen in the films. Words like “dogfights”, “fist fights”, “bloody”, “torn”, “fought” and “honour” all help to conjure up a boisterous scene of burgeoning virility. The breaks between the stanzas separate the different scenes similarly to cuts in a movie, dividing the boys and their model planes from the actual pilots and their real planes.

Bukowski points out that it was only his own generation, however, that enjoyed this excitement: “our fathers watched us / and / yawned.” This lack of enthusiasm for cinema shown by the parental generation is something that Bukowski himself would also eventually display as an adult when his own love of film paled to apathy (as we shall explore in Chapter 4). It is also key that Bukowski ends with reference to “our fathers” as the poem has now spanned the gamut of boyhood to manhood to fatherhood, and is written by a man in old age; thus creating a neat structure and symmetry within which to frame the poem, similar to the structure of a three act film. The fact that Bukowski ends with the single word “yawned” is also striking as it is particularly anti-

¹⁵⁴ Bukowski, *Betting on the Muse.*, 48-9

¹⁵⁵ Bukowski, *Open All Night: New Poems*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (2000), 46

climatic after the drama of the preceding poem and thereby creates an abrupt end, much like a plane crash.

Humphrey Bogart

Bukowski particularly admired the film actor Humphrey Bogart, mentioning him many times throughout his writing, always in a positive light. In the poem *Casablanca* (published posthumously in 2001), named after the 1942 Warner Bros. production of the same name, starring Bogart, Bukowski makes clear his fascination with the hardened image of the anti-hero – and more particularly the actor playing him – and the extent to which such cinematic figures affected his own personality and behaviour:

Bogie smoked 4 packs of cigarettes
a day
and was in a few good movies.

he made them good by being
in them.

some men have this undeniable
presence and some
women
too.

Bogie had it.

you listened when he spoke.

which is more than my women do.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (2001), 143

Referring to Bogart as “Bogie” immediately implies that Bukowski has a familiarity with the actor, and again ushers us, the readers, into this shared world of filmlore. Words like “cigarettes” and “movies” remind us that in this case it is the macho world of Bogart whose movies were made “good” (repeated twice for emphasis) by his very presence. Although Bukowski is here concentrating on a macho subject, it is revealing that he adds after “some men have this undeniable / presence” that “some / women / too” have it – which will become more important in the following chapter when we see that Bukowski does often treat women and men equally, despite his reputation for sexism. The break in lines before and after “Bogie had it” add emphasis by creating a physical pause for thought, visually framing Bogart on the page, recalling the way he is framed on the silver screen. Bukowski thinks of Bogart as a real man – a man’s man – because “you listened when he spoke”. Bukowski even holds Bogart in higher reverence than himself as revealed by his self-deprecating admission: “which is more than my women do.” It is important to acknowledge the position that Bogart occupied at the time: Bruce Crowther notes that “Bogart was firmly established as a major star, with a strong screen persona and a massive following among the moviegoing public.” Smith agrees:

Supreme among them is Humphrey Bogart, perhaps the most ubiquitous of all specimens of American rugged individualism. [...] His characterisations are symbolic of inner integrity and masculine self-sufficiency, often against the authorities. His characters are domineering once-bitten romantics, liking liquor to dull the pain.¹⁵⁷

This is all typically Bukowskian. As we know, Bukowski began drinking in youth, probably after observing it in films. Malone suggests of Bukowski: “The bar was an escape from the straitjacket of home and school, but this was another type of trap,”¹⁵⁸ and by his thirties Bukowski was a confirmed alcoholic (nearly dying from a stomach hemorrhage in 1956). What also makes this poem interesting is that Bukowski has chosen to call it *Casablanca*, the especially famous film that Bukowski and many of his contemporaries would have seen and been influenced by, and which itself is set against a backdrop of war yet with a romance at its forefront. Perhaps Bukowski is acknowledging

¹⁵⁷ Smith, *Art, Survival*, 168

¹⁵⁸ Malone, *The Hunchback*, 18

that his real life romances are never quite as glamorous and straightforward as those he has seen in the cinema – even to the point that Bukowski can't think about romance without juxtaposing it with war. He goes on to point out that “Bogie had the delivery, it never / varied.”¹⁵⁹ Consistency of form is something that Bukowski admires and aspires to. Indeed, Bukowski's consistency of form is similarly impeccable. Literally all of his published poetry is free verse, written in the colloquial everyday American idiom of his day. And in his novels, short stories and screenplay he never veers from his focus on the hard-boiled, rugged, anti-hero. Bukowski even admits to trying to imitate Bogart's voice:

I rehearse my voice,
I practice, I
put a steel edge on my vocal
inflection:

“listen, you whore, I've *had* it
with you!”

“oh go to sleep,” they say turning
over in the bed. “I
need my rest.”¹⁶⁰

The anaphoraic use of “I rehearse” and “I practise” help create a rhythm that suggests something exciting is about to happen. Words like “steel edge”, “whore”, “*had*” and “you!” all add to a sense of impending climax, which is then immediately foiled and met with total anti-climax when Bukowski's female counterparts simply respond with “oh go to sleep” (similar to his use of “yawn” at the end of the previous poem). This emphasis of the “steel edge” recurs in much of Bukowski's work, as we shall see throughout this thesis. Those who have the ‘edge’ are regarded as tough by Bukowski, whilst those without it are regarded as weak. The similar positions in each of the last three lines of the words “sleep”, “bed” and “rest” totally deflate Bukowski's pomp, putting to bed (as it were) his attempts of Bogart impersonation. This anti-climax is the perfect foil for Bukowski's literary persona who often takes himself too seriously.

¹⁵⁹ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 143-144

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 144

Bukowski's injection of bathetic humour into such scenes illustrates his synthesis of the cinematic ideal he aspires to and the more realistic result in everyday life. This is, again, reminiscent of Chaplin's Tramp who (as we have seen) regularly employs imitation with comedic and/or disastrous effect. And seeing as *Casablanca* is famous for being such a dramatic film, this deflatory end to Bukowski's poem is all the more amusing and unexpected. Bukowski continues in his reverence for Bogart:

he looked like he
knew everything.

throughout all my relationships I've tried
to be like that.

I mean, aren't we all influenced by
somebody?¹⁶¹

The fact that Bukowski asks us "aren't we all influenced by somebody?" is absolutely key. Like with Chaplin earlier, Bukowski is explicitly citing Humphrey Bogart as an influence. There can be no doubt that Bukowski's fascination with the rugged, short-spoken, nonchalant anti-hero is influenced by what he saw in the cinema. Accordingly, Fernanda Pavano observes that in the novel *Post Office*, especially, Bukowski often:

[...] portrays himself as a Humphrey Bogart type of character: "I slapped her [...] I slapped her again [...] I grabbed that blue dress by the neck and ripped one side of it down to her waist." Or "I swung and he walked right into it. I got him in the mouth. His whole mouth was broken teeth and blood. Hector dropped to his knees, crying, holding his mouth with both hands [...] Then as Hector was crying I walked up and booted him in the ass. He sprawled flat on the floor, still crying. I walked over, took a pull of beer." Or, as when he is talking to the mulatto who persecuted him and says, "It was Chambers looking at me [...] I walked over to a trashcan, and

¹⁶¹ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 144

still looking at him, I spit. Then I walked off. Chambers never bothered me again.”¹⁶²

Elsewhere Bukowski has qualified this further, admitting in an interview with Michael Andrews: “We have our heroes, you know – John Dillinger, Humphrey Bogart, even Clark Gable... Cagney, yeah.”¹⁶³ Often these actors were playing heroic rogues, outlaws and misfits, such that Bukowski felt an affinity with (or at least wanted to link himself with in the public’s consciousness). According to Sounes:

(Bukowski) [...] looked to outlaws like John Dillinger, Machine Gun Kelly and Pretty Boy Floyd as heroes, men who were not afraid to take what they wanted. He would always admire strong men, from writers like Hemingway to prize fighters, and champion jockeys.¹⁶⁴

Prize-fighters and jockeys often appear in Bukowski’s writing, as we shall see, with him regularly being drawn to the underdog, perhaps in part due to his own self-identification as one.

Marlon Brando

Beyond Bogart (who was perhaps technically of the generation preceding Bukowski’s), an actor of his own generation about whom Bukowski was consistently praiseworthy is Marlon Brando. Bukowski held Brando in high regard for both his acting skill and physical machismo, making clear his admiration in the following posthumously-published poem, *Brando* (2001) – a poem in which the word “Brando” is basically equated to sex:

talking about

Marlon Brando

¹⁶² Fernanda Pavano and Charles Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Laughing with the Gods*, Sun Dog Press, Northville, Michigan (2000), 126

¹⁶³ 1980 interview with Michael Andrews, as quoted by Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 149

¹⁶⁴ Sounes, *Charles Bukowski: Locked.*, 14-15

in bed
at ten thirty in the morning
I see bamboo stalks through the window
Bamboo outside the window to the north

me naked
her
in pink nightgown

the ceiling is white
the walls are white

it has stopped raining
the sun burns in from the east

we are talking about
 Marlon Brando
at ten thirty in the morning

and the entire world
holds still
 like an orange

like a huge orange

all holds still

me naked
her
in a pink nightgown

we speak of
 Brando

then we
forget him

and he
doesn't think of
us at
all.

we get up and
eat breakfast,
satisfied.¹⁶⁵

Two things are immediately clear: Firstly, the word “Brando” always arrives at the far right-hand end of the line, never on the left, thereby becoming an arresting feature whose generally consistent anaphoraic repetition creates a rhythm; secondly, this is an aubade – a poem written about two lovers who awaken together in the morning. What we can immediately infer, then, and which is made all the more clear by Bukowski’s repetition of “me naked / her / in a pink nightgown” (all three lines are precisely repeated near the end of the poem) is that sex has taken place. Although the actual crux of the post-coital discussion that Bukowski is having with his unnamed girlfriend regarding Brando is never properly revealed to us, we can infer that it is an elliptical reference to the fact that they’ve had sex. Furthermore, the placing of the word “Bamboo” at the start of the fifth line contrasts with the similar-looking “Brando” which, as we have seen, is always on the opposite end of the line, thus adding to the rhythm and turning the reading of the poem into a more physical act. This rhythmic repetition of Brando and the sudden insertion of Bamboo create a figurative visualisation of the sex act itself, added to again by the physical shape of the poem which appears as an undulating wave when seen on its side. Furthermore, the repetition of “holds still” / like an orange” / “like a huge orange” / “all holds still” seems, perhaps, to suggest the image of a hand holding a testicle. And, although Bukowski always presents himself as super-heterosexual, it is interesting that here he can only express his

¹⁶⁵ Bukowski, *The Nigh Torn Mad.*, 80-81

having had sex with a woman by employing an invocation to Brando, a male actor well-known for bi-sexual proclivities.

Indeed, certain tenets of Queer Theory might go as far as to suggest that in this potentially homoerotic scene, Bukowski actually *needs* to think about Brando in order to have straight sex, and that the role of the woman here is to bring Bukowski closer to Brando. The importance of Brando in mid-twentieth century cinema should not be underestimated, and it should be understood that the position he fills is different to that of Bogart. Brando is rugged and macho, yes, but much more sexualised. His (and Bukowski's) context is, again, key. Films such as *The Wild One*, *On The Waterfront*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, all made Brando a sex object in ways that Bogart had never achieved, maybe partly due to Brando's much younger age and more beautiful, youthful looks. Juan A. Suarez refers to "Brando, who embodied the ethos of youth rebellion",¹⁶⁶ and suggests that:

[...] such films as *The Wild One* [...] both glamorized and popularized oppositional youth style and, at the same time, cautioned audiences against it by emphasizing its destructive underside. Hence, while popular films ended up symbolically "punishing" youth subcultural forms, they also attributed to them a sense of autonomy, risk, and excitement.¹⁶⁷

This is exactly the kind of subject matter with which Bukowski is obsessed. Suarez notes a later film whose references to Brando in particular bring about a certain homoerotic effect: "The insertion of images from *The Wild One*, for example, highlights the underlying homoeroticism of the almost all-male outlaw group in Laslo Benedek's film and Marlon Brando's pin-up appeal."¹⁶⁸ In this respect, perhaps Bukowski's insertion of Brando into this poem is similar to the insertion of Brando's image in the films of the 1960s American avant-garde. Let us remember that *The Wild One* in particular is a film in which a large group of men reject "straight" society. Suarez also observes: "Hence, cultist re-elaborations of [...] Marlon Brando by underground

¹⁶⁶ Juan A. Suarez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis (1996), discussion of the film *Scorpio Rising* directed by Kenneth Anger (1964), 162-3

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 155

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 173

filmmakers are distinctly camp in so far as they focus on the theatricality, artifice, and role-playing attendant on some gender representations in Hollywood films.”¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, the metric rhythm of the word Brando is that of a trochee, with emphasis placed on the first syllable of “Brand-” whilst ending in the lighter syllable of “o”, which, interestingly, is traditionally thought of as a feminine ending. The double trochee of Marlon Brando creates a pleasant falling rhythm which again adds to the sexual rhythm of the poem, although most of the invocations throughout are simply to the surname Brando alone. Thus, we can see the use of Brando for what it is. After all, Bukowski could have used Bogart’s name, but we can see that it would not have conjured up the same feelings brought about by the reader’s shared knowledge of film history – plus it is also a harsher sounding spondee rather than trochee. Bukowski’s placing of the final Brando of the poem, the lone word on its line, far indented to the right so that it immediately sticks out, creating a visual and physical climax, is like an eventual ejaculation, spurted out at the end, left out on its own on the page. After all this, Bukowski ends the poem feeling “satisfied”.

Bukowski mentions Brando in several other poems, such as *the greatest actor of our day* (1999),¹⁷⁰ and in a letter to publisher John Martin in regard to the adaptation to film of some of Bukowski’s short stories: “And we can’t get Marlon Brando to act in them.”¹⁷¹ Brando was also, by the time of this poem, famous for acting in the iconic films *The Godfather* (1972) and *Superman: The Movie* (1978) – and nothing is more macho than playing both the title role of *The Godfather* and Superman’s father. Aubrey Malone has also made the connection between Bukowski and Brando, writing of Bukowski’s disaffiliated posture in youth: “He was like the Marlon Brando character in *The Wild One* who, after being asked ‘What are you rebelling against?’ replied, ‘Whaddya got?’”¹⁷² Thus Brando had become the symbol of both macho masculinity and creative rebelliousness that Bukowski aspired to.

Boxing

Further evidence of Bukowski’s love of all things ‘macho’, as influenced by

¹⁶⁹ Suarez, *Bike Boys*, 132-3

¹⁷⁰ Bukowski, *The Last Night of the Earth Poems*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1999), 34

¹⁷¹ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to John Martin (November 18, 1989), 128

¹⁷² Malone, *The Hunchback.*, 14

cinema, is his interest in boxing. In the following poem, *The Loser*, we see Bukowski employing a generalised cinematic trope to create a mood and to help him explain how he defines his role as a poet:

and then some toad stood there, smoking a cigar:
“Kid you're no fighter,” he told me,
and I got up and knocked him over a chair;
it was like a scene in a movie, and
he stayed there on his big rump and said
over and over: “Jesus, Jesus, whatsamatta wit
you?” and I got up and dressed,
the tape still on my hands, and when I got home
I tore the tape off my hands and
wrote my first poem,
and I've been fighting
ever since.¹⁷³

Here Bukowski uses the rhetoric of cinema to frame an event in a poem; a poem which is actually about poetry. Words like “cigar”, “Kid”, “fighter”, “knocked”, “tore” and “fighting” all help to create an urgency of tone, combined with the short phrasing and fast pacing of the narrative, thereby creating a ‘punchy’ scene. Bukowski again rejects lyric form for narrative, imitating the narrative structure he sees in cinema. Bukowski’s comment, “it was like a scene in a movie”, is one of many such explicit references to cinema throughout his work, prompting the reader to recall similar scenes in films, thereby evoking the appropriate mood and feeling. Remember, Bukowski is writing this with the hindsight of an entire history of boxing films, a genre in itself, in which an underdog is repressed, only to come back fighting. Obvious examples that Bukowski and many of his readers might have seen, range from *On The Waterfront* (1954) (which of course starred Brando as the boxer who “could’ve been a contender”), to films like *Rocky* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980), to name a few (even Chaplin’s Tramp enjoyed famous boxing scenes in his 1915 film *The Champion* and later in *City Lights*). By pointing us away from the genre ‘poem’ to the genre ‘movie’, Bukowski is

¹⁷³ Bukowski, *The Roominghouse Madrigals: Early Selected Poems 1956-1966*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1988), 43

giving the reader a new way to think about poetry. Bukowski cannot bear to write lyric poetry, or even discuss poetry in a formal way; he can only discuss poetry via the analogy of a boxing film, with himself cast as the boxer/poet – a boxer who wrote his “first poem” and has been “fighting ever since”. Thus Bukowski has equated being a poet to being a boxer. He also tinkers with the physical appearance of the poem in that as it progresses the lines generally grow shorter until we are hit with the shortest line at the very end – thus the poem takes the shape of a punch.

The fact that Bukowski is using the analogy of a boxer to describe himself is of course unsurprising by now as it is totally consistent with the macho image he invariably projects, and is also reminiscent of (and supported by) a scene from Taylor Hackford’s film documentary *Bukowski* (1973) (which we shall examine more fully in Chapter 4) in which Bukowski explains on an aeroplane flight en route to a poetry reading: “I’ll be all right... I wish I were more nervous. You read better when you’re a little nervous you know. Really it’s like, you know, before a fight or something. You’re nervous.” This notion of a poetry reading being like “a fight” is key to Bukowski, reiterating his focus on the masculine. Thus Bukowski has found a way to show his literary side but still remain macho, by framing the entire subject matter within a male-dominated sport. This, in turn, is reminiscent of the poems in which he can only discuss romantic love as framed by a backdrop of war movies. Bukowski absolutely refuses to discuss literary form or tradition without making it macho. The fact is, literature – or poetry in particular – complicates maschismo, and is the reason that Bukowski must therefore channel his interest in male identity all the more fiercely: be that boxing, Brando, Bogart, or simply the legend of his hardcore drinking and womanising. Hemingway, long before Bukowski, had made a name for himself as a keen sportsman: he shot big game on safari and loved bullfights, and, crucially, also became involved with filmmaking. Bukowski would later emulate this model, and often makes the connection between literature, cinema and sport. As Pivano notes, “Bukowski, like Hemingway before him, eventually gathered the esteem of film stars, the company of the rich and famous.”¹⁷⁴ Schiller further suggests: “Just as the Bullfights were for Hemingway “a drawing board of everything”, the place “where everything attached to everything”, so too for Bukowski is the racetrack a microcosm of the world he inhabits,

¹⁷⁴ Pivano/Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Laughing.*, 219

the American social construct he exists within”.¹⁷⁵ Thus we come to the track.

The Racetrack

Bukowski spent much of his spare time gambling on horses, and much of his writing is set at the racetrack. Smith tells us: “The racetrack is the movie set within Bukowski’s work, the melodrama where one can see the masses having their dreams shattered, successful punters picked up by hookers and murdered.”¹⁷⁶ Bukowski himself often conflates the two subjects of cinema and the track, such as in the following passage from his novel *Hollywood*:

I walked into the clubhouse, found a table and worked at my figures. I always did that first, then paid a buck to go over to the Cary Grant Pavilion. There weren’t many people there and you could think better. About Cary Grant, they have a huge photo of him hanging in the pavilion. He’s got on old-fashioned glasses and that smile. Cool. But what a horseplayer he was. He was a two dollar bettor. And when he lost he would run toward the track screaming, waving his arms and yelling, “YOU CAN’T DO THIS TO ME!” If you’re only going to bet two dollars you might as well stay home and take your money and move it from one pocket to the other.¹⁷⁷

Thus Bukowski has pinpointed what is his main complaint about Hollywood: the problem presented by the relationship between inauthenticity and authenticity. i.e. He (and the general public) enjoy cinema and are fond of film stars – to the point that a pavilion at the track has been named after one – but when Bukowski is presented with the reality of said film star, he is often disappointed and even surprised at this disappointment. Surely, however, it should not come as a surprise that someone who you are fond of precisely because they are good at imitating others, might reveal themselves not to be the thing they’ve been imitating all along? Indeed, even ‘Cary Grant’ was merely a stage name – the actor’s real name being the far less mellifluous

¹⁷⁵ Schiller, *Bukowski Unleashed!* ed. by Rikki Hollywood, 38

¹⁷⁶ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 171

¹⁷⁷ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1989), 177

Archibald Leach. Furthermore, later in his career, rumour abounded that Grant might secretly be gay, although he publicly denied it and was in fact married five times. Still, is Bukowski making a (potentially homophobic) distinction here between the camp inauthenticity of actors vs. the rugged authenticity of himself? Possibly. Could it simply be that Bukowski himself is homophobic or is it more likely that just his literary persona is? It could well be argued that cinema itself is homophobic if actors (potentially) have to hide their true sexualities in order to remain more bankable at the box office. Furthermore, that Bukowski constantly reminds us that he is the voice of authenticity in an environment of the inauthentic reveals a recurring ambivalence and hypocrisy on his own part as he has always been so inspired by the inauthentic. Smith suggests an important link between Bukowski's early love of film and his later love of the track:

The movies and the track offer not just romance and escapism but, for Bukowski, lessons in and material for his writing. And together, they frame the whole much-vexed question of his perceived 'sexism', which is more culturally mediated, ambiguous and complex than it appears to be.¹⁷⁸

That Smith places the word 'sexism' in inverted commas hints that perhaps Bukowski's supposed sexism is more performative than genuine. Indeed, maybe this sexism is an affectation picked up at the racetrack or cinema as both are inherently sexist places to begin with. In the cinema, men earn more than women and also have longer careers. At the track women barely register. So, if cinema and the track are already so sexist, can we really believe that it is Bukowski who is the instigator? Perhaps he is merely reflecting the society that he sees in order to create a debate within the reader's mind about that very society.

Highlighting the link between cinema and the racetrack creates potentially yet another new bridge via which Bukowski can meet his readers in the forum of shared experience. Furthermore, the worlds of the cinema and the track had already often converged: perhaps the most famous example in Bukowski's time was the movie *National Velvet* (1944), starring a young Elizabeth Taylor – an actress whose films

¹⁷⁸ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 149

Bukowski had definitely watched; he specifically mentions her several times throughout his work, and even wrote a eulogy about her entitled *Cleopatra now* (which we shall analyse in Chapter 3). Also, before Bukowski, the flamboyant Eadweard Muybridge had famously visited Stanford's Palo Alto racetrack many times to photograph horses running, as early as 1881. Charlotte Higgins points out:

Eadweard Muybridge's studies of speeding horses and wrestling men are well known, as is the fact that his photographs were the first to prove that when a horse gallops, there is a stage in its gait when all four legs lift off the ground. [...] At Stanford's Palo Alto racetrack he developed a technique for photographing horses in motion: he would set up 24 cameras and use a clockwork mechanism to synchronise them, drawing on the technology used to create the telegraph.¹⁷⁹

This breaking down of the moving image into twenty-four separate still images is particularly interesting because this was shortly before the official advent of cinema. When cinema did finally arrive it was soon extrapolated that twenty-four frames per second was the minimum number of images required to create an unstilted feeling of continuous, flowing movement. Bukowski himself visited the Palo Alto track and was probably aware of Muybridge's famous images. Indeed, Muybridge's interest in horses and wrestling is similar to Bukowski's interest in horses and boxing. We know from a myriad of Bukowski's stories and poems that he also sat at the track, observing the horses running whilst making his own mental "motion studies". In the poem entitled *horses don't bet on people and neither do I ...*, in which Bukowski changes seat because of a man who talks too much (a common complaint of Bukowski's at the track), we see the poet combine the world of horses, women and cinema to amusing effect:

I get up and move, I find a new seat,
the closest person to me is three seats away
and she doesn't even have a *Racing Form*, she's
working a crossword puzzle.
she looks up at me: "hey, what's a four-letter

¹⁷⁹ Charlotte Higgins, *Motion, mountains, murder: dramatic life of pioneer who captured movement*, *The Guardian* (Wednesday, 28 April, 2010), 9

word for ‘departed’?”
“dead?”
“no, that don’t fit ...”
“gone?”
“ah ... yeah, that’s it. say, didn’t I see you
in some movie? aren’t you a movie star?”
“no.”
“yes, it was a horror movie, you played a man
who fell out of a bell tower!”¹⁸⁰

That “she doesn’t even have a *Racing Form*” is Bukowski’s first reason for annoyance, but the fact that she is instead “working a crossword” whilst at the track is pure sacrilege. Bukowski immediately fires off words like “departed”, “dead”, “gone” and “horror” to signal his contempt for her. She, however, foils his aggression by suggesting he has a face that reminds her of a film character who died in a gory way. Maybe she had watched one too many Hitchcock films (n.b. *Vertigo* (1958) in regard to the bell tower) but chances are, especially if she lived in Los Angeles, that she had seen Taylor Hackford’s *Bukowski* documentary (which we will examine in Chapter 4) as it had been screened on a local television channel long before the writing of this poem. Thus cinema may have been intruding on Bukowski’s world of the track in more ways than one.

Masculinity is a key element in Bukowski’s love of the track. He never wants to see a woman there unless she is pretty and fulfilling her appointed role. For him, it’s a macho event. Bukowski explains: “I guess I go to the track because it’s like getting in the ring and slugging it out with some son of a bitch. Something is learned but I’m not exactly sure what it is. I guess it beats growing a patch of gladiolus”.¹⁸¹ Indeed, in the poem *Horse and fist*, he goes further: “The boxing matches and the racetracks are / temples of learning”.¹⁸² Indeed, with the word “temple” here, Bukowski has signalled that going to the track has now become a religious experience for him. It is a sacred place. Or, as Smith calls it, Bukowski’s “own world-in-itself, the racetrack. It remained

¹⁸⁰ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 236 (Bukowski states the event related in this poem occurred in 1980)

¹⁸¹ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Al Fogel (April 22, 1981), 28

¹⁸² Bukowski, *Play the Piano Drunk like a Percussion Instrument until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1998), 108-109

the richest single subject for his life and writing, and within which he felt quite at home.”¹⁸³ Bukowski wrote many poems set at the track. Smith suggests *the condition book* as a good example of one, a poem which appeared in *Wormwood Review* in the year that Bukowski died. Smith describes the poem as a “moving and accepting work, it reads in its entirety as a Whitmanesque farewell”¹⁸⁴ and quotes the following section:

the long days at the track have indented themselves into me:

I am the horses, the jocks, I am six furlongs, seven
furlongs, I am a mile and one sixteenth, I am a
handicap, I am all the colours of all the silks, I am all
the photo finishes, the accidents, the deaths, the
last place finishes, the breakdowns, the failure of
the toteboard, the dropped whip and the numb pain
of the dream not come true in thousands and thousands
and thousands of faces. [...]

I am the racetrack, my ribs are the wooden rails, my
eyes are the flashes of the toteboard, my feet are
hooves and there is something riding on my back. I am
the last curve, I am the home stretch, I am the longshot
and the favorite I am the exacta, the daily double and
the pick 6.

I am humanely destroyed, I am the horseplayer who
became the
racetrack.¹⁸⁵

Here Bukowski shares with us his expert knowledge of the track. The sporting terminology of “six furlongs, seven furlongs,” “one sixteenth,” “a handicap,” and “the silks” belies his almost professional gambler identity and the repetition of “I am” before each one of them suggests that Bukowski genuinely sees these things as part of his identity now. The racetrack has become more than a home a way from home, and he even thinks of himself as a racehorse in a certain respect. When Bukowski describes

¹⁸³ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 222

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 222-223

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 223

“the photo finishes, the accidents, the deaths, the / last place finishes, the breakdowns” and tells us that “I am the racetrack, my ribs are the wooden rails, my eyes are the flashes of the toteboard, my feet are the hooves” we are immediately reminded of a film of a horse running; a set of separate but related shots or sequences; a montage; a twenty-four frame motion study by Muybridge perhaps; this even seems like X-ray photographs as we see into Bukowski’s body and see his ribs are actually the wooden rails. When Bukowski tells us “I am the horseplayer who became the racetrack” he is potentially suggesting that his life itself has been a gamble on which others have bet. This is similar to certain literature published about him, too; e.g. the *Time Out* article which describes “publisher John Martin, who put his money on a horse called Risk when he funded Bukowski to write full-time”¹⁸⁶. (And won.) Still, phrases like “the photo finishes” and “the flashes of the toteboard”, “my feet are hooves”, “the home stretch”, and “the longshot” all leave us with the sense of a recognizable cinematic trope of a dramatic horserace, an underdog horse (Bukowski) suddenly coming up to first place and sprinting across the finish line.

Thus we have seen that Bukowski’s world is not the real world, despite his reputation for ‘realism’. Instead, it is a world of movie gangsters, boxers, war heroes, boozehounds, gamblers and villains, all inspired by cinema. We see Bogart squinting, Brando slouching and Bukowski posing. Despite the affectation, however, nothing is detracted. In fact, by employing such film-inspired stereotypes in the way that he does, Bukowski enriches his world to dynamic effect, helping us to access it via a seemingly familiar doorway.

¹⁸⁶ *Time Out Film Guide*: http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/68585/bukowski_born_into_this.html

3

Bukowski's Women

Bukowski often landed himself in trouble for making negative generalising statements about women: "Politics are just like women: get into them seriously and you're going to come out looking like an earthworm stepped on by a longshoreman's boot."¹⁸⁷ Jules Smith observes: "Indeed, probably the most commonly-expressed negative reaction to Bukowski's work concerns its apparently bull-headed sexism".¹⁸⁸ An entire thesis could be written on the ubiquitous use of the word "whore" in Bukowski's early work. Smith reminds us, however, that context is key: "Bukowski's literary and sexual ethos was formed during the Depression and the War years; his attitudes appeared increasingly old-fashioned, patriarchal, and, yes, sexist, as times changed."¹⁸⁹ Bukowski maintained that his use of the word was not always aggressive: "I also use 'whore' to mean 'death' which is also, in a sense, 'love' to me".¹⁹⁰ Biographer Malone attempts a psychoanalytical explanation for Bukowski's sexism relating to the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father: "His mother's silent complicity was almost as culpable as his father's cruelty. [...] Hank never forgave her. From now until the day she died she was a nothing to him. In a sense, she was the source from which all his misogyny sprang."¹⁹¹ Of course, the more sensational poems with the more offensive language are the ones more likely to create controversy; whereas the huge amount of Bukowski's writing which is more deprecating about himself (and other men) than women is often (maybe rightly) ignored. Bukowski put it succinctly: "My attitude toward women is the same as my attitude toward men: it comes down to the individual involved."¹⁹²

Indeed, in contrast to his more controversial content, there is much evidence of thoughtful and compassionate writing, especially in those areas influenced by cinema. Smith observes: "His poetry is full of admiring lines about women; and sensitive, not to

¹⁸⁷ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Gerald Locklin (August 2nd, 1981), 30

¹⁸⁸ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 150

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Bukowski as quoted by Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 153

¹⁹¹ Malone, *The Hunchback.*, 16

¹⁹² Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Luciana Capretti (February 6, 1990), 136

say sentimental, tributes to movie actresses such as Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and Brigitte Bardot.”¹⁹³ Indeed, as Bukowski matured, his personal relationships with women improved and the tone of his writing about them duly developed. After becoming a father, the topic of his daughter was always a happy one: “she is a sweet box of candy. she is joy. I look at her and light goes all through me. I am soft, man, soft, and I don’t mind a bit. to feel some kind of love after the jars and holes they’ve had me in, it’s the neatest of miracles.”¹⁹⁴ Smith points out that “Bukowski’s work evolved; his later collections move away from the hardened denizens of roominghouses and bars towards portraying a combative but essentially contented domestic life with wife and cats.”¹⁹⁵ With this in mind, then, we shall now examine how cinema influenced Bukowski’s portrayal of women.

Women – the novel

It is fair to say that Bukowski’s depiction of female identity has a wide range, from one extreme to the other, admittedly. His youthful admiration of various screen sirens certainly had an effect on how he pictured women as an adult. Smith notes: “More aspects of Bukowski’s treatment of women emerge as we go to the movies, which permeated his artistic mould to a much greater extent than he ever admitted [...]”¹⁹⁶ If Bukowski’s writing is often graphic, sexual and violent, can we really be surprised when cinema is, too? As we discussed in the previous chapter, cinema itself is sexist. Men are paid more and enjoy longer careers. Regarding film noir in particular, a favourite of Bukowski, Bruce Crowther reports:

The literary origins, the tough-guy writers and their hard-boiled heroes excluded women from principal roles. The dominance of men on the production side of the motion-picture industry – studio bosses, producers,

¹⁹³ Smith, *Art, Survival*, 152

¹⁹⁴ Bukowski, *Living on Luck*, to William Wantling (February, 1967), 74

¹⁹⁵ Smith, *Art, Survival*, 150

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 153

directors, cinematographers, art directors, editors, screenwriters – militated against women.¹⁹⁷

Thus in Bukowski's early period we repeatedly meet what Smith refers to as "the racetrack whores, brassy barstool hustlers, unfaithful lovers, rapacious landladies and the like".¹⁹⁸ In such an underworld crime and sex are often conflated, especially for Bukowski who grew up watching war films, gangster movies and film noir. In Bukowski's 1978 novel aptly entitled *Women*, we see more evidence of this influence:

In the morning Dee Dee drove me to the Sunset Strip for breakfast. The Mercedes was black and shone in the sun. We drove past the billboards and the nightclubs and the fancy restaurants. I slouched low in my seat, coughing over my cigarette. I thought, well, things have been worse. A scene or two flashed through my mind.¹⁹⁹

Here Bukowski sprinkles in just the right words – almost like ingredients – to create the perfect noir flavour: "Sunset Strip", "Mercedes", "black", "billboards", "nightclubs" and "restaurants" all help to set the scene; whilst our hero Chinaski is "slouched low", "coughing" over a "cigarette". This is all noir territory. Bukowski explicitly reveals the influence of cinema by using the phrase a "scene or two flashed through my mind". This is similar to many moments throughout *Women*, often involving cars with Chinaski as passenger whilst a beautiful woman drives. Later in the novel, Bukowski writes:

We left together in her M.G. It was like a movie. At any moment I expected her to drop me off at the next corner. She was in her mid-twenties. She talked as we drove. She worked for a music company, loved it, didn't have to be at work until 10:30AM and she left at 3PM.²⁰⁰

Note the phrase, "It was like a movie"; Bukowski identifies moments of

¹⁹⁷ Crowther, *Film Noir: Reflections.*, 115

¹⁹⁸ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 150

¹⁹⁹ Bukowski, *Women*, 51

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 202

excitement with women in cars with what he saw his heroes like Bogart and Brando doing with women in similar situations in films. The seemingly impossible glamour of being on a journey with a beautiful woman is so far removed from Bukowski's early youth that as an adult the best way he can describe the elation is by comparing it to a movie; i.e. fiction. Incidentally, the novel begins with the Chinaski quotation: "Many a good man has been put under the bridge by a woman", which immediately sets a noir tone by projecting the spectre of the femme fatale. When telling a friend about the novel in a letter, Bukowski continued in this vein: "Finished a novel, *Women*, I guess I told you [...] when *Women* comes out I might get shot like Larry Flynt (of *Hustler*)."²⁰¹

This is not to say that *Women* is a cinematic thriller in any sense. It is not. In fact, it is mainly a romantic comedy, if anything – or the closest Bukowski can allow himself to come to writing one. There are many film-like moments, but generally the novel is a comedy of errors as Chinaski frankly admits his many failings with women. Bukowski's honesty in *Women* is actually beyond self-deprecating: on at least five occasions Chinaski either can't get an erection or can't stay erect long enough to ejaculate, all of which he freely admits. These scenes usually end with: "I couldn't bear it. I rolled off with a gasp."²⁰² Or: "I pumped and I humped. Finally I rolled off. "Sorry, baby, too much drink." [...]"²⁰³ Or: "I was hard but I couldn't come. Finally I rolled off and went to sleep."²⁰⁴ And: "I lay dying, my cock limp."²⁰⁵ As Bukowski put it in a letter: "Lots of women claimed to have fucked me. Well, lots of them have. But those who have don't talk about it much. I'm just not that good."²⁰⁶ Lydia (based on pro-feminist sculptress Linda King) even directly says in the novel, "I can tell by reading your poems and stories that you just don't know anything about women", to which Chinaski's eventual (and honest) reply is, "I've always been a slow starter."²⁰⁷

The scene in *Women* that I believe shows the most remarkable evidence of cinema's influence, however, occurs in Chapter 18 in which Dee Dee drives Chinaski to the Hollywood Cemetery where the two lovers go for a stroll:

²⁰¹ Bukowski, *Living on Luck.*, to Hank Malone (March 13, 1978), 243

²⁰² Bukowski, *Women*, 78

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 192

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 31

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 157

²⁰⁶ Charles Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to David Reeve (May 3, 1991), 175

²⁰⁷ Bukowski, *Women*, 21

Dee Dee took my hand and led me around the corner. There he was, down near the bottom, Rudolph Valentino. Dead 1926. Didn't live long. I decided to live to be 80. Think of being 80 and fucking an 18 year old girl. If there was any way to cheat the game of death, that was it. [...] Dee Dee said, "I want to sit on Tyrone Power's bench. He was my favorite. I loved him!"

We went and sat on Tyrone's bench next to his grave. Then we got up and walked over to Douglas Fairbank Sr.'s tomb. He had a good one. His own private reflector pool in front of the tomb. [...] We walked up some stairs and there at the back of the tomb was a place to sit. Dee Dee and I sat. [...] then put my arms around Dee Dee and kissed her, a good long kiss.²⁰⁸

What Bukowski does here, whether consciously or not, is highly revealing. Chinaski and his date visit three graves in total. The first is Rudolph Valentino's where Chinaski admits that he already has sex on his mind, imagining, "Think of being 80 and fucking an 18 year old girl." Next they visit Tyrone Power's bench as Dee Dee claims "He was my favorite. I loved him!" Thus, now, both sex *and* love have been mentioned, both of which have been inspired by the spectres of dead Hollywood actors. Thirdly, and finally, they move on to Douglas Fairbank's tomb and here, suddenly, Bukowski's language changes. Fairbanks has a "tomb" rather than a grave. "He had a good one. His own private reflector pool" too. This is therefore the most impressive resting place of the three they have visited. It is only now, in the environment of Fairbank's tomb, that Bukowski feels comfortable enough to put his "arms around Dee Dee" and give her "a good long kiss." What is most significant about this, however, is the order of the names of the three dead actors: Valentino is first, who was rumoured to be gay and accused of two lavender marriages; Tyrone Powers is second, who only came to fame in 1940 in the re-make of *The Mask of Zorro*; and Fairbanks is third and final, an actor known as a dashing ladies' man who married the most popular and glamorous actress of his time (Mary Pickford), and, crucially here, who starred in the *original* 1920 *The Mask of Zorro*. Thus Chinaski has chosen the most authentic and macho of the three graves in order for him to be able to feel comfortable enough to engage romantically with his

²⁰⁸ Bukowski, *Women*, 55

date. Cinema has therefore both influenced Bukowski's writing and improved Chinaski's love life. Furthermore, Fairbanks and Pickford had famously partnered with Charlie Chaplin and D.W. Griffith to create United Artists, the first independent film distribution company, thereby signalling, again, the wider cultural milieu of cinema's influence that Bukowski was placed in.

Similarly, in the following poem, *close encounters of another kind* (1979), written a year after *Women* was published, Bukowski gives us a humorous episode in which he combines women, sex, cinema and poetry:

are we going to the movies or not?
she asked him.

all right, he said, let's go.²⁰⁹

It should be clear from the poem's title, *close encounters of another kind*, that Bukowski and his date are most likely going to watch Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), starring Richard Dreyfuss. It might also suggest that Bukowski is equating women with aliens. Could the unnamed female character here be Bukowski's second wife, Linda? Smith reports: "While he insisted that "the old movies were best", his second wife Linda Lee Beighle, an enthusiastic film-goer, would have kept him in touch with current movies. She herself apparently performed a minor role in *Death Wish III*."²¹⁰ Bukowski's response to his unnamed date, "all right [...] let's go", suggests a conceding on his part, as if to imply he feels he has been nagged enough and will take her even though he doesn't really want to go. She tries to encourage him:

I'm not going to put any panties on
so you can finger-fuck me in the
dark, she said.

should we get buttered popcorn?

²⁰⁹ Bukowski, *Play the Piano Drunk.*, 110

²¹⁰ Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 154-155

he asked.²¹¹

The phrase “you can finger-fuck me in the / dark” (of the cinema) is key as Bukowski’s date is already permitting him to engage sexually with her, *before* they have even left. This, of course, backfires as Bukowski now feels emasculated before the event; it is *his* job to be the sexual aggressor – a concept he makes clear in much of his correspondence, a good example of which is when he refused to take part in Madonna’s *Sex* project: “On the matter of being photographed and appearing in the Madonna book of “erotica”, I phoned her agent and told her, “no.” Madonna acts like she just discovered sex and she keeps hitting you over the head with it. Not for me.”²¹² Bukowski’s question about whether the popcorn should be buttered straight after his date’s “finger-fuck” invitation might be his attempt at humour in regard to having buttered fingers, but, even so, he still isn’t keen.

leave your panties on,

he said.

what is it? she asked.

I just want to watch the movie,

he answered.

look, she said, I could go out on
the street, there are a hundred men
out there who’d be delighted to have
me.

all right, he said, go ahead out there.

I’ll stay home and read the *National
Enquirer*.

²¹¹ Bukowski, *Play the Piano Drunk.*, 110

²¹² Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun*, to John Martin (January 24, 1992), 218

You son of a bitch, she said, I am
trying to build a meaningful
relationship.

you can't build it with a hammer,
he said.²¹³

His response, "I just want to watch the movie" suggests that, firstly, he doesn't really want to go, but secondly, if he does have to go, he'd rather simply watch the film than have to engage sexually with his date who has already brought him to indifference. When she reminds him how easy it would be for her to go out and be unfaithful, instead of apologising he dismisses her further with "all right" [...] "I'll stay home and read the *National Enquirer*", thereby implying that all she does when he's out is stay inside reading trash. His "hammer" remark further suggests that she shouldn't have emasculated him by usurping the role of aggressor. We are then presented with an almost exact repetition of the opening dialogue of the poem, again implying that this is a circular conversation that has been going on for some time:

are we going to the movies or not?
she asked.

all right, he said, let's
go . . .

at the corner of Western and
Franklin he put on his blinker
to make his left turn
and a man in the on-coming lane
speeded-up
as if to cut him off.

brakes grabbed. there wasn't a

²¹³ Bukowski, *Play the Piano Drunk.*, 110

crash but there almost was one.

he cursed at the man in the other
car. the man cursed back. the
man had another person in the car with
him. it was *his* wife.

they were going to the movies
too.²¹⁴

This a humorous ending with Bukowski clearly making a mischievous comment about domesticity – his and others’. What makes it all-the-more entertaining is that the reader has likely also been on similar dates to the movies and Bukowski has effectively met us in the shared forum of experience once again, successfully combining women, cinema, sex and poetry all in one place.

Brigitte Bardot

One of the most glamorous actresses of Bukowski’s generation was Brigitte Bardot. On walking through a supermarket, passing a newspaper stand and learning that she had recently attempted to commit suicide, Bukowski wrote *poem for Brigitte Bardot* (published posthumously in 2001) in which he observed the following:

and I see where Brigitte Bardot
cut her wrist and took some pills,
but like the rest of us she will manage to continue
in spite of everything²¹⁵

Bukowski is not acting callous, for once. He is aware that despite the differences in life style between a famous actress and a more normal citizen, she too will “continue” “like the rest of us”. The enjambement between “continue” which is the final word of its

²¹⁴ Bukowski, *Play the Piano Drunk.*, 111

²¹⁵ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 277

line, yet literally *continues* onto the next “in spite of everything”, gives us a visualisation of her struggle. Thinking of Bardot in this nostalgic way casts Bukowski into a reverie of another woman he once loved:

and then for no reason at all I remember
another young woman
looking down from the window
in her dirty underwear
many years ago
screaming my hangover name on a
Philadelphia Sunday morning,
and I remember
the way we decorated the trees in the snow
outside the bar there
on the sidewalk
that Christmas Day
falling down like drunken bears
laughing and tramping over tinsel.
yes, I am sorry, Brigitte, if it is not going well
for you, but it's bad all around;²¹⁶

I believe the “young woman” that Bukowski is referring to is Jane Baker, a woman ten years his senior with whom he entered into a relationship and cohabited during the Philadelphia period of his odd-jobbing across America. She sadly died a premature death brought about by severe alcoholism. Words like “dirty”, “screaming” and “hangover” set the typical Bukowskian scene, but then we are struck by a subtle change of language brought on after the key phrase “and I remember”: suddenly Bukowski is reminiscing about “the way we decorated the trees in the snow / outside the bar” on “that Christmas Day / falling down like drunken bears / laughing and tramping over tinsel.” The change to sentimental language is important here, as it has been brought about by his thinking about a movie actress. i.e. through cinema Bukowski can finally gain catharsis in regard to the death of an old girlfriend. He also chooses to use “tramping” instead of the more correct

²¹⁶ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 277

“trampling” which could be argued is a Chaplinesque nod in regard to his behaviour “on the sidewalk” here – i.e. tramping about on the sidewalk. Bukowski snaps out of his reverie for a moment to re-address Bardot with “yes, I am sorry, Brigitte” [...] “but it’s bad all around”, thus equating the plight of his ex-girlfriend with that of Bardot. He goes on to equate the two further:

you see, I have figured out that seagulls
are mad angels
trying to tell us something,
and as they dip and screech before our eyes
the sea comes up for air and spirits them
away.²¹⁷

Is the seemingly less glamorous Jane Baker one of the “seagulls” here, and Bardot one of the “angels”? Ultimately the distinction is unimportant as Bukowski tells us he has realised they are both the same, both “trying to tell us something”, and that they both “screech before our eyes”, perhaps like the drama on the silver screen, before the “sea comes up and spirits them / away”. The word “spirits” is being used as a verb here, but in noun form is plural and suggests an understanding of the two dead/dying women. The placement of the final word of the sentence, “away”, on its own line, adds to the sense of isolation. A.D. Winans reports that Bukowski met Jane Baker “in a skid row bar that he hung out at”²¹⁸ (exactly how Chinaski meets Wilcox in the screenplay *Barfly*), and that despite the age gap they “remained together for several years in a love/hate relationship.”²¹⁹ Furthermore: “Hank drew strength from her, and he would draw upon the years he spent with Jane in later poems and short stories. There was evidence that it was Jane who introduced Hank to the race track, the subject of many Bukowski poems.”²²⁰ Winans describes how detrimental the relationship was for both Bukowski and Baker as the two simultaneously struggled with alcoholism and unemployment. Jane finally died prematurely of liver failure. Winans claims:

²¹⁷ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 277

²¹⁸ A.D. Winans, *The Charles Bukowski: Second Coming Years*, The Beat Scene Press, Warwickshire (1996), 30

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

Several scenes from the movie, *Barfly*, which Hank wrote, are definitely drawn from Hank's experiences with Jane. Just how important this woman was to him can be shown in a later poem, For Jane, one of several poems he wrote for her. It was after reading this poem that I realised that he was not the hard boiled person he pretended to be.²²¹

There is also newly published evidence that proves Jane Baker was in fact much more than a fleeting romance. In 1968 the FBI had begun their investigation of Bukowski after taking offence to some of the more incriminating material in his notorious weekly column *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, in John Bryan's Los Angeles underground tabloid *Open City*. It seems that the FBI uncovered a startling fact; Bukowski's first wife may have been 'Jane Cooney Baker'²²². If roominghouse receipts can be trusted – in which the couple were referred to as Mr and Mrs. Bukowski – then the couple were married in 1952, three years *before* what all of Bukowski's biographers have hitherto claimed was his first marriage to Barbara Frye. Of course, he may have simply pretended to be married to Jane in order to combat the potential prudishness of a landlady. Either way, Bukowski is accessing a wealth of personal history regarding the untimely death of a serious ex-girlfriend/wife via the symbol of the movie actress Bardot. Bukowski continues:

so I am truly sorry, Brigitte,
that you are not doing well but
I have just turned both my pockets out
and found just three pennies
on my dresser, undress,
shave and go to sleep
although there is something wrong
with my left arm, it's stiff as hell and hurts
(polio? bad blood or something?)²²³

Again we see a Chaplinesque influence with the phrase “turned both my pockets out” and “found just three pennies”, further adding to the impoverished misery of

²²¹ Winans, *The Charles Bukowski: Second Coming Years*, 30

²²² Bukowski FBI files: <http://bukowski.net/fbi/058.php> and <http://bukowski.net/fbi/058jane.php>

²²³ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 277—278

Bukowski's physical situation as well as mental state. He tells us that he undresses, shaves and tries to "go to sleep" followed immediately by the line: "although there is something wrong", which, of course, there is. He has grown depressed over his reverie of Jane via Bardot, but, being the poet of enjambement, Bukowski's next line completes the sentence with "with my left arm, it's stiff as hell and hurts / (polio or bad blood or something?)". So, yes, there is something wrong with Bardot, and of course there was something wrong with Jane, but there is also something wrong with Bukowski. After all, "it's bad all around". He continues:

and today as I walked through the supermarket
I looked at oranges and apples and cucumbers turning on their spits
like great men burning in their own fire,²²⁴

Bukowski cannot rid his mind of death. Even things as innocuous as fruit and vegetables in the supermarket become similar to men burning in hell now that he's in this mood.

and I stood and read the headline in the paper
and saw your picture
and I looked around
and on the tall building across the street
a man crouched
ready to leap, and a dog went by with a bone
in his mouth, something dead,²²⁵

Words like "headline", "paper", "your picture" help to conjure the physical image of Bardot and create a sense of drama, which is then exaggerated all the more by Bukowski's growing paranoia when he "looked around" and saw "a man crouched" atop "the tall building across the street", "ready to leap" as "a dog went by with a bone in his mouth, something dead". The idea of suicide is suggested, followed by the bone of something dead, again recalling the men being burned on rotating spits; and all this

²²⁴ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 278

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

apocalyptic imagery as he does something as mundane as stand in line at the supermarket!

and I am sorry for you, Brigitte, and I too have
love problems, but I still have my typewriter,
a radio, and all the water I can drink,
so I will have one for you, a tall
one, and I'll shake my arm, turn on the radio
and hope for Brahms or Beethoven,
and maybe in the morning the man will have
jumped, maybe I will have jumped,
and maybe through picture postcards and
coffins, through arcades of roses and screaming,
maybe through the towers and tables and Christmas trees
your lover will come and kiss you once again
under the cigarette and cucumber sun.²²⁶

Bukowski tells us that even without Bardot (i.e. without cinema) and even without Jane (i.e. without love) he can “still have my typewriter, a radio and all the water I can drink”; so he can still survive, although life will be miserable now with only sound (radio), no beautiful vision (cinema), and no alcohol (just water). This poem is reminiscent of Frank O’Hara’s *Poem* (sometimes referred to as *Lana Turner Has Collapsed*) written in 1962, which, although shorter, contains a similar invocation to an actress in need: “I was trotting along and suddenly / it started raining and snowing”; “and suddenly I see a headline / LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED! / there is no snow in Hollywood”; and “I have been to lots of parties”; “but I never actually collapsed / oh Lana Turner we love you get up”.²²⁷ Reading these two poems comparatively, then, the shared cultural context within which these two writers worked is clear. Although O’Hara also employs enjambement to keep the poem running (similarly to a film), his structure is more uniform than Bukowski’s in regard to line length, framing the poem neatly within the opening “Lana Turner has collapsed” and the closing “oh Lana Turner we love you get up”. O’Hara enters his reverie of running

²²⁶ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 278

²²⁷ Poem collected in: Frank O’Hara, *Lunch Poems*, City Lights, San Francisco (1964), 78

around town in the “traffic” whilst it’s “hailing” and “snowing” (similar to Bukowski’s mention of “snow” “on the sidewalk” “that Christmas Day”) and “lots of parties” presumably in “Hollywood” and “California” via the medium of cinema, and exits it via cinema. So in a sense, O’Hara looks up at the silver screen, sees Lana Turner and suddenly watches a film about his own life, in the same way that Bukowski did with Bardot. Furthermore, both poems engage with film culture as well as refer to newspapers spreading the news of film stars’ declining health, with both poets offering their sympathy via nostalgic reveries. Of course, O’Hara and Bukowski’s literary personae (as well as real life selves) were at polar opposites, sexually speaking: O’Hara was openly gay and Bukowski was almost belligerently straight, with O’Hara’s work having a fascination for women and Bukowski’s a fascination for men. A further link between the two poets’ choices of actresses is that Lana Turner was also famous off-screen for having been embroiled in a media controversy: on April 4th 1958, Turner’s fourteen-year-old daughter stabbed to death Turner’s violent ex-boyfriend, gangster Johnny Stompanato, with a kitchen knife in Turner’s Beverly Hills home. So both Turner and Bardot had a dramatic relationship with their audiences off-screen via newspapers. O’Hara, like Bukowski, was inextricably linked with the cinematic cultural milieu around him. Indeed, regarding O’Hara, Jim Elledge goes as far as to say:

No poetry has been more influenced by movies than Frank O’Hara’s. Many critics have noted that O’Hara employed cinematic technique throughout his work, pointing out, as Marjorie Perloff has, that his images “move, dissolve, cut into something else, fade in or out” as scenes in films do. Others, such as James Breslin, view O’Hara’s consciousness as “moving, taking in things [...] with the speed and precision of a movie camera.”²²⁸

So, when we read Bukowski’s *poem for Brigitte Bardot* in the context of O’Hara’s *Poem/Lana Turner Has Collapsed*, which Bukowski would undoubtedly have read, we see Bukowski again inserting himself within a developing tradition whereby

²²⁸ Jim Elledge, ‘Never Argue with the Movies’: *Love and the Cinema in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara*, collected in *Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor (1990), 350-57

one's own romantic relationship can be looked at like a film via one's relationship with cinema itself.

Elizabeth Taylor

By the time Bukowski came to write the poem *Cleopatra now* in later life (published posthumously in 2004), it is clear that he is still using cinema – and in this case, one of its most famous female stars – as a mirror in which to examine his own life as well as an opportunity to discuss the bigger picture of sexism within the film industry:

she was one of the most beautiful actresses
of our time
once married to a series of
rich and famous men
and now she is in traction, in hospital, a fractured
back, the painkillers at work.
she is now 60
and only a few years ago
her room would have been bursting with flowers
the phone ringing, many visitors on the waiting
list.²²⁹

As the poem is entitled *Cleopatra now* and the subject here is “one of the most beautiful actresses / of our time / once married to a series of / rich and famous men”, it can be surmised that Bukowski is referring to Elizabeth Taylor who starred in the 1963 film version of *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and co-starring Richard Burton as Mark Anthony. Indeed, Richard Burton was actually one of the “rich and famous men” whom Taylor married (twice, in his case). The positive language of the first half of the stanza such as “most beautiful” and “rich and famous” contrasts strikingly with the second half where they are now replaced with words like “traction”,

²²⁹ Bukowski, *The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain: New Poems*, Ecco, Harper Collins, New York (2004), 103

“hospital”, “fractured” and “painkillers”. Indeed, “fractured / back” includes an actual fracture of the line, thereby making it a genuine physical break. Similarly, “waiting / list” is cleverly enjambed to emphasise the fact that we have to *wait* for the next line. In fact, the entire first stanza is made up of long lines contrasting with much shorter lines to create a rhythm that helps physically illustrate the see-sawing in Taylor’s fortunes from youth to age. All of these line breaks and see-sawing enjambent thereby help Bukowski to force us to become physically involved with the poem, like a real life struggle with ageing. Even the word “now” in the title strongly hints that this is going to be a somewhat pejorative poem in which the Cleopatra’s past glories are going to be compared to her current lot. Ultimately, however, this poem is about much more than simply the sadness of growing old in a film star who most would likely sympathise with. Bukowski continues:

now, the phone seldom rings, there
are only a few obligatory flowers,
and visitors are at a
minimum.²³⁰

Indeed, words like “seldom”, “obligatory” and “minimum” are key here, signalling further the stark change in mood from the initial description of her glorious past. Even the word “minimum” appears on its own, the solitary word on its line, thereby embodying its very meaning by being the most minimal line in the poem; thus emphasizing that this once-sought-after actress really is truly alone now. Bukowski observes, however, that this loss of youth is not totally without gain:

yet, with age the lady has matured, she knows more now, understands
more, feels more deeply, relates to life much more
kindly.²³¹

Bukowski highlights Taylor’s maturing and growth in wisdom by actually making this literally the longest line in the poem, thereby emphasising the definite and solid nature of her growth. We are also struck by another sudden change in mood.

²³⁰ Bukowski, *The Flash of Lightning*., 103

²³¹ Ibid.

Words like “lady”, “matured”, “more”, “understands”, “deeply”, “relates”, “life” and “kindly” all trigger a more genial regard of the subject who herself does not seem to be complaining about her lot. Bukowski continues:

all to no avail: if you are no longer a good young
fuck, if you can't play the
temptress with
legs crossed high and
violet eyes glowing
behind
long dark lashes,
if you're not still beautiful
if you ain't in movies any longer
if you aren't photographed drunk and obnoxious
in the best
restaurants with new young
lovers:
it's all to no
avail.²³²

Thus the poem has see-sawed once more, with this stanza's language shifting back to the pejorative. It seems, too, at least superficially, that Bukowski is now using misogynistic language and objectifying his subject with words like “temptress” and “legs crossed high”. However, on a deeper level, it seems that Bukowski's ironic tone is not actually chastising Taylor for growing older and being “no longer a good young / fuck”, instead it seems he is actually chastising the film industry. Bukowski is pointing out (correctly) that if you are a female actor in showbusiness, you generally need to be young and beautiful in order to succeed. Bukowski reminds us that he is definitely referring to Elizabeth Taylor by throwing in “violet eyes / behind / long dark lashes”, which Taylor was most certainly famous for in the role of Cleopatra. However, Bukowski then strikes us with the dramatic tri-colon: “if you're not still beautiful / if you ain't in movies any longer / if you aren't photographed drunk and obnoxious” [...]

²³² Bukowski, *The Flash of Lightning.*, 103-104

“it’s all to no / avail.” The evolving anaphoraic repetition of “if you’re not”, “if you ain’t” and “if you aren’t” also add to the dramatic anti-climax of “no / avail”. Indeed, “avail” constitutes a single word line, like “minimum” earlier, reiterating the hopelessness of Taylor’s plight.

now she sits forgotten
in hospital
straddling a bedpan
as new horizons open up for
the new generation.

in traction you’re pathetic at 60
and
nobody wants to sit in a room with
you.
it’s too
depressing.

this world wants only the young and the strong and the
still beautiful.²³³

When Bukowski writes “it’s too depressing” he reveals that despite his critical language, he probably is sympathetic to Taylor’s plight. Furthermore, when he says “the world” wants this, Bukowski is again using his ironic voice and probably actually means that “the *film* world” only wants the “young” and “still beautiful”.

as this once-famous actress
lies forgotten in hospital
I wonder what thoughts she
has
about her x-lovers
about her x-public

²³³ Bukowski, *The Flash of Lightning.*, 104

about her vanished youth
as the hours and the days
crawl
by.

I truly wonder what thoughts she
has.

possibly she has discovered her real self,
achieved real wisdom.
but has it come too late?
and when late wisdom
finally arrives
is that better than none at
all?²³⁴

Phrases like “once famous”, “lies forgotten”, “vanished youth” and “days / crawl / by” all add to the striking contrast between Taylor’s current sedentary situation and her previously fast-paced, heady youth. The anaphoraic tri-colon of “about her x-lovers / about her x-public / about her vanished youth” is especially emphatic, reminding us just how severely her situation has changed. The two words “crawl / by” are each the only word on their respective lines, which immediately jolt our reading of the poem, especially after the longer lines immediately preceding them, thereby helping to illustrate the slow pace of a crawl as well as actually create it. Ultimately, we are presented with the possibility that Taylor might have “discovered her real self” and “achieved real wisdom, with the repetition of “real” creating a rhythm and emphasizing her genuine growth as a person – and possibly Bukowski’s.

The Femme Fatale

Shortly before his death in 1994, Bukowski published his final novel, *Pulp*, which contains a great deal of cinematic reverie and shows Bukowski’s dexterous employment of the style of film noir:

²³⁴ Bukowski, *The Flash of Lightning.*, 104-105

“Well, Eddie, you stop thinking and see if you can fix me a double vodka and tonic, touch of lime.”

“We don’t got no lime.”

“Yeah, you have. I can see it from here.”

“That lime’s not for you.”

“Yeah? Who’s it for? Elizabeth Taylor? Now, if you want to sleep in your own bed tonight, I’ll have that lime. In my drink. Pronto.”²³⁵

In *Pulp*, cinema influences not only the content but also the shape of the text. The chapters in *Pulp* are remarkably short and concise, composed almost entirely of dialogue, thereby appearing more like the scenes of a screenplay than traditional chapters of a novel. Indeed, *Pulp* was written after Bukowski had written his screenplay *Barfly* and therefore shows a further cinematic, stylistic evolution in his prose. Bukowski wrote in a letter: “I’m into the beginning of a novel right now, called *Pulp* and right now it’s running hot and I want to stay on it. It’s a detective novel which I hope will end all detective novels forever.”²³⁶ Sounes notes: “*Pulp* was the first novel Bukowski had written which was not explicitly autobiographical, or even addressed his usual interests. Indeed, it broke all his rules, being conceived as a pastiche of a Mickey Spillane crime story.”²³⁷ Indeed, Bukowski had read the Spillane novels and watched all the films, setting *Pulp* in the typical Hollywood underbelly that one would traditionally expect from the genre. Frank Krutnik observes that “the 1940s *noir* ‘tough’ thrillers feature [...] hero-figures who manifest one form or another of ‘problematized’ – eroded or unstable – masculinity”,²³⁸ and in such stories “the hero, often a professional detective, seeks to restore order – and to validate his own identity [...]”.²³⁹ Thus it is clear that Bukowski is paying homage to the classic film noir investigative thriller by making his protagonist an ageing Hollywood private detective. Often more important than the male in these films, however, is the female figure. Crowther reports: “The

²³⁵ Bukowski, *Pulp*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1994), 117-118

²³⁶ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to the editor of *Explorations*, Juneau, Alaska (June 27, 1991), 178

²³⁷ Sounes, *Charles Bukowski: Locked.*, 233

²³⁸ Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge, London (1991), 85

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 86

advent of *film noir*, however, brought to the fore a new breed of woman. [...] She understood that while society had dealt her a low hand from a stacked deck, she did have an ace up her sleeve: her body.”²⁴⁰ With this new breed of *femme fatale* in mind, then, we now turn to scene (chapter) 2 of *Pulp*:

She walked in.

Now, I mean, it just wasn't fair. Her dress fit so tight it almost split the seams. Too many chocolate malts. And she walked on heels so high they looked like little stilts. She walked like a drunken cripple, staggering around the room. A glorious dizziness of flesh.

“Sit down, lady,” I said.

She put it down and crossed her legs high, damn near knocked my eyes out.

“It's good to see you, lady,” I said.

“Stop gawking, please. It's nothing that you haven't seen before.”

“You're wrong there, lady. Now may I have your name?”

“Lady Death.”

“Lady Death? You from the circus? The movies?”

“No.”

“Place of birth?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“Year of birth?”

“Don't try to be funny . . .”

“Just trying to get some background . . .”

I got lost somehow, began staring up her legs. I was always a leg man. It was the first thing I saw when I was born. But then I was trying to get out. Ever since I've been working in the other direction and with pretty lousy luck.²⁴¹

Another signal that Bukowski is playing with the genre of film noir is that he has named his femme fatale, “Lady Death”. This is remarkable as “Lady Death” is literally an exact translation of “femme fatale”; doubly confirmed by the detective's

²⁴⁰ Crowther, *Film Noir.*, 115

²⁴¹ Bukowski, *Pulp*, 10 -11

following question about the origin of her name: “The movies?” So Bukowski is clearly signalling that he is, once again, playing with cinematic stereotypes. Indeed, Bukowski’s detective is named “Nicky Belane” – a play on the name of crime novelist Mickey Spillane whose many books were turned into famous films. Furthermore, Spillane sold 200 million books but was almost universally reviled by critics amid accusations of vulgarity and violence – similar to the critical reaction to Bukowski. Smith says of such obviously film-inspired female stereotypes in Bukowski’s writing:

These women show themselves to be tough cookies, ready with wisecracks. Their descriptions are written in a kind of shorthand, the reader knowing what they look like because they correspond to a pre-existing image. [...] The women’s physical attributes, their witty, tough-talking, allied to their ability to manipulate men, enable the movie connection to be made with Mae West. She patented the steamy one-liner.²⁴²

Such women, combined with Bukowski’s men, often combine to set a perfectly film-like scene in which we find all the noir stereotypes, as Crowther defines them: “The hard-boiled heroes, the vulnerable victims, male and female and predatory spiderwomen”²⁴³. Bukowski neatly ends a chapter of *Pulp* with:

Then she got up and walked out of there. I never saw an ass like that in my life. Beyond concept. Beyond everything. Don’t bother me now. I want to think about it.²⁴⁴

Objectification

Thus we have seen that much of Bukowski’s perceived sexism is garnered from cinema. With this in mind then, we now turn to what, I believe, is the most remarkable example of objectification of women in all of Bukowski’s writing; the posthumously published *girl on the escalator* (2001):

²⁴² Smith, *Art, Survival.*, 162

²⁴³ Crowther, *Film Noir: Reflections.*, 69

²⁴⁴ Bukowski, *Pulp*, 12-13

as I go to the escalator
a young fellow and a lovely young girl
are ahead of me.
her pants, her blouse are skin-
tight.
as we ascend
she rests one foot on the
step above and her behind
assumes a fascinating shape.
the young man looks all
around.
he appears worried.
he looks at me.
I look
away.²⁴⁵

Firstly the symbol of an escalator is an interesting choice; representing transition and, perhaps here, rites of passage. At first appraisal Bukowski is happy with the view: a “young fellow” and “lovely young girl”. Bukowski describes her in detail, scanning her in camera close-ups of “pants”, “blouse” [...] “skin- / tight”; the fracturing of the skin- / tight drawing our mind’s eye to the tautness of clothes across flesh.

no, young man, I am not looking,
I am *not* looking at your girl’s behind.
don’t worry, I respect her and I respect you.
in fact, I respect everything: the flowers that grow, young women,
children, all the animals, our precious complicated
universe, everyone and everything.²⁴⁶

The repetition of “I am not looking” with “I am *not* looking”, creates a sense of sarcasm, especially with the italicising of the word *not*, thereby implying that the *not* is

²⁴⁵ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 336

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

the odd word out here, physically standing out from the rest of the sentence, i.e. it doesn't belong here as Bukowski most definitely *is* looking. As we know by now, Bukowski is always *looking*. Furthermore, the tri-colon of "I respect her", "I respect you" and "I respect everything" builds emphatically to the anti-climactic crescendo of the hyperbolic description of "the flowers", "women, / children," "animals," and "universe" as total sarcasm.

I sense that the young man now feels
better and I am glad for
him. I know his problem: the girl has
a mother, a father, maybe a sister or
brother, and undoubtedly a bunch of
unfriendly relatives and she likes to
dance and flirt and she likes to
go to the movies and sometimes she talks
and chews gum at the same time and
she enjoys really dumb TV shows and
she thinks she's a budding actress and she
doesn't always look so good ...²⁴⁷

The tri-colon of "I sense", "I am" and "I know" remind us of Bukowski's more privileged viewpoint as the more experienced male on the "escalator". After misanthropically citing other "unfriendly" humans as the initial part of the "problem", Bukowski turns his focus to the girl. The repetition of "she likes to [...] and she likes to" combine with the placing of "dance and flirt" to create a sense of rhythm which helps us actually picture the girl dancing in a care-free way. By adding that "she likes to go to movies" Bukowski has given her his worst insult because when he is talking about "movies" in this way, he means "dumb" movies like the "dumb TV shows" he next describes as another of her hobbies. Thus cinema has returned once more in Bukowski's writing, and we are again reminded of his dichotomy in regard to cinema: afterall, if it's a film adapted from one of his stories or poems, he's its greatest supporter, but if it's the writing of someone else, it's clearly going to be dumb and inane. The fact that

²⁴⁷ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 336

Bukowski juxtaposes going to “the movies” with watching “dumb TV shows”, with the fact that she “talks / and chews gum at the same time” sandwiched in between, shows how greatly the two worlds overlap in Bukowski’s eyes. Furthermore, as if to add insult to injury, Bukowski throws in also that “she thinks she’s a budding actress” to reinforce his notion of her as “dumb”. Bukowski continues:

[...] and she has a
terrible temper and sometimes she almost goes
crazy and she can talk for hours on the
telephone and she wants to go to
Europe some summer soon and she wants you to
buy her a near-new Mercedes and she’s in love with
Mel Gibson and her mother is a
drunk and her father is a racist
and sometimes when she drinks too much she
snores and she’s often cold in bed²⁴⁸

The alliteration of “terrible temper”, “talk” and “telephone” help create a dissonant rhythm that suggests the sound of angry ranting, and reiterates how “crazy” she must really be. This is re-emphasised by the alliteration of “Mercedes”, “Mel Gibson” and “mother” – all within one, long, rambling sentence to better create the sound of garbled speech from a girl who “can talk for hours” and can’t make up her mind whether she wants to be an “actress” or a “dancer” or actually just be “unemployed”. By claiming that “she’s in love with / Mel Gibson” Bukowski has really dealt her a low blow as Gibson is known mainly (disregarding his early Mad Max career in Australia, which Bukowski may well have liked) for prosaic Hollywood action films and comedies – the kind of thing Bukowski now detests. The mention of Gibson’s name in this way also serves a second purpose, therefore, of reminding us how erudite and anti-establishment Bukowski is. He further dismisses the girl in the poem by suggesting her “mother is a / drunk and her father is a racist” and that she herself is wholly materialistic for expecting her boyfriend “to / buy her a near-new Mercedes” and that, most insultingly for Bukowski, “she / snores” and is “often cold in bed” – i.e she is

²⁴⁸ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 336-337

sexually selfish, too. After such a character assassination we must truly understand what a total failure of a woman she is to Bukowski.

I watch him take her
up
the escalator, his arm
protectively about her
waist, thinking he's
lucky,
thinking he's a real special
guy, thinking that
nobody in the world has
what he has.

and he's right, terribly
terribly right, his arm around
that warm bucket of
intestine,
bladder,
kidneys,
lungs,
salt,
sulphur,
carbon dioxide
and
phlegm.

lotsa
luck²⁴⁹

This is a striking finish and, I believe, Bukowski's most vulgar example of female objectification anywhere in his entire oeuvre. The lines "I watch him take her / up /"

²⁴⁹ Bukowski, *The Night Torn Mad.*, 337

immediately suggest sexual innuendo; instead, however, we are reminded, the young man is actually taking her up “the escalator”, although even this could be a pun in such context. The frank description of the girl as a “warm bucket of / intestine, / bladder, / kidneys” and “lungs” breaks her down, quite literally to her constituent parts – as if Bukowski is examining her through a magnifying glass or microscope. She is no longer a living person to him, but a cadaver on an operating table. The word “bucket” immediately brings to mind the image of a butcher’s slop bucket filled with the discarded waste of pig intestines. There is also the more misogynistic meaning of the word “bucket” as used to refer to a promiscuous woman. When Bukowski describes his further analysis of her constituent parts as “salt, / sulphur, / carbon dioxide / and / phlegm” he has reached a new low, literally treating the girl as inanimate matter, and the basest examples at that. It is no accident that the final word of the description is “phlegm” – literally the most revolting word of the poem. This visceral detail aids Bukowski in his bid both to debase the girl and to shock the reader. Why has he done this? The final two words of the poem, constituting their own stanza, give us the reason: “lotsa / luck”, Bukowski says, clearly addressing the *boy*. It is only now that we remember the short stanza before Bukowski’s strikingly vulgar dissection of the girl – the stanza in which Bukowski describes how the boy places “his arm / protectively about her / waist”. Bukowski immediately goes on the attack, chiding the boy with a dramatic tri-colon for “thinking he’s lucky, / thinking he’s a real special / guy, thinking that / nobody in the world has / what he has.” Bukowski hammers this point further with the anaphoraic repetition of “and he’s right, terribly / terribly right”, as if to say that’s he’s most definitely terribly *wrong*. The emphatic repetition and oxymoronic juxtaposition of “terribly, terribly right” should alert us that Bukowski is about to say something awful. So when he does go on to describe the “arm around / that warm bucket” we should already know that whatever is coming is just as much an insult to the boy.

Yes, Bukowski uses sexist and misogynistic language in describing the girl, but, I believe, he is doing it precisely to mock her boyfriend for *his* immature and possessive behaviour. Bukowski is, in effect, using objectification to chide the boy for treating his girlfriend like a trophy to begin with. If we then return to the beginning of the poem we will be reminded that Bukowski had actually described the girl as “lovely”, initially. Only once the young man put his arm around her, possessively checking that everyone knew she was with him, Bukowski changed his tone. So, on a second reading,

Bukowski is potentially mocking superficial men in regard to their objectification of girlfriends. Bukowski might even be chiding himself, perhaps attempting to exorcise himself of the same negative traits that he sees in the boy, or to extricate himself from what he believes to be a similar emotional position to the boy. Does Bukowski see himself in the boy? Quite possibly. What is more likely, however, is that Bukowski is deliberately playing the despicable misogynist in order to create a reaction and a debate about how despicable society itself is. I believe that Bukowski must be *anticipating* a certain reading. Maybe he believes that this debate can only be initiated in an unpleasant and despicable way, and thus he continues to play this role.

That the poem ends without a full-stop (which is highly unusual for Bukowski) suggests perhaps that the couple are still on the escalator, their journey not yet over? Rather than simply misogynistic, calling him more broadly misanthropic would probably be a more accurate description of Bukowski. Of course, being critical of men, too, does not alleviate his offensive objectification of women, although it places it within a wider context of his more general (and acute) misanthropy. Either way, we have seen once more that Bukowski's 'dirty realist' world is not truly what we could ever regard as reality at all. It is a transmogrified realm populated by movie starlets, glamourpuss whores, femme fatales and "dumb" teenage girls. Of course, there are moments of sincerity, and even many moments of self-deprecation; but when Bukowski is writing about Chinaski, a much more separate scene is set – a scene stolen directly from the Hollywood films that Bukowski spent a lifetime watching, via which the reader can more readily access his work.

Bukowski's Hollywood

In his later years, Bukowski found himself and his work the subject of several Hollywood films and documentaries, which affected both him and his writing. Ample evidence of this influence can be found in his screenplay *Barfly*, in his autobiographical novel *Hollywood*, and in much of his personal correspondence from the period. Crucially, in 1973 he finally gained a new, wider audience when an award-winning film documentary entitled *Bukowski*, directed by Taylor Hackford, was broadcast on KCET-TV in Los Angeles, ushering in what I believe one can now refer to as Bukowski's 'Hollywood period'. It is in this period, specifically, that we find cinema is no longer merely an influence upon Bukowski's work but has become its very subject.

Bukowski – the Documentary

Hackford – born in Santa Barbara, California, and raised by his mother, a waitress – has stated: “I make films about working-class people; showbusiness is one of those things through which people can get themselves out of the lower rung of society.”²⁵⁰ Hackford's working class upbringing, combined with the fact that he grew up in California, may well have catalysed his budding affinity with the work of Bukowski, and his eventual purchasing of the film rights to the novel *Post Office*. Hackford says of his documentary: “Now I had this [...] miniscule budget. I decided to shoot in black and white.”²⁵¹ The resultant film has a grainy, raw look to it that aptly suits its subject matter – an often unkempt Bukowski sitting in impromptu settings, drinking and chatting, or following him around L.A., talking to camera. Hackford also includes footage of a trip to a sold-out poetry reading in San Francisco, and has since described an insightful anecdote about this latter scene that goes some way to explaining Bukowski's truth/signifier relationship, and which, I believe, clearly reveals Bukowski's faux-disaffiliated posture towards Hollywood. Hackford recounts:

Once Ferlinghetti [...] invited Bukowski to go to San Francisco to read

²⁵⁰ Peace Corps Online, *Taylor Hackford Interview* (April 26, 2005), found online at: <http://peacecorpsonline.org/messages/messages/467/2031326.html>

²⁵¹ From the documentary *Bukowski: Born Into This*, directed by John Dullaghan (2003)

at the City Lights Poet's Theater. [...] We go up in the plane. He's drinking scotch. He got pretty drunk and a little silly, and I was shooting the whole thing. [...] He arrives [...] at Ferlinghetti's Poet's Theater and my god it was like the second coming. [...] We walked into this big gymnasium and there were [...] six, seven hundred people [...]. It was a loud rowdy audience. [...] He wrote a column at the L.A. Free Press called *The Notes of a Dirty Old Man*. One week he wrote this article in there about going to San Francisco to read and having these punk asshole stupid filmmakers along, and he was trying to [...] help them along and organizing this and that because these people bumble through [...] asking stupid questions and so on. It was quite an entertaining [...] funny piece. So I read it and I [...] saw him later and [...] said "Hey [...] I read that article." He says, "Yeah baby, what'd you think?" I said, "Well, I thought it was full of shit, man. [...] You forget, I have the film. You're the guy who's drunk on the plane, making a fool out of yourself [...]." He says, "Hey, baby, when I write, *I'm the hero of my shit.* [...] You got your film, you do your film."²⁵²

Thus it is clear that Bukowski himself was well aware of the disparity between his literary persona and his real-life behaviour. I believe that his engagement with filmmaking – in fact the very presence of a camera focussed upon either him or his work – encouraged Bukowski to act up. Now that he was famous, a camera was just as useful a tool to Bukowski as a typewriter in perpetuating his macho legend. He maintains in the documentary:

You know, the young blondes with the tight pussies came too late. The cameras came too late. Don't grin at me like that. It's true. They came too late. I'm too strong. The gods have really put a good shield over me, man. They really have. I've been toughened up at the right time and the right place.²⁵³

²⁵² *Bukowski: Born Into This*, directed by John Dullaghan (2003)

²⁵³ *Bukowski* directed by Taylor Hackford, PBS (KCET) (1973)

Despite the bravura, much of this is true – Bukowski had indeed been ignored for much of his adult life. Fame and financial success came late to him, and yet the fact that Bukowski is denouncing the “cameras” and “young blondes” as the gaudy trappings of fame, directly to a camera and crew, makes his stance somehow less authentic. He is still attempting to embody the symbol of authenticity in a world of inauthenticity. Yet the fact that he is so influenced by what he professes to be inauthentic (i.e. cinema) and is even discussing this within a film, reveals that he must have a little of the inauthentic about himself, too.

Apostrophes

Hackford’s documentary brought Bukowski a substantial new following amongst filmmakers, leading to his first cameo in 1976 in the comedy *Supervan* (released 1977). Bukowski was invited by director Lamar Card to appear in a scene in which he plays an officially uncredited character (although now popularly referred to as ‘Wet T-Shirt Contest Water Boy’) whose sole purpose in the plot seems to be to hose down various merrily drunken girls in what appears to be an impromptu wet T-shirt contest held in the woods. Thus Bukowski is cast as an exaggerated stereotype of himself, and willingly so. The scene is dubbed over with music and Bukowski has no lines of dialogue; he does appear to be grinning throughout though. No doubt this cameo contributed further to Bukowski’s self-perpetuated legend of Dirty Old Man, and quite deliberately, or surely he would not have accepted the role. This, in turn, led to one of Bukowski’s most famous television appearances, which took place on the French literary discussion show, *Apostrophes*, on 22nd September, 1978.

Bukowski began the show clearly inebriated, growing steadily more disenchanted as the episode progressed. Finally, halfway through the program, Bukowski abruptly stood up, unclipped his microphone and wandered offstage, not to return, leaving the rest of the panel (and audience) bemused. Again, this only added to the Bukowski legend, and he himself noted how this stunt subsequently made him even more popular in Europe, as we can see from a letter to Hank Malone:

No, I didn't vomit on national tv in France. I just got stinking drunk, said a few things and walked off, pulled my knife on a security guard. Actually it was good luck. All of the newspapers in France gave it a good write-up except one. It went over good with the people of the streets. Went to Nice next day, was sitting getting drunk with Linda Lee at outside table and 6 French waiters waved, then walked up in a line, stood and bowed. I write better of the incident in a book due out in November via City Lights, *Shakespeare Never Did This*, all about the European trip.²⁵⁴

Indeed, we can see in *Shakespeare Never Did This* that Bukowski deliberately glamorises his drunken behaviour on the show in a further attempt to perpetuate the legend of his macho persona:

It was a talk show that lasted 90 minutes and it was literary. I demanded to be furnished 2 bottles of good white wine while on the tube. Between 50 and 60 million Frenchmen watched the show. [...] There were 3 or 4 writers and the moderator. Also the shrink who had given Artaud his shock treatments. [...] I was the honored guest so the moderator started with me. My first statement was: "I know a great many American writers who would like to be on this program now. It doesn't mean so much to me . . ." With that, the moderator quickly switched to another writer.²⁵⁵

Here Bukowski has immediately employed several typical tactics. Firstly, he informed the viewers and the readers that this was so unimportant to him he wanted to be drunk for it; secondly, this is a remarkably popular television programme, with fifty or sixty million viewers; thirdly, Bukowski was the guest of honour, despite the producers knowing that he was planning to be drunk; and lastly, that Bukowski cared so little for the show that he even explicitly announced it live on air as his first statement. This performative nonchalance is clearly false and purely a transparent attempt by Bukowski not to look 'establishment'. Of course, it should be clear by now to the initiated reader that Bukowski most definitely wanted to be there, and wants the reader to know of his

²⁵⁴ Bukowski, *Living on Luck.*, to Hank Malone (October 15, 1979), 274

²⁵⁵ Bukowski, *Shakespeare Never Did This*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1979), 5

fame by faux-casually including the mention of the “50 and 60 million” viewers. Indeed, if it weren’t for the television show, Bukowski would have had one less opportunity to misbehave. And misbehave he does: the next morning he awakens hungover, with no memory of what had happened after the show. Our excitement is heightened as we piece together simultaneously with Bukowski, like in a thriller, what had happened:

The next morning I am awakened by the ringing of the phone. It was the critic from *Le Monde*. “You were great, bastard,” he said, “those others couldn’t even masturbate . . .” “What did I do?” I asked. “You don’t remember?” “No.” “Well, let me tell you, there isn’t one newspaper that wrote against you. It’s about time French television saw something honest.”²⁵⁶

Thus Bukowski has told us via the vehicle of someone else informing *him*, that he is the only person to have brought honesty to French television, similarly to how he had always intended to bring honesty to literature. Of course, we are still unsure of what exactly he did, but Bukowski will of course shortly tell us, precisely because his recounting of others’ anecdotes about himself gives him an easy way out, so to speak, for perpetuating his own myth. i.e. He doesn’t have to look like a braggard; in fact, he comes across as an innocent bystander along with the reader as we both find out together what happened. After the phonecall Bukowski asks Linda to explain:

“Well, you grabbed the lady’s leg. Then you started drinking out of the bottle. You said some things. They were pretty good, especially at the beginning. Then the guy who ran the program wouldn’t let you speak. He put his hand over your mouth and said, ‘Shut up! Shut up!’ [...] You finally ripped your translation earphone off, took a last hit of wine and walked off the program. [...] Then when you reached security you grabbed one of the guards by his collar. Then you pulled your knife and threatened all of them. They weren’t quite sure whether you were kidding or not. But they finally got to you and threw you out.”²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ Bukowski, *Shakespeare Never Did This*, 6

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Thus, via the vehicle of Linda, we have now been told another typical Bukowskian tale including a “lady’s leg”, “drinking out of the bottle”, violence in the form of a “ripped [...] off” earpiece, assaults by “security [...] guards” and even the pulling of a “knife”. The fact that Bukowski is told that he was thrown out at the end is sublime as it means he has thereby told *us* that he was quite literally ejected from a “literary” establishment, thus he no longer has to worry about having looked ‘establishment’ to begin with. He then describes the next phonecall to his hotel room:

When I got out of the bathroom the phone continued to ring. One was a call from Barbet Schroeder, my friend and the director of many strange and unusual films. “You were great, Hank,” he said, “French television has never seen anything like it.” “Thanks, Barbet, but I have very little recall of the evening.” “You mean you did all that and you didn’t know what you were doing?”²⁵⁸

It is key that Bukowski mentions Schroeder here, who himself had been gaining a somewhat cult reputation with his own work, the most famous of which at this point was his 1974 documentary *General Idi Amin Dada* about Uganda's notorious dictator. In the film, Amin discusses his outreach to Arab nations, his goal of eradicating Israel and his views on economics. We are even permitted to see him supervise a war-game simulation of an invasion of Israel. Bukowski later refers to this film in his novel *Hollywood*, but changes the name of the film, referring to it as “*The Laughing Beast*”, a documentary “about a black ruler who did it his way with bloody gusto.”²⁵⁹ He also refers to Idi Amin as Lido Mamin, describing him as “a bloody bastard with a marvelous sense of humour.”²⁶⁰ Bukowski adds: “Anybody the least suspect in his country was quickly murdered and dumped into the river. There were so many bodies floating in the river that the crocodiles became bloated and could eat no more. / Lido Mamin loved the camera.”²⁶¹ After watching the film, Chinaski says of Pinchot (Schroeder):

It was a fascinating documentary and I was happy to tell Pinchot as much.

²⁵⁸ Bukowski, *Shakespeare Never Did This*, 6

²⁵⁹ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1989), 13

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

“Yes,” he answered, “I like strange men. That is why I have come to find you.”

“I am very honored,” I said, “to be one with Lido Mamin.”²⁶²

So Bukowski actually found he had something in common with the ‘laughing beast’ Idi Amin, and was quite proud of it. Perhaps he felt Schroeder could make just as good a film about him, another ‘laughing beast’. This led to Schroeder approaching Bukowski in 1979 to write the screenplay for an autobiographical feature film – what would eventually become *Barfly*. According to Sargeant, “Schroeder paid Charles Bukowski \$20,000 to write a screenplay – a powerful incentive for Bukowski who at the time was “living in a dive and just barely getting by” [...].”²⁶³ Thus, for Bukowski, one entertaining appearance in front of a camera (on *Apostrophes*) would lead to another. Before *Barfly* actually gained funding, however, another film based on Bukowski’s writing was produced and released.

Tales of Ordinary Madness

Tales Of Ordinary Madness (Storie Di Ordinaria Follia) was directed by Marco Ferreri and released in 1981. An Italian/French co-production based loosely on the 64 short stories in *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*, the film starred a bearded Ben Gazzara as the poet Charles Serking – clearly modelled on the real-life Charles Bukowski. The two stories that are most recognisable in the finished film are *The Most Beautiful Girl In Town* and *Rape! Rape!* Bukowski himself voiced initial enthusiasm for the project in letters and interviews. It is also one of the greatest early signals of filmmakers’ growing attraction to Bukowski as a cinematic figure. The symbol of a scruffy, bearded alcoholic poet who rejects tradition and form, yet still aspires to be a poet, is particularly dynamic and creates a remarkable paradox. Ferreri explained of his choice of subject:

I fell in love with Bukowski’s books, rather than with Bukowski.

That’s the key to my movie. I was interested in the places, in the images; and I found in the States the very images he had caused me to

²⁶² Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 19

²⁶³ Sargeant, *Naked Lens.*, 230

imagine. Bukowski is a very visual author. What appealed to me were those images, those characters, those streets and home where they lived, the Los Angeles he writes about.²⁶⁴

That what appealed to Ferreri in Bukowski's work were "the images", "the very images" and "those images" is absolutely key. Ferreri calls Bukowski a "very visual author" and I believe this is a result of cinema's influence upon the writer. That a filmmaker recognised this in Bukowski's writing and readily adapted it to film is further testament of this. Ferreri was particularly fascinated by "the Los Angeles he writes about" and, indeed, Bukowski did love Los Angeles (or "Lost Angels" as he sometimes called it).²⁶⁵ Bukowski thought of it as his hometown and, even during his youthful bouts of drifting across America, he would often return to L.A.. In interview he admitted:

You live in a town all your life, and you get to know every bitch on the street corner and half of them you have already messed around with. You've got the layout of the whole land. You have a picture of where you are... Since I was raised in L.A., I've always had the geographical and spiritual feeling of being here. I've had time to learn this city. I can't see any other place than L.A.²⁶⁶

Instead of saying "I couldn't *live* any other place than L.A." Bukowski tells us that he can't "*see*" any other place. His emphasis on the visual is further reiterated by "You have a picture of where you are". This again confirms what Ferreri had noticed in his writing, that Bukowski is "a very visual author" whose work is improved by his "images" and his "picture" of where he was, all influenced by, I believe, cinema.

Bukowski wrote a letter to Joe Stapan at the end of production of Ferreri's film in which he seemed in good spirits regarding the project: "Marco Ferreri [...] has finished directing a full length movie of *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, Ben Gazzara acts as Chinaski. They shot some scenes in Venice, Calif. I got drunk with Ferreri and

²⁶⁴ Pivano/Bukowski, *Charles Bukowski: Laughing.*, 145

²⁶⁵ e.g. in his letter to Sheri Martinelli (mid-June 1960), *Beerspit Night.*, 40

²⁶⁶ As quoted by Jay Dougherty, *Introduction to Charles Bukowski*, found online at: <http://www.jaydougherty.com/bukowski/index.html>

Gazzara, good fellows both.”²⁶⁷ At this point Bukowski has offered no critique of the quality of the adaptation’s directing or acting, but is (somewhat typically) happy to confirm that Ferreri and Gazzara are “good fellows both” purely because they “got drunk” with him. He writes in another letter that “Gazzara can act and he’s got good eyes. We’ll see [...] I’ve met any number of movie people, mainly through Barbet Schroeder, cameramen, directors. mostly the European crowd, who I think get film down closer to where actuality is [...]”²⁶⁸ Bukowski notes the “eyes” and adds we’ll “see”, then observes that European filmmakers “get film down closer to where actuality is”. Thus Bukowski’s focus on vision and reality are still at the forefront of his mind. Unfortunately, however, when the finished film was released and Bukowski finally viewed it, his opinion quickly changed. We can detect the beginnings of Bukowski’s change in attitude from a letter to Louise Webb, before he viewed the final cut:

Ben is acting in *Tales of Ordinary Madness* directed by Marco. Taken from some of my short stories. But there’s something I don’t trust about celluloid. I guess it’s an old superstition but I get the idea, still, that it kills people. Marco Ferrari, (sic) though, seemed a natural and ordinary guy, kind of like a dock worker. He seems to have retained his humanity.²⁶⁹

That Bukowski professes not to trust film, but is once again willing to be a mechanism within the production of one, again reveals his (by now predictable) hypocrisy. The finished film begins with Serking giving a poetry reading to a bored audience in a New York bar. This typically Bukowskian opening aptly sets the scene for what turns out to be a surprising adventure of mishaps. After the reading Serking observes that “Style is the answer to everything, it pertains to the madness inside. Joan of Arc had it. Hemingway had it when he blew his brains out.”²⁷⁰ Dirk Matthews observes: “As a film it falls short of the mark as it wanders like a drunk through the streets trying to give us a snapshot of sorts, a month in the life of the great Charles Bukowski.”²⁷¹ However, it could be argued that this Chaplinesque wandering “like a

²⁶⁷ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Joe Stapan (August 8, 1981), 32

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, to Gerald Locklin (August 2, 1981), 28-29

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, to Louise Webb (Jan 27, 1982), 35

²⁷⁰ As quoted in the film *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, directed by Marco Ferreri (1981)

²⁷¹ Dirk Matthews, review of *Tales of Ordinary Madness* (November 19, 2001), found online at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086410/reviews>

drunk through the streets trying to gives us snapshots” is *exactly* what Bukowski always intends to do in his writing, in which case the film is surely successful. After the film’s release, we see Bukowski’s final (and much more frank) reaction: “I didn’t like the movie made from *Tales of Ordinary Madness*. It was all out of focus. I hardly recognized it as something taken from my works. The whole thing was just dumb.”²⁷² The fact that he calls it “all out of focus” is interesting. Clearly the finished film is not (literally in terms of filmmaking and lens use) out of focus; Bukowski must be referring to a more emotional disconnection between the perspective of his original writing and that of the finished film – a loss in translation that bothers him. He adds with more venom:

The movie *Tales of Ordinary Madness* was ridiculously bad. Gazzara looked like a satisfied dullard. Oh boy, holding [on] to that girl’s leg down by the sea and moaning out one of my early poems about the atom bomb... But almost all of it was worse than bad. And Gazzara always hitting on the wine bottle but never getting drunk. Water, what? I sat through that movie drinking bottles of wine and screaming against the whole atrocity.²⁷³

This is particularly revealing of Bukowski’s attitude towards his writing as it suggests (if not explicitly states) that what bothered him about a staged version of his life was the very fact that it was *staged* – as typified by the alcohol not being genuine. What did Bukowski expect? Afterall, this was not a documentary about him but a fictional adaptation with actors. Bukowski’s reaction suggests that he really didn’t think of his work as fiction but as an autobiographical reflection of his true self and that any acting made his writing (and therefore *life*) inauthentic. The fact that Bukowski “sat through the movie drinking bottles of wine” (to counter-act the fake wine on-screen, perhaps), is even more ironic and again makes clear his obsession with authenticity over inauthenticity and his need always to have the correct image projected (both figuratively and literally).

²⁷² Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Luciana Capretti (February 6, 1990), 139

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, to “Suzy ?” (sic) (March 1 1984), 54

Barfly

Sargeant reports that although he agreed to write it, “Bukowski refused to examine or study other screenplays in order to understand the technique, and wrote the screenplay for *Barfly* by gut instinct.”²⁷⁴ This is interesting as, I believe, it suggests that Bukowski’s life-long exposure to cinema had by now ingrained in him an inherent understanding of its craft. Barry Miles similarly reports that “Hank did not study screenwriting method before writing the script as he thought it would take away some of his natural energy and he preferred it rough to polished.”²⁷⁵ Bukowski himself wrote similarly in his letter to Luciana Capretti in response to her asking if he felt a need to study screenplay form before writing one: “Not at all. To study screenwriting seemed repulsive to me and I think that it would have taken away some of my natural impulses, my instincts. I prefer the rough to the polished.”²⁷⁶ This reiterates Bukowski’s disdain of traditional form, here going as far as to refer to its study as “repulsive”, reminding the initiated reader of Bukowski’s contemptuousness of form itself, especially with regard to verse form and typographical protocol. No doubt Schroeder had chosen Bukowski as his subject because he (Bukowski) too was “rough rather than polished”. Sargeant notes: “The screenplay was based on Bukowski’s own experiences during his twenties when he was a barfly in Philadelphia and Los Angeles.”²⁷⁷ Indeed, an important chapter during Bukowski’s odd-jobbing odyssey across America was when he had passed through Philadelphia and met Jane Cooney Baker, a woman ten years his senior leading a similarly down-at-heel life (as we examined in the previous chapter). Bukowski now drew from the experience of their relationship to write his first and only screenplay.

One of Bukowski’s most humorous literary excursions, *Barfly*, in summary, is the story of a young alcoholic who harbours a certain talent for writing but struggles to succeed professionally; although he is finally discovered, his success is short-lived and he quickly returns to drinking in a self-destructive descent. Miles reports that Bukowski genuinely “liked working with Schroeder and got closely involved with the making of *Barfly*, selecting and advising actors, reworking scenes, suggesting some final cutting or

²⁷⁴ Sargeant, *Naked Lens.*, 230

²⁷⁵ Miles, *Charles Bukowski*, 276

²⁷⁶ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Luciana Capretti (February 6, 1990), 135

²⁷⁷ Sargeant, *Naked Lens.*, 230

changes, and appearing in a cameo.”²⁷⁸ Bukowski briefly appears as an actual barfly, sitting at a bar, flipping a coin and downing an unnamed drink. Bukowski seemed initially to be comfortable in the world of filmmaking, on this, his first major production. Sargeant observes that this is “the only film based on Charles Bukowski’s work, with which he was directly involved.”²⁷⁹ And, as we can infer from his later novel *Hollywood* (which we shall investigate shortly), this would likely be the last. Not long after beginning work on the *Barfly* screenplay, Bukowski wrote a letter to William Packard in which he made the following observation:

Too many nights now with movie people who talk about camera angles, and producer directors who go to baseball games with Jack Nicholson, kissing his ass, trying to get him to act in their movies when they should really be kissing the ass of his agent.²⁸⁰

This slightly barbed observation of “movie people” and all their “kissing [...] ass” marks the beginning of Bukowski’s growing dislike of cinema and the pushy characters populating its business side. It is particularly interesting that Bukowski notes his dislike of “talk about camera angles” – an important aspect of cinematic form – again reminding us of his rejection of accepted convention. However, it is also likely that Bukowski is simply wearing his mask of anti-establishment macho outsider again. After all, he did still finish the screenplay and take part in its production. Plus, the fact that he slips in mention of “baseball games with Jack Nicholson” who – as we saw earlier – Bukowski had once named as a major influence, belies his more obvious excitement. Meanwhile, *Barfly* pre-production continued and in this next letter we see Bukowski’s growing frustration with the mechanics of filmmaking:

On *Barfly*, there’s still to be more tinkering with the script [...] because too expensive and complicated to shoot certain scenes. If I had known this from the beginning I would have set the whole thing up in the bar, a la stage play. Of course, then they would have said, show us something of his life outside the bar. [...] What they are doing is thinking

²⁷⁸ Miles, *Charles Bukowski*, 276

²⁷⁹ Sargeant, *Naked Lens.*, 229

²⁸⁰ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to William Packard (November 27, 1979), 16

of other movies, of standard ways and processes. That's bad. What you do is shoot the raw material as is and people feel and appreciate that. The last thing they want is finesse. The natural fibre is what invigorates.²⁸¹

Thus Bukowski is, yet again, rejecting accepted form. He has progressed from rejecting typical form in his writing to rejecting it in his screenplay, thus maintaining his principle of re-invention over conformity. With this in mind, we should now examine the screenplay itself where we will find that Bukowski continues with his usual themes. On the first page of the published manuscript of *Barfly* we find Bukowski's "Description of Characters"; the first is Chinaski:

Henry Chinaski: Late twenties. Already life-worn. More weary than angry. Face formed by the streets, poverty. If he is mad, then it is the madness of the disowned who lack interest in the standard way of life. Rather than enter the treadmill of society he has chosen the bottle and the bars. [...] Drinking seems a way to hide. [...] He thinks of suicide, he has tried suicide several times and failed, but he's not even a good suicide. He is more sad than bitter, and like most desperate men he has some humor. He attempts to remain hidden behind his street face but now and then kindness and gentleness come to the surface, though rarely.²⁸²

This is the most comprehensive description of Chinaski anywhere in Bukowski's work, and we have the very format of a screenplay to thank for it. Whereas normally we would have to build the above information as an aggregate gathered during the reading of, say, a short story or poem, here Bukowski has literally described his protagonist as fully as possible for the sake of the actor who will play him. Again, though, we find the familiar Bukowski language: "life-worn"; "weary"; "streets"; "poverty"; "madness"; "society"; "bottle"; "bars"; "drinking"; "suicide"; "desperate". This is the well-used pejorative vocabulary we have come to expect from any sample of Bukowski's trampish content matter. However, Bukowski buoys up the description with some lighter language near the end where we suddenly see the arrival of "humor";

²⁸¹ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to John Martin (December 19, 1986), 90

²⁸² Bukowski, *The Movie: "Barfly" An Original Screenplay*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1987), 7

“kindness”; and “gentleness”. Thus the familiar Bukowskian rhythm of pathos-cum-bathos has returned. The proximity of pathos and bathos is clear in the following scene, and is one of key moments in the script:

WANDA

Don't hit me!

HENRY

Hit you? I'm not your goddamned pimp!

WANDA

Then stop acting like one!

HENRY

Why did it have to be Eddie? He symbolizes everything that disgusts me.

WANDA

You're right, he's not much. I made an error, an unhappy error. I drink. Sometimes when I drink I move in a wrong direction.

Henry sits back down on the bed.

HENRY

(after a pause)

Every time I get with a woman something happens. It either happens sooner or it happens later. This time it happened pretty fast.

WANDA

Listen, we've just met. You don't own me!

HENRY

Nobody owns anybody. I just thought we had a little something going. I guess it was just green corn. What are we, just people who pass in the hallways?

WANDA

What the hell do you want? What the hell do you expect?

HENRY

I know. I expect too much.

He pulls the bedcover up around his head, forms a cowl.

HENRY

I can't handle the scene. I ought to be a fucking monk.²⁸³

This is a key scene as Chinaski specifically cites (alongside his inevitable failures with women: “This time it happened pretty fast”) the character Eddie as one who “symbolizes everything that disgusts me.” Turning back to the ‘Description of Characters’ page, then, we find the following:

Eddie the Night Bartender: Twenty-four. Stocky, square-jawed, quick of movement, a seemingly nice fellow at first glance. He's quick with the ladies, knows the phrases to set them off, pours free drinks to the best lookers. He's also a man's man, black hair jutting from his chest, his shirt open two or three buttons down. He's really a sickening prick but you don't want to admit it to anybody because he's what a man is supposed to be, and if you don't like that, you know, then there's something wrong with you.²⁸⁴

The key phrase here is “if you don't like that, you know, there's something wrong with you” – thus revealing another layer to the Bukowski/Chinaski enigma. Although he has always admired the macho heroes of golden era cinema, he has no interest in socialising with a genuine ladies' man. Eddie's character is brought into question with the phrase “pours free drinks to the best lookers”. He is “seemingly nice at first glance”, implying that his good looks are only skin deep. Bukowski prefers authentic character to looks, substance to style, rawness to form. He reveals his recurring hypocrisy (once again) however, in a letter to a friend written during filming.

²⁸³ Bukowski, *The Movie: “Barfly”* screenplay, 72-73

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 9

Mickey Rourke is doing an *excellent* job – so far. He brought a rep on with him, well-earned, I'm sure, of being a complete bastard and hard-to-handle motherfucker. I've liked him both on and off camera.²⁸⁵

In true Bukowskian tradition then, the double standard has returned (yet again) and Bukowski glamorises the image of the “complete bastard”, the “hard-to-handle motherfucker”, who he actually quite likes in reality, despite having claimed *in the screenplay* to find such a character a “sickening prick”. Bukowski writes of Rourke in another letter:

I don't understand where all the shit reports come from.

What is it, that in this world, the more rare and forward and good an individual becomes, the more you will hear the mocking tales and lies?²⁸⁶

Now Bukowski is actually *surprised* that the macho image of an *actor* doesn't actually match the reality of the person who is actually quite “forward and good”. Surely this cannot come as a genuine surprise when Bukowski has been employing the same tactic his entire life? This ‘willful hypocrisy’ of he who ‘discards logical contradiction’ (as we saw in Chapter 1) reaches its apotheosis in Bukowski's next work, *Hollywood*.

Hollywood – the Novel

Bukowski wrote *Hollywood* in 1988, a year after *Barfly*'s release. Toby Moore observed that from Bukowski's autobiographical novel “based on his experience of writing a screenplay [...] what emerges is a parable for the disappointment, dottiness, decadence and deceit that somehow ended up on screen.”²⁸⁷ Christopher Heard adds that, with *Hollywood*, Bukowski “made it clear how little time he had for the movie

²⁸⁵ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to John Martin (February 8, 1987), 91

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, to John Martin (March 29, 1987), 93

²⁸⁷ Toby Moore, *Hollywood* review, Times Literary Supplement, London (1989)

industry types”.²⁸⁸ The novel opens with the dedication, “for Barbet Schroeder”, and states: “This is a work of fiction and any resemblance between the characters and persons living or dead is purely coincidental, etc.” The “etc.” is the real clue that almost everything in the following novel will therefore mainly be true. And, indeed, despite the preceding inscription, there are many easily recognisable figures: Chinaski/Bukowski is once again our lead; “Jon Pinchot” is Barbet Schroeder; “Francis Ford Loppola” and “Jon-Luc Modard”²⁸⁹ both appear on the same page (*Barfly* was co-produced by Francis Ford Coppola’s Zoetrope Studios); “Jean-Paul Sanrah”²⁹⁰; “Werner Zergog, the noted German filmmaker”²⁹¹; “Mack Derouac”²⁹²; “Hector Blackford”²⁹³ (Taylor Hackford) – “One of his first films had been a documentary about me”²⁹⁴; “Victor Norman”²⁹⁵ (Norman Mailer); and “Tab Jones”²⁹⁶ (Tom Jones) – “He grabs his balls and sings about all the good things he can do for women”.²⁹⁷

The novel begins: “A couple of days later Pinchot phoned. He said he wanted to go ahead with the screenplay. We should come down and see him?”²⁹⁸ Bukowski describes a trip to visit Pinchot at home in “Marina del Rey. Strange territory.”²⁹⁹ Why strange? Bukowski describes driving past its harbour and noticing the people on their boats, “fiddling about on deck” during the day when presumably they should have been at work. “They were dressed in their special sailing clothes, caps, dark shades.”³⁰⁰ This was a far cry from Bukowski’s early life of vagrancy and alcoholism, or his twelve straight years as a postal worker. He mockingly remarks that, “most of them had apparently escaped the daily grind of living. They had never been caught up in that grind and never would be. Such were the rewards of the Chosen in the land of the free. After a fashion, those people looked silly to me.”³⁰¹

Bukowski and Schroeder’s project bounced briefly between the potential leads of

²⁸⁸ Christopher Heard, *Mickey Rourke: High and Low*, Plexus Publishing, London (2006), 69

²⁸⁹ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 32

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 26

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 137

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

either Rourke or Sean Penn. According to Bukowski, Penn had wanted Dennis Hopper to direct the film, but Schroeder (who had invested so much time and effort by this point) refused to be relegated to producer, and eventually chose Rourke. Bukowski admits in a letter: “Sean was willing to work (do the whole thing) for a dollar but he wanted his own director, Dennis Hopper and I had to stick with Barbet Schroeder”.³⁰² Bukowski, however, discusses the episode in which all four of these men meet at his (Bukowski’s house) to debate this, and it is here in *Hollywood* that we see how greatly screenplay form was beginning to pervade Bukowski’s prose:

INTERIOR. WRITER’S HOME. 8.15.p.m.

Jon had arrived a little early.

“Wait until you see this Austin,” he said. “He’s off drugs and booze. He’s like a flat tire, an empty stocking . . .”

“I think it’s great,” said Sarah, “that he has gotten himself cleaned up. That takes courage.”

“O.K.,” said Jon.³⁰³

That Bukowski suddenly breaks into the traditional prose form with this intrusive screenplay scene heading of “INTERIOR. WRITER’S HOME. 8.15.p.m.” is highly unusual. It reveals that, of course, Bukowski was thinking between genres, but might also signal that this is the key scene of the entire novel. It was certainly a pivotal moment in the history of *Barfly*. Pinchot (Schroeder) obviously dislikes Austin (Hopper), feeling that the latter has encroached unfairly on the project. Bukowski seems to agree somewhat by immediately noting on Austin’s arrival: “He had on a half dozen gold chains”.³⁰⁴ Bukowski recounts some dialogue then adds on the next page: “Toward the end, I don’t remember who was telling the story, but it got to Mack Austin. It struck him, health food sodas and all. He fell backwards laughing loudly. His gold chains bounced up and down.”³⁰⁵ This second mention of the “gold chains”, alongside the “health food sodas and all” as opposed to hard drink, immediately tell the informed reader that Bukowski is implicitly attacking Austin/Hopper. This is confirmed all the more by Pinchot/Schroeder’s

³⁰² Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun*, to Teresa Leo (December 8, 1992), 264

³⁰³ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 96.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 97

complaint after he leaves: “Did you hear that fake laugh? Did you see how those fucking gold chains bounced up and down on his neck? What was he laughing about? Did you see all those fucking gold chains?”³⁰⁶ This last is now the *fourth* mention of the “gold chains”, made all the more damning by the laugh being “fake”, thus reiterating that Bukowski is definitely asserting his position as authentic over Hopper’s inauthenticity. Chinaski replies, “Yeah, I saw them,”³⁰⁷ thus effectively diverting the reader’s eye (like in a film) to a fifth and final close-up shot of the chains. Of course, Bukowski was astute enough to realise that in the land of the inauthentic, he himself would come in for equal criticism:

Sarah and I were waiting by our black 320i BMW when Jon pulled up. We climbed in and moved toward the ghetto.

“What are your readers and the critics going to say when they find out about the BMW?

“As always those fuckers will have to judge me on how well I write.”

“They don’t always do that.”

“That’s their problem.”

“You have the screenplay with you?”

“I’ve got it right here,” said Sarah.

“My secretary.”

“He wrote it right out,” said Sarah.

“I’m a 320i genius,” I said.³⁰⁸

This is remarkable as, like in the *condition book*, in which Bukowski literally became the horse, he has now become his BMW 320i. Bukowski is obsessed with symbols; horses, chains, cars. He has the honesty to laugh about himself, however, enjoying his new-found wealth; but from Bukowski’s following letter, it is clear that in reality his publisher was nervous:

We’ll just have to forget about “the image.” I never hide anything.

The car is a 1979 black BMW, sun roof and all. 320I. (52% tax write-off.)³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 97

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 98

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 89

So John Martin was clearly worried about Bukowski's hardcore image being softened by his new, luxurious life style. Bukowski, however, to his credit, maintained an open transparency policy and even seemed proud of his new more business savvy vernacular, repeating the "BMW 320i 52% write-off" phrase in several letters. After all, Chinaski concludes in *Hollywood*, somewhat wryly: "Who wants to be a gardener or a taxi driver? Who wants to be a tax accountant? Weren't we all artists? Weren't our minds better than that? Better to suffer this way rather than the other. At least it looks better."³¹⁰ Chinaski must reap what he sows, however, and an amusing incident in *Hollywood* is when he returns to his house to find a freshly delivered letter:

Chinaski! Piss on you! You were once a great writer! Now you suck! You've sold out! My grandmother writes better shit than you do! You've had your head up your asshole too long! [...] You gobble your own weenie under a sky of vomit! You've sold your balls to the butcher! You've killed the baby of your love! You are monkey stink! Forever and ever and ever!

I enclose some of my latest work . . .³¹¹

What is interesting here is that Bukowski actually includes this at all. It does seem to give him the authentic 'edge' as he is showing (again) that he is willing to self-deprecate. The comedy arises both from the fact that cinema has brought him to the ironic point where he (the Barfly Tramp King!) can now actually be accused of selling-out and also (heightened by) the inclusion of a polite adjoiner at the end by his scathing attacker hoping Chinaski will share the success. Whether this note existed in reality or not seems immaterial as it symbolises perfectly Bukowski's recurring ambivalence towards Hollywood and his own position/identity within it. This theme reappears in the scene where Chinaski meets Victor Norman (based on Bukowski's real life meeting with Norman Mailer):

³⁰⁹ Bukowski, *Living on Luck.*, to John Martin (June 18, 1979), 267

³¹⁰ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 31

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56

Victor Norman was perhaps the best known novelist in America. He appeared on tv constantly. He was glib and deft with the word. What I liked best about him was that he had no fear of the Feminists. He was one of the last defenders of maleness and balls in the U.S. That took guts. I wasn't always pleased with his literary output but I wasn't always pleased with mine either.³¹²

Here the key phrase is "What I liked best about him was that he had no fear of the Feminists", as this immediately draws a parallel between the two writers. Like Rourke being known as a "hard-to-handle motherfucker", the fact that Victor Norman is in an ongoing battle with the "Feminists" and is the uber-macho defender of "maleness and balls in the U.S." immediately endears him to Chinaski who, of course, has been in similar scrapes. Chinaski reports: "There was some minor conversation. Then Victor told us how he met Charlie Chaplin. It was a good, wild and funny story."³¹³ This again indicates the wider cultural milieu of cinema's influence over literature and reveals the single degree of separation between Bukowski and Chaplin. This scene from *Hollywood* then takes on an extra layer of meaning when read alongside a letter that Bukowski wrote to a friend after the real life meeting:

Mailer works for Cannon also. Met him at his place and we had some drinks. "Norman," I told him, "Hollywood scares the shit out of me."

He just looked at me like I didn't know what I was saying.

Oh yeah, when I met him we shook hands and I said, "The Barfly meets the Heavyweight Champ." He liked that.³¹⁴

What is interesting here is that the real-life Mailer didn't understand truth when Bukowski admitted that Hollywood scared him: "He just looked at me like I didn't know what I was saying." Yet when Bukowski calls him "the Heavyweight Champ", Mailer immediately "liked that."³¹⁵ Is Bukowski suggesting that in the land of the hypocrite he is surprised that Mailer didn't like truth but did like untruth? This constant

³¹² Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 107

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Gerald Locklin (November 21, 1986), 89

³¹⁵ Mailer was not a heavyweight champion himself but wrote the non-fiction book *The Fight* (1975), about Muhammad Ali

cycle between truth/fiction, authenticity/inauthenticity is incessant for Bukowski. His ambivalence is genuine and even now he can't seem to control it. In the following scene he finally gives in to Pinchot (Schroeder) regarding Bledsoe (Rourke) asking for a new scene to be added to the script:

“He wants to do a scene in front of a mirror, he wants to say something in front of a mirror. Maybe a poem . . .”

“That could ruin everything, Jon.”

“These actors can be very difficult. If they get unhappy in the beginning, they can kill the whole film.”

Here I go, I thought, selling my ass down the river . . .

“All right,” I said, “I’ll write a poem in the mirror.”³¹⁶

This is a key scene as it reveals that, finally, despite the (literally) *decades* of posturing, when it finally came to the crunch, the ‘tough guy of literature’ folded and gave in to ‘Hollywood’. This scene takes on even greater meaning when read alongside a letter that Bukowski had written during pre-production:

We had one large producer willing to make *Barfly* into a major motion picture. Only one catch – he wanted to use Chris Christoferson (sic) as Chinaski, and in the part where Chinaski comes back to the room and lays in the dark listening to classical music, he wants Chris Chris (sic) to break out his guitar and start singing. We told him, no.³¹⁷

That he tells us “We told him, no.” after a producer asked for an actor to have a narcissistic scene added, suggests (seemingly) that despite his frequent hypocrisy, Bukowski did still have principles. However, he performs another half revolution when it comes to making the actual film, despite his having cast himself in the macho role of hero of integrity vs. progenitors of pop. Thus he can only play this role on paper; his integrity is purely textual; and when faced with the reality of a pushy actor, he capitulates.

³¹⁶ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 142

³¹⁷ Bukowski, *Living on Luck.*, to John Martin (December 29, 1979), 277

At the end of the novel Chinaski and Sarah (based on wife Linda) leave a screening of the film and return home. Now that the film is finished they can both finally relax. Yet something seems amiss:

We sat and drank and watched tv until Johnny Carson came on. There he was, perfectly clothed. His hand kept darting to the knot of his necktie, he was subconsciously worried about his appearance. Johnny went into his monologue and Ed's booming false laughter could be heard from the sidelines. It paid well.³¹⁸

That Bukowski ends the novel with a discussion between Chinaski and his wife whilst watching Johnny Carson being "subconsciously worried about his appearance" is intriguing, especially as this is within minutes of Chinaski having left a screening of a film about himself. I believe Bukowski reveals in the following letter precisely what was actually 'subconsciously worrying' him:

One thing I didn't like, strange as it may sound, was Mickey Rourke's clothing get up. The baggy dragging pants, the hair on face, the filthy shirt and undershirt. Now, I was a bum but let me tell you, I'd often come into the roominghouse drunk and wash my bluejeans, underwear and shirt, shorts, in the bathtub. This took a day or so while I wore my other set of stuff. My clothing was wrinkled but clean. The Rourke get up went too far.³¹⁹

Thus Bukowski, The Laureate of Skid Row, The Patron Saint of Punk, who had spent an entire career detailing squalid urbanity, and decades crafting an image of himself as alcoholic-hero-tramp poet of authenticity, ultimately, was actually *affronted* when someone portrayed him as grubby. He only wanted to create the *appearance* of filth. This is almost the final irony of Bukowski's Hollywood period. The juxtaposition of these two opposing intentions typifies the outrageous recurring ambivalence and hypocrisy of Bukowski's position. At least, he realised, just as Johnny Carson probably had: It paid well.

³¹⁸ Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 239

³¹⁹ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun*, to Teresa Leo (December 8, 1992), 265

Conclusion

Not long after the release of *Barfly*, Bukowski wrote to a friend: “Yes, I wrote a screenplay. [...] But think of all the terrible things you’ve heard about Hollywood, then multiply that by at least ten. I’m away from them now and it feels so good to be back in this room, typing at my old stuff.”³²⁰ Returning to what he had originally known best – the typing at the “old stuff” – after a sabbatical in the film world, brought with it a new way of thinking for Bukowski; a new cinematic approach to his writing. Many of his final poems reveal Bukowski’s changing attitude to Hollywood. I believe that the finest of these – and what is by far the most striking example of how greatly cinema influenced him – is the following poem *my movie*, published posthumously (1999):

my movies are getting better finally.
but I remember this one old movie I starred in.
I worked as a janitor in a tall office building
at night, with other men and
women who cleaned up the shit
left behind by other people.
those men and women had a very tired and dark and
useless feeling about them.

this one old man and I
we used to work very fast together
and then sit in an office on the top
floor
at the Big Man’s desk
our feet up there as
we looked out over the city and
watched the sun come up while
drinking whiskey

³²⁰ Bukowski, *Reach for the Sun.*, to Louise Webb (November 14, 1987), 94

from the Big Man's wet bar.³²¹

What is immediately noticeable in the opening two lines is the repetition of “my movies” and “movie” with reference to the improvement in the new ones over the less sophisticated older ones. By writing “I remember this one old movie” it is almost as if (via nostalgic reverie) Bukowski is about to screen the trailer for an old movie before he returns us to the main feature. Indeed, we are then treated to a flashback in which Bukowski “worked as a janitor in a tall office building / at night”, thereby returning us to the familiar Bukowsian territory of the struggling factotum pictured among dirty realist phrases like “cleaned up shit” and “tired and dark”. The depiction of Bukowski and “this one old man” with whom he “used to work very fast” brings to mind an old black-and-white Chaplinesque high-speed film sequence, janitors working quickly, arms flailing, brooms sweeping, and this high speed scene is then contrasted with the much slower pace of “and then sit in an office” at “the Big Man's Desk” with “our feet up”, clearly relaxing and thereby completing the Chaplinesque scene with a good dose of pantomime mimicry worthy of the Tramp. That Bukowski and the “old man” are “on the top / floor” of a “tall office building” looking “out over the city” whilst watching “the sun come up” also brings to mind both a feeling of mythic wonder as well as a nod to the glamour of golden era movies like *City Lights*. That Bukowski enjoyed acting as a leader of men, on top of the world, while actually being employed as a janitor reminds us of his ambivalence toward ambition and signals us to his early fractured relationship with his father, which the poem soon reiterates. The word “women”, meanwhile, is mentioned only once, thus keeping in tune with Bukowski's wider oeuvre in general in which women are relegated to second place while the predominant focus; and the one mention of women is not particularly epic – “women who cleaned up shit”. Although the line enjambed with the previous line's final phrase “other men and”, it is still placed on its own line, physically placing women nearer the “shit” than the “men”. In fact, this line is enjambed with the next too so that we find women are specifically cleaning up “the shit / left behind by other people” – which is both physically and figuratively in tune with most of Bukowski's work. The incessant enjambling might not seem to have a metrical purpose although it does therefore match the formlessness of this middle act of

³²¹ Bukowski, *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire: New Poems*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa (1999), 405

Bukowski's life which is predominantly centred around "shit" jobs, cleaning up "shit" and is just generally "shit" – a substance literally lacking in form. The repetition of "Big Man" in regard to the two men "drinking whiskey / from the Big Man's wet bar" reminds us of both Bukowski's drinking habit as well as his obsession with the glamour of the macho Big Man – Bukowski is, as we have seen both obsessed with films *and* film stars' looks and physical characteristics. This also reiterates that Bukowski is placing himself, as always, in a longer tradition of macho writers who drank. As he points out in *Hollywood*: "I had been preceded by some good drinkers. Eugene O'Neill, Faulkner, Hemingway, Jack London. The booze loosened those typewriter keys, gave them some spark and gamble."³²² Indeed, Robert Collins would later suggest that Bukowski "almost singlehandedly inspired a generation of would-be writers to believe that you could spend your entire life getting drunk and still achieve a reputation as a cult author."³²³ The poem continues:

the old man talked and I listened to the
years of his life
not much
he was just another tired guy who cleaned up
other people's shit
and did a good job of it.

I didn't.
they canned me.³²⁴

The dynamic phrase "the old man talked and I listened" could mean his co-janitor as well as his father, a man whom Bukowski referred to "as the old man" and who also "talked" while Bukowski had "listened". The summation of "the years of his life" (i.e. the old man's) add up to "not much", a two-word phrase which is given its own line, one of the shortest of the poem, to illustrate physically its diminutive size. Bukowski's father's life had indeed amounted to "not much" in his son's eyes, and Bukowski only received \$16,000 after his parents' deaths which he quickly frittered

³²² Bukowski, *Hollywood*, 237

³²³ Robert Collins, *Charles Bukowski*, The Observer (Sunday 24 January, 2010)

³²⁴ Bukowski, *What Matters Most.*, 405

away at the track. Bukowski tells us the old man was “just another tired guy who cleaned up / other people’s shit” thus reminding us of the “cleaned up the shit” phrase in the opening stanza, reiterating that the topic of the poem is “shit”, a formless waste, similar to the formlessness of a narrative poem without classic lyrical structure. Bukowski tells us the old man “did a good job of it”, which, again could refer to his actual father’s conformity in life, playing the game correctly, fighting in a war, working a nine-to-five, paying his taxes. Bukowski then says of his own attempt, “I didn’t”, immediately contrasting his position with the older janitor in this scene as well as with his father. The dynamic phrase “they canned me” actually holds three potential meanings in the context of this poem: 1) They fired him; 2) They put the film of his life in a can (in filmmaking terminology, once a film is shot it is referred to as “in the can”), thus Bukowski is telling us this Chaplinesque factotum tramp-like film of his early life is over; 3) “Canned” can also mean drunk (especially in American Depression-era vernacular) and Bukowski was possibly fired for getting drunk on the job, drinking the Big Man’s whiskey, thus he got canned for getting canned! Bukowski continues:

then I got a job as a dishwasher
and they also canned me there because
I wasn’t a good dishwasher.³²⁵

The second reference to being canned, “they also canned me there” is quite literally sandwiched between the two words “dishwasher” and “dishwasher” which appear immediately above and below it, thus suggesting an actual physical canning of Bukowski by the menial jobs that he worked in, like a literal can in a dishwasher, as well as the notion again of film in a can, signalling, perhaps, that he is referring to the fact that a film was made about this period of his life, too. i.e. they “canned” a movie of my earlier life, then they “canned” another of my next period, and so on (maybe referring to Hackford’s film, then Ferreri’s, then Schroeder’s, etc.) – ultimately leading us to Bukowski’s final, Hollywood period. The poem ends:

this was a seemingly endless low-budget movie
it ran for years and years

³²⁵ Bukowski, *What Matters Most.*, 405

it didn't cost 50 million to make
it didn't have an anti-war message
it really didn't have much to say about anything
but you still ought to read my poems
and see it.³²⁶

That it was a “seemingly endless low-budget movie” implies that it had the appearance of cheapness but in reality was not, reminding us of Bukowski’s ambivalence about his own image as well as implying that all along he knew his movie would be box-office gold as it was only “seemingly” low-budget. That it “ran” for “years and years” reminds us again of a running film with reels turning in a projector, as well as that the analogy is being applied to an entire lifetime. The dramatic tricolon at the end of the poem, composed of “it didn’t”, “it didn’t”, “it really didn’t”, suddenly gives formal structure to Bukowski’s poem, thus – in its final moments – the poem (i.e. Bukowski’s *life*) suddenly becomes more lyrical. Thus the appeal of cinema has actually triggered an entry into form, a new framing of his life story. That this movie of his life “didn’t have much to say” is also a dynamic phrase as Bukowski was invariably concise with his writing, i.e. he *quite literally* didn’t say much (as in didn’t use many words due to his simplistic style of poetry). The repetition of the word “movie” in the final stanza reminds us of the opening stanza, thereby framing Bukowski’s entire life in a neat three act structure within which the middle section – which revolved around “shit” (which lacks form) – is suddenly seen to have been framed by form, canned by it, so to speak, and presented as its own flowing narrative yet in lyric mode at the end, thus also revealing (yet again) Bukowski’s recurring ambivalence about conventional form vs. reinvention, authenticity vs. inauthenticity, cinema vs. literature. The fact is, for Bukowski, poetry complicates machismo, and the best way for him to assert his ego through writing is to use allusion to film in order to create accessibility for his readers.

With this poem, then, Bukowski has graduated from simply writing about films – i.e. mentioning films/characters/actors/directors – and employing ‘film-like’ writing, but has now turned his actual life *into a movie* – a series of poems/scenes which he ‘sees’ as an entire film. This is, I believe, a key moment in the evolution of Bukowski’s literary style and clearly reveals the summation of the lifetime of influence that cinema

³²⁶ Bukowski, *What Matters Most.*, 406

had upon him. Bukowski concludes by inviting us, the readers, to watch the ‘movie of his life’. And how? – “read my poems / and see it’. Thus, for Bukowski, *reading* is quite literally *seeing*.

It is, finally, a “movie” made up of shorter individual “movies” the earlier ones of which Bukowski tells us were worse than the later, the latter of which are actually “getting better”. i.e. As Bukowski’s lot in life has improved, accordingly so have his ‘movies’. He probably wrote this poem on his Mac inside his study upstairs in his Hollywood mansion, a far cry from his battered typewriter in a cheap, rented room with peeling wallpaper. Thus the final irony of his life is this re-embrace of cinema just before his death; ironic as he had been so inspired by it as a child, then so disgusted by it as an adult, but ultimately realised he could re-live his life through it when combined with his writing. Bukowski is the poet of enjambement, constantly employing enjambement to keep the eye moving, just like with a movie. ‘Poet Laureate of Skid Row’ is in itself an oxymoron, thus perfectly typifying the ambivalence and recurring hypocrisy of Bukowski’s position regarding literature, cinema and ambition. In this sense, rather than a sell-out he is in fact the quintessential working class hero who, like Chaplin before him, went from Dickensian poverty to the Hollywood Hills. Thus not only had the films improved for Bukowski, but, by the final act of his life, via the wider syncretism in his gathering of literary and cinematic influences, he created a new way of writing in regard to thinking of it (again, quite literally) as film, thus enabling Bukowski to attain the classic lyric happy ending and realisation of the American Dream.

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