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*How to Successfully Fail Charles Bukowski*

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# Allegories of Branding

How to Successfully Fail Charles Bukowski

*Gaston Franssen*

## Abstract

The American author Charles Bukowski (1904-1984) has become an authorial brand – that is, a complex symbol that projects a set of associations onto commercial products. This brand emerges from interactions between the fields of creation, production, and reception. Bukowski himself fuelled this interaction by constructing a recognizable, albeit contradictory public figure: that of the successful loser. Focusing on the Dutch reception of Bukowski as a case study, I demonstrate how cultural producers and suppliers capitalize on this figure, invoking it to suggest that their products allow consumers to partake in the Bukowskian lifestyle. However, the contradictions inherent in the persona of the successful loser subvert this process. As a consequence, instances of Bukowskian branding appear as normative failures, as their very success belies the values associated with the author.

**Keywords:** Bukowski, authorship, branding, cross-field interaction, the Netherlands, deconstruction

## Introduction: The Brandability of the Beastbuk

The phrase ‘What would Bukowski do?’ is a life mantra for many fans of Charles Bukowski (1904-1984). Admirers of ‘Buk’ or the ‘Beastbuk’, as the author would refer to himself at times, can even wear their hearts, in a very literal sense, on their sleeves, for there is an impressive supply of Bukowski merchandise (Churkovski 1991: 41). Numerous pin badges and T-shirts feature the question, portrayed as if an aphorism on how to navigate through life.

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Curiously, it seems to be the question itself, rather than its possible answers, that holds the key to understanding the Bukowskian way of life. Even if the question goes unanswered, the phrase functions as an indicator of a specific attitude, or mode of being – in other words, of a lifestyle. ‘Bukowski’ has become a successful brand, a specific set of connotations attached to books, films, clothing, beverages, home accessories, and even restaurants and bars, all allowing individuals to partake in the Bukowskian lifestyle.

However, this branding of Bukowski – by which I refer to the process of the author becoming a brand as well as the use of the author as a brand to market products and services – has something profoundly self-subversive to it. Here, too, the aphoristic phrase ‘What would Bukowski do?’ provides an insightful starting point for further reflection, as semantic fault lines quickly appear when one attempts to actually answer this question – indeed, what *would* the Beastbuk do? As will become clear, potential answers that would concur with what has become the author’s trademark persona include: Bukowski would never conform to the existing order or dominant aesthetic conventions; he would refuse all opportunities to success, social mobility, or increase of status; he would embrace his position as an outsider and self-determined loser.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, such answers point to an implied cluster of choices and preferences that make up the quintessential Bukowskian lifestyle. Yet paradoxically, these answers also indicate that there are certain practices that the intractable author would certainly *not* engage in. For example, Bukowski would refrain from engaging in commercial endeavours such as advertising or merchandise production; he would never bother with fashionable clothing or home accessories, let alone buy or wear badges featuring authors’ quotes; and he would certainly not allow either himself, or his work, to be transformed into a commodity tailored to audiences’ expectations. On closer inspection, the quintessential Bukowskian lifestyle appears to be deeply at odds with the process of branding.

These reflections on the afterlife of Bukowski already reveal that the author’s branding is driven by a negative moment or, in the terms of literary theory, by a deconstructive impulse. Reflecting on the process of literary reading, the post-structuralist critic Paul de Man argues that this impulse manifests itself when it is revealed that readers’ most profound insights are often the result of a ‘peculiar blindness’ – of a ‘negative moment that animates the critic’s thought’ and simultaneously ‘leads his language away

1 Tellingly, Bukowski figures prominently in the opening pages of Mark Manson’s popular self-help book *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living the Good Life*. Manson (2016).

from its asserted stand' (De Man 1971: 103, 106). I propose that this 'blinded vision' (De Man 1971: 106) can be clearly seen to be at work in the branding of Bukowski. The appeal of the Bukowski brand is dependent on the author's characteristic refusal of all forms of success, be it in terms of sales figures, social elevation, or cultural prestige. However, at the precise moment that the author is successfully branded – which seemingly bolsters his market visibility and cultural presence – important elements of the Bukowskian lifestyle appear to be downplayed or even negated. As a result, commercially appealing or socially accepted instances of Bukowski branding turn out to be normative failures, since their very success belies the values that readers have come to associate with the author. In this contribution, I want to explore this deconstructive dynamic. Thus, I will argue that the branding of Bukowski can be read in terms of what De Man would call an allegory of unreadability – or, in this case, a narrative about the author's unbrandability.

My analysis is driven by two fundamental questions: Firstly, what are the elements and operations that constitute the Bukowski brand? Secondly, how does the negative moment at work in the author's branding affect the use of the author as a brand by others? In seeking answers to these questions, and for two interrelated reasons, I will focus on Bukowski's reception in the Netherlands. Bukowski's early acceptance and ongoing popularity in the Netherlands constitute my first reason. All of his novels and most of his poetry collections have been translated into Dutch. Well-known Dutch authors have praised him and even attempted to emulate him, and his work has generated Dutch film, dance, and theatre adaptations, Bukowski reading tours, and Bukowski festivals. Perhaps Bukowski has appealed to Dutch markets because his work and lifestyle harmonized with the tolerant, anti-authoritarian, and culturally alternative self-image of the Dutch, given that critics were quick to welcome the author as an 'anarchistic figure' and a 'leading representative of underground poetry' (Anon. 1970; Anon. 1980). Whatever the cultural explanation for his appeal may be, it is undeniable that the Netherlands comprises an extensive and profitable market for the branding of Bukowski. A second reason to focus on the author's impact in the Netherlands is that the transposition of the author's work to a non-American context, in which it must be tailored to audiences with different tastes, initiates a selective foregrounding and exploitation of those elements of the Bukowskian universe that are considered to be compatible with the Dutch market. Bukowski's extensive Dutch success, in other words, holds out the promise of providing ample insights in the transformative and expansive work of the branding process.

Before I turn to the ‘Dutch’ Bukowski, in the following section I first develop a theoretical framework that conceptualizes branding as a dialectical process. As I will demonstrate, a brand is not merely a marketing tool employed by a particular company, but a dynamic, collaborative construct constituted through cross-field reactivity – that is, through an ongoing interaction between the cultural fields of creation, production, and reception. This conceptualization implies that branding is to be understood as a process of emergence that lies significantly beyond the control of individual actors. In the third section, I turn to the Bukowski brand itself and trace its origins in the author’s work and biography, paying special attention to the role of success and failure in his self-presentation. Whilst it appears that the author was unable to control his public image, his self-presentation did introduce key elements to what would become the Bukowski brand. The fourth section focuses on the reception of Bukowski’s work in the Netherlands, exploring how the success of his Dutch translations and adaptations relates to the connotations and values associated with the Bukowski brand. First, however, a more conceptual issue needs to be addressed: How might we understand literary authorship in terms of branding?

### Conceptualizing Authorial Branding

Modern, (post)romantic discourses of authorship often presuppose the finiteness of, and indissoluble tie between, an author and his or her oeuvre (Bennett 2005: 55). As Roland Barthes (1977: 147) famously observed in his essay *The Death of the Author*, ‘[t]o give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing’. Yet the process of authorial branding is characterized precisely by a proliferation of meaning (which can, but does not necessarily have to be controlled by a managerial strategy, as the next section will show) and a disconnection of author and text. After all, Bukowski did not author the phrase ‘What would Bukowski do?’, but it is nonetheless an undeniable product of the signifying potential of his oeuvre. Likewise, his work does not contain references to, for instance, the ‘Bukowski Tavern’, but his name has been effectively affixed to the restaurants bearing that name in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, as a mark of quality. It is this productive, expansive dimension of branded authorship that I aim to conceptualize in this section.

Jeroen Dera et al. (2021: this volume) define a cultural brand as a set of regimented associations, resulting from an interactive process in which cultural producers, intermediaries, and consumers are involved. Given this

definition, authorial branding implies that an author has been transformed into a complex, collectively construed symbol that bundles specific values associated with commercial products. The idea that artists, too, can be thought of as brands has already been pursued by several marketing scholars. For example, in his article, 'The Artist and the Brand', Jonathan E. Schroeder (2005: 1292) argues that artists are 'exemplary instances of image creation in the service of building a recognizable look, name, and style', and as such, they 'can be thought of as brand managers, actively engaged in developing, nurturing, and promoting themselves as recognizable "products"'. However, as others in the field point out, an analysis such as Schroeder's, which emphasizes the role of artists as brand 'managers', runs the risk of underplaying the influence that audiences have in the creation of their public image. In order to resist such a 'managerialist blinding', Daragh O'Reilly (2005: 582) claims that 'it is important always to keep in mind the dialogic character of branded communications' and to assert that all 'brand identities', including those of artists, are 'to be constructed and negotiated in the context of social interaction'.

Within a literary context, this means that the branding of an author should not be understood merely as a form of consolidation or reproduction of existing texts and images by the author. Rather, it has to be valued as an emergent process, entailing authorial control and continuity as well as spontaneous change and the addition of new texts and images by others. In *Under the Cover: The Creation, Production and Reception of a Novel*, Clayton Childress (2017: 8-11) introduces a terminology for the analysis of the literary industry that can help to clarify this. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, Childress distinguishes between three fields within the publishing world: the field of creation, that of production, and that of reception. These fields are interdependent – novels, authors, and reputations can travel between fields. For example, literary agents pitch authors to publishers; marketing agencies introduce novels to audiences; publishers then adapt backlists depending upon their audiences' responses; thereby affecting authors, and so on. Although these fields are generally oriented towards the maintenance of the market's status quo, Childress (2017: 241) points out that their interdependence can result in what he describes as 'loops' of 'exogenous forces of change'. By this, he refers to reiterative shifts in one field in response to changing conditions in another. This 'cross-field reactivity' provides continuity within fields as well as accounting for the proliferation and differentiation of what the different fields produce.

Although Childress (2017: 241) does not write on the process of branding per se, his terminology helps to conceptualize branding as a product of cross-field interaction. The authorial brand, too, emerges out of this

inter-field reactivity. First, the author's success in a field of reception – be it with literary critics, the general audience, or a particular subculture – results in the production of new meanings: audiences construct images of authors and associate them with values they find appealing. The author's impact sends ripples throughout the other fields, stimulating other actors to play into the success. On the one hand, this capitalization depends on continuity and repetition: in order to catch the attention of its target audiences, well-known images or texts of the author have to be reproduced, underlining the attributes appreciated by the audiences. This produces the authorial brand as a set of associations, built up and reaffirmed over a period of time. On the other hand, the use of the brand as a tool to target new audiences – to generate innovative meanings, in line with the required market differentiation – requires adjustments and extensions of the author as a brand: the associated set of attributes has to be tailored to a new field of reception. Such transformations in one field, responding to changing conditions of supply and demand in other fields, are examples of Childress's loops of exogenous forces of change. Over time, the changes in the brand narrative can even eclipse its origins in the field of creation, invoking values with only very indirect relations to the author.

Here, one can think of examples such as the 'aesthetic' qualities of the persona of Oscar Wilde invoked to sell cigars, or a photograph of Ernest Hemingway's penny loafers to market a shoe shining product, or a line from Bukowski – 'food is good for the nerves and the spirit' – quoted in a menu to suggest the countercultural, underground appeal of a restaurant.<sup>2</sup> In all of these cases, the author does not function as an ultimate signified that closes the writing of the text (as Barthes would say), but as an emerging and proliferating brand – as a complex symbolic structure, invoking the author's semiotic potential and redirecting it in order to introduce a commercial product in selected fields of reception. In Bukowski's case, this symbol is easily recognizable but comes with certain contradictions, as illustrated in the next section.

### **Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life: The Origins of the Bukowski Brand**

The main elements that constitute the Bukowski brand can be traced back to his personal life story. All of his biographers paint a picture of a rough-hewn

2 See Mayer (2016: 114) on Wilde; Ogilvy (2018) for Hemingway; and Bukowski Tavern (2018) for the Bukowski quote (taken from his 1971 novel *Post Office*).

loner, who wastes his days in the 'seedier' parts of Los Angeles, rubbing shoulders with barflies, prostitutes, and dropouts, whilst spending his money on alcohol, women, and gambling. Neeli Cherkovski, his first biographer, describes him as a 'lone figure', growing up 'in cheap dives and dead-end jobs' to become a 'rough-edged libertine' and a 'boozing, sex-crazed character' (Cherkovski 1991: 57, 264, 207, 231). In his book, *Charles Bukowski* (2005), Barry Miles (2005: 12, 203) also characterizes the author as an 'outsider, loner', a 'hard-drinking, belligerent wild-man'. Howard Sounes (2007: 6-8) chimes in with his portrait of a 'bawdy writer' who is a 'a roaring drunk for much of his life', and whose life philosophy revolves around a stubborn 'refusal to try and "get on" in life'. This, indeed, was the preferred self-image of the author: the 'Dirty Old Man' – from the title of his underground press column series, *Notes From a Dirty Old Man* – who feels at home at the bottom of American society (Miles 2005: 159).

The first-person narrator of Bukowski's poetry and his novelistic alter ego Henry (Hank) Chinaski answer to the same description. The life stories they tell are similar: a difficult childhood, an abusive father, a life spent drinking and fighting – with practically everyone, from alcoholic men, loose women, pestering bosses, to pretentious authors – whilst writing a good story or poem every once in a while. The world they inhabit is roughly the same: one of 'sleazy bars, littered alleyways, [and] dark furnished rooms', where they mingle with 'the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the mad and [the] dysfunctional' (Cherovski 1991: 97; Miles 2005: 10). Michael Hemmingson (2008: 45-46) effectively sums up the literary universe of Bukowski/Chinaski with a list of core ingredients: first, 'alcohol', as both narrator and characters spend their time drinking beer and cheap wine; second, 'work', understood as something that is necessary but 'either loathed or not there'; third, 'women', mainly in the figure of 'barflies, prostitutes, nymphomaniacs'; and finally, 'the ugly' – that is, the ugliness of the life of the modern urban underclass, which the author transforms into 'the beauty of the human grotesque'. Of course, from a biographer's point of view it is important to keep in mind that the author was prone to self-mythologizing. Most biographers are quick to point out that Bukowski created an exaggerated 'persona' that cannot be taken at face value; Miles even claims that the author reinvented 'the Bukowski myth' so often 'that it is now impossible to sort out the truth from fantasy' (Cherkovski 1991: 114; Miles 2005: 83, 60).

Be that as it may, it is precisely this almost caricatural self-stylization as a boozing tough guy from the urban underclass that became his defining trademark. Both Abel Debritto and David Charlson have charted how Bukowski developed into an iconic figure, with Charlson (2005: 42) helpfully



outlining three stages: first, the real author builds a 'personal myth' from real experiences; then, 'the author *and* the man [...] use the personal myth' to 'further define themselves'; finally, the myth is fleshed out in the Chinaski novels. The resulting persona, suggests Andrew J. Madigan (1996: 456), 'was increasingly becoming an entity in its own right'. Already at the beginning of his fame, the real Henry Bukowski Jr. struggled with his popular *doppelgänger* – a creation that was increasingly out of his control. He complained about 'this shitty image, this Humphrey Bogart image of me', and about 'those who worship me as some totally wild Hemingway, or some slum-god from the sewers of L.A.' (Cherkovski 1991: 178). However, once the public image of Bukowski was set, there was no escape: all of the author's biographers note that he felt compelled to live up to the audience's expectations. In this sense, the author was (referring to the subtitle of Sounes' biography) 'locked in the arms of a crazy life'.

Although the components that constitute the Bukowski brand vary over time, as the next section will illustrate, one persistent dimension of the author's public image needs to be addressed separately here, as it introduces the negative moment that complicates the use of the author as a brand. This dimension pertains to the role of success. Both in the form of bestseller print runs and literary fame, success came relatively late for Bukowski: despite his mid-1940s debut in *Story* magazine and his cult status in the little magazines, it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that he was to finally reach a wider audience.<sup>3</sup> As a result of his growing popularity, Bukowski was not only able to support himself as a full-time writer, he even became a literary celebrity: his readings were crowd pullers, his work was adapted to the big screen (with Hollywood actor Mickey Rourke starring as Chinaski), and the author found himself in the company of famous authors and stars, such as Alan Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, Sean Penn, and Madonna (Miles 2005: 198, 254, 260, 275).

Yet in spite of this popularity, the Bukowski persona and the lifestyle it represented continued to be predicated on a stubborn disavowal of all forms of success.<sup>4</sup> The self-image projected by Bukowski is, in fact, that of the ultimate loser. In a letter from 1965, for instance, the author distances himself from fans who take him to be a role model: 'I am a fucking oracle

3 Bukowski's slow rise to success, from the little magazines and zines to mainstream culture, is documented by Debritto (2013) and Madigan (1996).

4 See also Charlson's (2005: 92) analysis of Bukowski's position in the field of tension between high culture and popular culture; and Madigan's (1996: 451-461) reading of Bukowski's *Hollywood* (1989) as a fictionalized expression of his unease with regard to his Hollywood success.

[...] for the *lost* or something, is what they tell me. that's nice. but I *am the lost*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the author prefers 'losers' to 'winners', as in his opinion the latter's success can only be the result of giving in to social expectations or aesthetic conventions. 'You say you never care much for losers, but it's all I've known', Bukowski (1995a: 22) confesses to John William Corrington in 1962: 'I don't like winners. Winners get fat and careless and write things like *The Old Man and the Sea* which is printed in *Life* magazine for a public which was long ago gaffed by the formula.' Not much later, again in personal correspondence, he even characterizes himself as 'the Image of the Loser, the Man who doesn't care, the Man who didn't quite make it' (Bukowski 1995a: 87). It is a pattern of self-fashioning that returns in Bukowski's literary work, which embodies, according to Russell Harrison (1994: 14), a wholesale 'rejection of the ideology of success and power'. In the following section I take a closer look at two examples in order to illustrate this rejection more clearly.

In one of his *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* columns, Bukowski (2011: 163-165) puts forward a distinction between two forms of fame, although turning away from both. Some writers, he proposes, 'are famous not because their work is excellent and original but because the masses identify with the output' (163). The books of the authors are highly popular and thus, as a consequence, they 'line the stands of the bookstores in the shopping malls. *The Heartbeat's Wail. Thunderblossom*'. These writers are 'more rich than famous', he maintains, but they are not 'real': they are 'false in their ideals, their actions, their lives' (163). At the other end of the spectrum of success, according to Bukowski, are 'the *literary* writers': 'Their idea is that if something is written tediously enough, if it is involuted enough, if it is hardly understood, then, that's art.' (164) The success of these authors is not based on mass appeal, obviously, but on favouritism, as 'they promote, publish and teach each other'. Hence, 'these writers are more famous than rich', according to Bukowski, since 'they are the only ones who buy each other's books' whilst constantly complaining 'of the success of such writers as those who put out books entitled *The Heartbeat's Wail; Thunderblossom* and so forth' (165). Bukowski concludes that an author, when confronted with these two models of success, can never be sure if it is truly deserved, 'so there's only one thing to do: go on typing, as I have been doing here' (165). With his column, Bukowski explicitly refutes success in the form of what sociologists would label 'economic capital' – short-term, mass-market success that will quickly fade away – as well as success in the form of 'symbolic capital' – that

5 Quoted in Sounes (2007: 79); emphasis in original.

is, acknowledgment by other authors or critics, leading to limited but long-term prestige, albeit only within a small circle of connoisseurs (Thompson 2012: 21-31). Bukowski presents himself as completely opting out of the economic dynamics of the literary field: he is not in it for profit, status, or power. In reality, of course, columns like this one did have a profound field effect, turning Bukowski into a 'Los Angeles celebrity' (Miles 2005: 159). However, notwithstanding his celebrity status, it seems safe to conclude that the author preferred not to be seen as a 'winner'.

The aptly titled poem 'The Loser', first published in 1960, confirms Bukowski's unease with winning (Bukowski Net 2018). Evoking the aftermath of a bar fight in fragmentary images, it is an exemplary Bukowski poem, with an intriguing programmatic twist at the end. It starts mid-sentence with the first-person narrator recalling how he once found himself lying 'on a table' – presumably after being struck down. He remembers 'some toad', 'smoking a cigar', looking down on him and saying: "Kid, you're no fighter." The narrator goes on to describe how he 'got up' nonetheless and 'knocked him over a chair'. Dumbfounded, his opponent repeats 'over and over: "Jesus, Jesus, Whatsmatta wit / you?"'. The poem ends with the lines 'I got up and dressed, / (believe it or not) / the tape still on my hands and / wrote my first poem, / and I've been fighting / ever since' (Bukowski 1973: 45). The scene invokes the classic Bukowski persona: a washed-up tough guy, picking fights in smoke-stained bars. Interestingly, the experience of taking a beating coincides with the birth of the poet, as the act of fighting is aligned with the writing of poetry. This closing twist, together with the title, invite the reader to interpret the invoked persona as a trope: the first-person narrator is not a literal loser, but the allegorical Loser – the personification of the Bukowskian lifestyle.

The final lines introduce an important ambiguity to this portrayal. On the one hand, they suggest that the poet cannot be anything but a 'loser', as the barroom trashing that kick-starts his poetic production marks him from the outset, quite literally as a 'beaten-down' figure. On the other hand, the closing lines raise doubt about whether or not the first-person narrator really is to be identified with the allegorical figure of 'the Loser'. After all, the narrator does *not* fail: as a fighter, he succeeds in flooring the 'toad'. As if to confirm this, his opponent's "you're no fighter" is countered with the claim that he has been 'fighting / ever since'. Similarly, despite being a beaten-down poet, he successfully turns his fighting spirit into a source of creative energy – with a first poem as result. Moreover, the structural parallel between fighting and writing suggests an alternative phrasing of the poem's last line, with the undefeated poet '*writing* / ever since'. Thus,

in the end, the allegorical setup of the poem subverts itself, producing a highly contradictory persona: a successful loser.

### Brands and Bars: Cross-Field Interaction in the Netherlands

Once Bukowski started to enjoy popularity, audiences wanted to see and read more of the same. From within the field of creation and production, this demand was happily met by publishers, magazine editors, and cultural journalists as well as by Bukowski himself, all supplying the audience with new images and texts confirming the qualities that readers had come to associate with Bukowski and his work. Out of this cycle of production and reception arose the complex symbol of 'Bukowski' – an authorial brand. However, as this section will demonstrate, this brand is susceptible to change, as the different loops of inter-field reactivity foreground some aspects of the set of associations whilst downplaying others. At the same time, the contradictions inherent to the Bukowskian figure of the successful loser will prove to have profound consequences for the use of this author as a brand.

In order to explore this dynamic, I now turn to the Dutch fields of production and reception. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Bukowski's success in the Netherlands offers ample insights into the expansive and transformative work of cultural branding. A first important observation is how, with the publication of a volume of Dutch translations of his poems in 1970, Bukowski was characteristically introduced to the Dutch market as the author of poetry about failure and defeat.<sup>6</sup> A review in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* praises the author for the 'relentless honesty' with which he analyses 'his own spinelessness, his non-conformity, and his self-pity'. This 'spinelessness', the reviewer contends, marks the poet's 'mode of being in a world where all the good things and all the beautiful women are for the others'. Clearly, Bukowski's work is presented as a literature of losers – as a 'poetry of the failure of the adjusted and the defeat of the maladjusted' (RK 1970).<sup>7</sup> This trend continues with the reception of *Postkantoor* (1977), the Dutch translation of *Post Office*. An initial reviewer applauds the author for

6 The translation, *Dronken Mirakels & Andere Offers* (Bukowski 1970), was produced by the Cold Turkey Press, an underground publisher from Rotterdam; see Brus (2012).

7 RK (1970): 'Met een niets ontziende eerlijkheid ontleedt de dichter zijn eigen zakkigheid, zijn onaangepastheid, en zijn zelf-medelijden'; 'het is zijn wijze van bestaan in een wereld waar al de goede dingen en alle mooie vrouwen naar anderen gaan'; 'Poëzie derhalve van het echeder maatschappelijken en ook van de nederlaag die de onmaatschappelijken van vandaag voortdurend te lijden hebben'. All translations from Dutch are my own.

his hilarious portrait of an ‘alcoholic troublemaker’ (Luijters 1977),<sup>8</sup> whilst a second confirms the beaten-down tough guy persona, touching upon all the core elements of the Bukowski myth as inventoried by Hemmingson (2008): ‘a decade of continuous inebriation’ (alcohol), ‘dozens of trades and countless accidents’ (work), ‘a great amount of trouble with the ladies’ (women), ‘broke and down’ (the ugly) (Lieshout 1977).<sup>9</sup> Finally, a third reviewer evokes the image of Bukowski/Chinaski as failure personified: ‘Chinaski, whose experiences are without a doubt based on Bukowski’s own, is prototypical of the guy who is “had” by this society time and again’ (Maandag 1977).<sup>10</sup> This characterization would prove to be a constant theme in the Dutch reception of Bukowski: he was praised again and again for being a successful loser. The publisher De Bezige Bij, who translated and marketed most of Bukowski’s prose works during the 1980s and 1990s, began to play into this image: the jacket notes of the 1980 translation of *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1972) presents the author to the Dutch audience as ‘the born loser turned into a winner’ (Bukowski 1980).<sup>11</sup> Following Bukowski’s death in 1994, the author Martin Bril (1994) summarized Bukowski’s oeuvre as follows: ‘His work is the triumph of one single theme: losing. Missing the boat. Coming off worst. Getting the short end of the stick.’<sup>12</sup> Clearly, an ongoing interaction between the field of production and that of reception was taking shape.

However, it was only when others began to use the image of Bukowski to launch their own products that a brand – as conceptualized in the second section of this chapter – really began to emerge. ‘Bukowski’ became a form of shorthand used to refer to the specific interests of potential consumers. In the 1980s, for instance, the music magazine *Vinyl* – a Dutch version of *The Face* – advertised one of its issues with the slogan: ‘Also in this issue: Charles Bukowski [...], pop videos and clothing’ (Anon. 1983). A further example can be found in the marketing of the cult film *Crazy Love* (1987), directed by the Belgian filmmaker Dominique Deruddere and based on

8 ‘alcoholische dwarsligger’.

9 ‘een tiental jaren onafgebroken dronken; ‘dozijn ambachten en talloze ongelukken; ‘uitermate veel gelazer met dames; ‘blut in de put’.

10 ‘Chinaski, in wie Bukowski zonder enige twijfel een aantal persoonlijke ervaringen heeft gestopt, is het prototype van de vent, die in deze maatschappij steeds weer “gepakt” wordt, maar die er met een borrel en een vrouwtje [...] tracht boven uit te komen’.

11 ‘De geboren verliezer is een winnaar geworden’. The De Bezige Bij translations are collected in Bukowski (1995b).

12 ‘Zijn werk is dan ook de triomf van één thema: verliezen. De boot missen. Het onderspit delven. Het loodje leggen.’

Bukowski's stories. Newspaper advertisements for the film prominently featured the lines 'based on stories by Charles Bukowski' (Anon. 1987), with the author's name in capital letters and in a distinctly larger font than the names of either the director or the actors.<sup>13</sup> Bukowski was obviously no longer in need of any introduction; rather, the author's name itself had come to stand for an implied set of connotations, introducing products of a certain type and quality to the audience.

As the branding process intensified, 'Bukowski' increasingly became a cluster of suggested qualities of commercial products instead of an authorial identity – with the result that contradictions began to manifest themselves. The production and reception of *Pussy Album* (2016), a novel by Stella Bergsma – a Dutch poet, author, and singer of the band *Einstein Barbie* – illustrates this perfectly. Bergsma has repeatedly expressed her admiration for Bukowski. In one interview, she praises him as 'one of my heroes because he wrote in a "stripped-down" style about sex, drugs, and rock and roll' (Steenberghe 2017).<sup>14</sup> More importantly, with *Pussy Album* she attempts to follow in the footsteps of the author. Upon its publication, the novel, narrated by a self-destructive teacher who embarks on an affair with a pupil and gets caught in a downward spiral, was presented as a 'literary experiment'. Bergsma 'wanted to write a Charles Bukowski novel from the perspective of a woman, with all the related depressing sex, hectolitres of booze, self-destruction, craziness, and total degradation' (Vullings 2016).<sup>15</sup> Bergsma's critics followed up on the suggested comparison, comparing her to her literary hero, whilst praising her stylistic fireworks and her gripping description of the main character's downfall (Breukers 2016; Vullings 2016; Witteman 2016).

However, successful as the attempt to brand *Pussy Album* as a novel *à la* Bukowski may have been, the book goes against the grain of the Bukowskian lifestyle. Although alcohol abuse and sexual encounters play an important role, the novel's style and themes differ distinctly from Bukowski's work. Stylistically, *Pussy Album*, by employing the stream of consciousness approach to its prose – which is rich with intertextual references and language experiments – ends up being a far cry from the American author's stripped-down realism, which Bergsma praised. Additionally, the novel's heroine

13 'gebaseerd op verhalen van Charles Bukowski'.

14 'een van mijn helden omdat hij in een "uitgeklede" stijl over seks, drugs en rock-'n-roll schreef'.

15 'een literair experiment: ze wilde een Charles Bukowski-roman schrijven vanuit het perspectief van een vrouw, met alle deprimerende seks, hectoliters drank, zelf-vernietiging, gekte en totale verloedering van dien'.

has little of the principled ‘refusal to work ethic’ embodied in Bukowski’s underclass characters (Harrison 1994: 140). In Bergsma’s novel, the monotonous despair of lower-class life described by Bukowski is substituted for the eventful melodrama of a middle-class tragedy. Rephrasing Bukowski’s words on the success of Hemingway, one could argue that, on the one hand, Bergsma is one of those literary ‘winners’, producing a branded bestseller work aimed specifically at ‘a public which was long ago gaffed by the formula’ (Bukowski 1995a: 22). On the other hand, Bergsma can be said to have failed her American idol, as her success and the qualities for which her work is praised are markedly un-Bukowskian. *Pussy Album* thus illustrates how the components that make up the brand’s set of attributes can change over time and might even become incompatible with some of the values associated with the brand at an earlier stage of its history. This negative movement manifests itself even more profoundly in non-literary uses of the author as a brand. To illustrate this point, I conclude my discussion of the Dutch reception of Bukowski with another example – ‘Bar Bukowski’ in Amsterdam.

Situated in a trendy city neighbourhood, Bar Bukowski presents itself as ‘the hottest place in the eastern part of Amsterdam’ (Bar Bukowski 2018). Its name is far from coincidental; indeed, the bar’s website claims:

Named after the writer Charles Bukowski, this bar is breathing his love for alcohol, women and literature. From a type-machine light fixture above the bar to his quotes on the menu; as Bukowski said, ‘there is always a reason to drink!’<sup>16</sup> (Bar Bukowski 2018)

The menu includes a citation from *Post Office* next to the bar’s logo, which is based on the famous 1981 portrait of a teeth-baring Bukowski by photographer Mark Hanauer.<sup>17</sup> A mural in the style of Bukowski’s cartoonish self-portraits adorns the walls, next to another quote: ‘Life’s as kind / as you let it be.’ (Bukowski 2002: 193) Furthermore, customers can order a (blonde) beer named after the author, its logo promising ‘a wild ride with an outspoken blonde’.<sup>18</sup> The author’s ‘love for literature’ is evoked in the bar’s event programme, entitled ‘Notes of a Dirty Old Man’ – a monthly evening of public readings by young authors. Finally, the bar’s website includes a

16 In 1989, another Dutch bar, this time in the city of Haarlem, was named after Bukowski, and subsequently sued by the author for copyright infringement (Anon. 1989).

17 The Hanauer portrait of Bukowski is reprinted in Debritto (2013: 171).

18 The beer is only marketed as ‘Bukowski’ by the bar itself; for the general market, it is labelled as ‘Flink’; see RateBeer (2018).

restaurant review from a local newspaper that concludes: ‘Bukowski would have smiled approvingly if he would have entered this place thirstily and positioned himself at the bar’ (Bar Bukowski 2018).<sup>19</sup> In short, Bar Bukowski presents itself as an establishment that offers customers a chance to truly partake in the world of Bukowski.

It is not difficult, however, to point out a series of incongruities in this particular example of authorial branding. To begin with, the set of associations built up around the author is evoked only selectively at Bar Bukowski, to the exclusion of important elements, such as the ugliness of urban underclass life or the refusal to work ethic. Admittedly, the bar’s branding process does reproduce key elements of the Bukowskian universe, such as alcohol, sex, and literature, but in a sanitized manner: the menu offers a customized list of local craft beers and popular cocktails; the Bukowski beer is euphemistically presented as a ‘wild blonde’; and the literary evenings are organized in collaboration with respected Dutch literary institutions such as *Das Mag* magazine and Lebowski publishers. Significantly, the author’s statement that ‘there is always a reason to drink!’, cited in order to set the desired Bukowskian atmosphere, cannot be traced back to his letters, poems, or novels. It appears to be a paraphrase of what the bar owners believe to be the essence of the Bukowskian lifestyle.<sup>20</sup> It is a crucial paraphrase, however, as it rewrites the defeatist alcoholism of Bukowski’s hard-nosed losers into the more acceptable conspicuous consumption of middle-class, well-to-do *bons vivants*. In other words, Bar Bukowski presents its customers with a gentrified Bukowski – a branded author that has been adapted to meet the demands of the creative urban middle class. By doing so, it cannot help but fail the author: popular as the bar may be, it is unlikely that Bukowski, upon entering the establishment, would have smiled approvingly. Paradoxically, it is much more likely that he would have not felt at home in such a place.

### Failing Bukowski: By Way of Conclusion

Tracing the interaction between the Dutch fields of production and reception, I have illustrated how the branding of Bukowski can be understood as

19 ‘Bukowski zou goedkeurend hebben geglimlacht als hij hier dorstig was binnengestapt en had plaatsgenomen aan de bar’.

20 The quote appears to be a paraphrase of a paragraph taken from Bukowski’s *Women*: ‘That’s the problem with drinking, I thought, as I poured myself a drink. If something bad happens you drink in an attempt to forget; if something good happens you drink in order to celebrate; and if nothing happens you drink to make something happen.’ (Bukowski 2007: 77).



a collective and expansive process: loops between the fields construct the author as an emergent brand, which is subsequently projected onto a range of commodities in order to suggest that these have been produced 'under the sign' of Bukowski. However, the author's public image as a hard-nosed dropout who rejects all forms of success as false, turns out to complicate and subvert this process. Consequently, those who successfully evoke the author as a brand end up failing the Bukowskian lifestyle.

As has become clear, Bukowski's figure of the successful loser is the crux of the matter: he is an indeterminable personification that cannot be identified as a trope of either success or failure. In a literary context, De Man (1979: 204) has shown how such unstable tropes put into question the 'readability' of the text, as they demonstrate that the text in which they appear 'cannot be closed off by a final reading'. De Man goes on to distinguish between two types of 'unreadable' texts: first-degree, 'topological' narratives, which 'tell the story of the failure to denominate' (that is, tropes that demonstrate their undecidability); meanwhile, second-degree, 'allegorical narratives' tell 'the story of the failure to read' (that is, tropes that self-reflexively narrate their own unreadability) (205). Thus, in the context of Bukowskian branding, it can be concluded that the contradictory figure of the successful loser questions the brandability of the author's work. Indeed, as I hope to have shown, branding attempts that evoke this persona, such as Bergsma's *Pussy Album*, or Amsterdam's Bar Bukowski, reveal themselves to be topological narratives, demonstrating the indeterminacy of this figure and telling the story of their failure to brand.

The Bukowskian figure has also been shown to engender allegorical narratives. Returning to the poem 'The Loser', one might argue that the 'toad's' repetitive expression of bewilderment at the loser's winning punch – 'Jesus, Jesus, Whatsmatta wit / you?' – mirrors the reader's profound incomprehension of the figure of Bukowski, which refuses to be identified as a trope of either success or failure. Thus, the branding of the author turns out to be a process that generates allegories of unbrandability – narratives about the failure of branding. After all, in becoming a brand, the Bukowskian figure has been transformed into a trademark or logo, and by the same token, it has been misidentified and disfigured. In that sense, invoking the etymological history of the word 'brand' in its meaning of 'burning as a mark of identification' (Stern 2006: 219), Bukowski can be said to have been doubly branded.

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