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An Everyman's Pretty Face Grows Ever More Complex

By [A. O. SCOTT](#)

WHAT happened to that guy? Something like that was surely the first question that popped into critics' heads in May 2005, when Bent Hamer's "[Factotum](#)" popped up at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes. You could certainly wonder as much about the film's hero, Henry Chinaski, the chain-smoking, alcoholic alter ego of the novelist and poet [Charles Bukowski](#), whose life and work constitute a ribald, aching chronicle of drinking, womanizing, gambling, drinking, writing and drinking. Given such themes, it's easy to see what happened to Henry: his weary face, his hunched shoulders and the tremor in his hands tell a straightforward hard-luck tale; and if he sat still for long enough, you might be able to watch his lungs and liver disintegrating. This is a man who sets the bar as low as possible and then trips over it, a man for whom failure becomes its own form of achievement. How he came to be that way is of no interest to Henry, and therefore irrelevant to anyone else. This is just the way he is.

So the focus of the question might drift from the character to the man playing him, a roughed-up but nonetheless recognizable [Matt Dillon](#). His face is raw and ragged, and he moves with the cramped, tentative carefulness of someone decaying slowly from within.

Even after "[Crash](#)," in which Mr. Dillon played a Los Angeles police officer at war with himself and everything around him, his appearance in "Factotum," which opened on Friday, comes as something of a shock. Those of us with long memories or a special devotion to the work of [Francis Ford Coppola](#) are still likely to cherish the youthful image of Mr. Dillon in "[The Outsiders](#)" and "[Rumble Fish](#)" (both released in 1983), Mr. Coppola's self-conscious but impressively durable adaptations of S. E. Hinton's classic young-adult novels. (He also starred in "[Tex](#)," Tim Hunter's 1982 adaptation of another of Ms. Hinton's novels.)

Mr. Dillon, not even 20 when those films were made struck the precise balance between toughness and sensitivity that Ms. Hinton's tales of adolescent class struggle required. But the unforced naturalism of Mr. Dillon's acting was nearly overshadowed by his looks, the delicate, hollow-cheeked face of a born movie star.

What has happened since, somewhat surprisingly, is that Mr. Dillon, now 42, has grown up into one of the most resourceful character actors in American movies. The opening titles of "Factotum" explain that the word means "someone who works at many jobs." This is only technically true of Henry Chinaski, who is hired many times but usually works only until he is bored, thirsty or ready to head for the racetrack.

In the last decade or so Mr. Dillon has been something of a jack-of-all-trades, playing an impressively various collection of heavies, suckers, straight men and foils in movies ranging from Academy Award-season dark horses to straight-to-video dogs. This summer, in addition to Henry Chinaski, he plays the regular-guy buddy of [Owen Wilson](#)'s naughty-boy slacker in ["You, Me and Dupree."](#) a role that is not altogether untypical. Around the same time that "Crash" was in theaters last year, Mr. Dillon could be seen as a ruthless racecar driver, bullying [Lindsay Lohan](#) in "Herbie Fully Loaded."

During the 90's he portrayed a clumsy stalker in "There's Something About Mary" with [Ben Stiller](#) and [Cameron Diaz](#), [Nicole Kidman](#)'s amiable patsy of a husband in [Gus van Sant](#)'s ["To Die For"](#) and the guidance counselor caught up in dangerous sexual schemes with [Neve Campbell](#) and Denise Richards in ["Wild Things."](#) There have also been occasional flights into eccentricity, like the Brian Wilson-like songwriter in [Allison Anders](#)'s ["Grace of My Heart"](#) (1996).

Viewed from a certain angle, this career looks like a disappointment, though one that has lately been redeemed by the best supporting actor nomination for "Crash" and that movie's surprising best picture win. Twenty years ago Mr. Dillon seemed to be part of a cluster of young actors poised to become the leading men of the future. But that transition — the growth from quasi-juvenile promise to full movie-star adulthood — has proven especially tricky for some members of this cohort. These young would-be stars, who came on the scene in their late teens and early 20's during the 1980's, are hardly a lost generation; [Keanu Reeves](#), [Sean Penn](#), [Kevin Bacon](#) and [Tom Cruise](#) are all still very much around. But their development, like Mr. Dillon's, has occurred in the face of certain obstacles.

They arrived too late for the New Hollywood of the 1970's and too soon to reap the full glory of the indie renaissance of the late 80's and early 90's. The continued dominance of the generation ahead of them — the likes of [Dustin Hoffman](#), [Robert De Niro](#), [Al Pacino](#) and to some extent [Tom Hanks](#) — bestowed the mixed blessing of an extended youth. Many of them seemed to be perpetual teenagers who, all of a sudden, turned 40.

In Mr. Dillon's case, though, it has often seemed that traditional movie stardom did not much interest him. His definitive leading role remains Bob, the easygoing addict in Mr. Van Sant's ["Drugstore Cowboy"](#) (1989). That performance seems, at first glance, much more casual than it is, since the playful charisma of the character seems to arise effortlessly from the actor's personality. On subsequent viewings, though, you appreciate just how canny and subtle Mr. Dillon can be, as Bob's complexities — the desperation that shadows his charm, the way his commitment to reckless living requires a perverse kind of discipline — become clear.

In the years since, as his face has thickened into more conventional handsomeness — his straight, heavy brow is the dominant feature now that the cheekbones have filled in — Mr. Dillon has managed to be both self-effacing and memorable in his everyman roles. His good

looks have occasionally subverted his best efforts to blend in with the scenery. More often, though, his performances, even in movies that are barely worth a second (or a first) look, are distinguished by a sly wit and a lack of vanity.

And also a quiet perfectionism: a refinement of gesture and body language that is especially evident in “Crash” and “Factotum.” I am not one of those who think “Crash” is an especially good movie, but I do think it is an exceptionally well-acted one; some of the performances give it an emotional power far beyond what the writing or direction have earned. Mr. Dillon’s character, a mean-spirited cop whose bigotry overwhelms his decency, is in some ways the most schematic figure in a relentlessly schematic movie. The two sides of his character are illustrated in a pair of scenes with [Thandie Newton](#), a wealthy African-American woman whom he first molests and later rescues from a burning car.

He is an abstraction, a social contradiction turned into a moral axiom, but Mr. Dillon, with a swagger, a sneer and eyes that shift suddenly from cold hostility to anxious need, turns him into a human being. Henry Chinaski, by contrast, is a more-or-less real person — the distance between him and Charles Bukowski is approximately the breadth of a sheet of typing paper — stylized by Mr. Hamer’s dry, quizzical direction. Mr. Dillon plays him without romance or irony, but rather with a stumbling, soulful weariness. Who is this guy? He’s generous, drunk, mean, noble, confused: all of those ordinary qualities that only an extraordinary actor can make real.

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