

THE RATHER WRITERLY GERMAN director Hartmut Bitomsky likes to quote Oulipian writer Raymond Queneau. A work of art, according to Queneau, needs a rules-based structure. If those rules remain invisible, then the unseen and paranoia-inducing regularities will prey on the mind. The audience need not know the creator's purpose. Neither, then, do the participants in Bitomsky's new film, who are earnest German housewives, factory workers, construction laborers, scientists, and intellectuals, all of them occupied or preoccupied with dust.

Bitomsky, who is currently working in grimy Berlin after a long stretch teaching cinema in sunny California, has created a work engineered to feast on the anxieties of tidy-minded Teutons. Dust is his meditative, polymorphous essay on the pulverized: that which remains formless, invasive, unprunable, and uncategorizable. Bitomsky's dust is not mere meaningless bits of fluffy gray trash, but an itchily anal Freudian antistubstance that pours in through every crack in the German psyche.

Bitomsky never coaches his players; he simply sets up a camera and waits for them to do something unheimlich. They consistently oblige him. Most of the figures portrayed here are burdened with formidable academic learning and gleaming, ultraspecialized machinery. There are a few perky, lighthearted ones, such as the grinning female obsessive who collects lint balls and dust bunnies, categorizes them in fake Linnaean fashion, and preserves choice samples within solid plastic as a kind of "jewelry." She's clearly having a ball with her stark confrontation with the ineffable.

As for most of the film's other women--crop-haired cleaning ladies, glum assembly workers, and dutiful, objective scientists devoid of cosmetics and nail polish--they all tote psychic burdens that would baffle Hitchcock. Locked in intimate combat with irrevocable forces of decay, these fading flowers are morosely resigned to the microfith that besieges them; each softly falling mote of dust weighs on their souls like an anvil.

The queen among them is surely the museum staffer, who is fluent, heavy-lidded, conscientious, and yet touchingly disheveled in Berlin alterna-girl fashion. This punked-out functionary's melancholy task is to remove the dust from medieval statuary. She is keenly aware, as she reveals to us, that the ancient, crumbling paint on the drying wood is itself just a kind of dust. The polluted air of modern Berlin and even her own human exhalations are integrating themselves into the very substance of Germany's cultural heritage. She's in a quiet, ruthless, unwinnable war of camel's hair and damp Q-tips. It's painful to see her postmodern penance at the feet of a crumbling icon, whose original artisan probably finished in a week, put down his chisel, and went out for a beer.

There's also an extensive tour of a paint factory, where plastic tubs of pulverized

pigment would seem to offer a golden chance for some sticky, Disney-style polychromatic lyricism. That's a temptation Bitomsky firmly resists: This rainbow factory is a whirring, clanking tomb, which breeds dust in fantastic profusion. There's no getting away from the stuff, anywhere; it even haunts high-tech clean rooms where bunny-suited metaphysicians have to chase it down with sponges. Naturally the debris they pursue is commonly skin cells flaking off their own bodies. Ashes to ashes.

As the film rumbles on, spewing dense clouds of billowing particles, the scale methodically expands. Closets become echoing clean rooms, dead factories become exploding quarries, and quarries become old battlegrounds bedizened with toxic, fetus-wrecking spews of depleted uranium shells, which saw lavish use in Iraq and Kosovo. The eponymous Dust Bowl also takes its turn on the stage, where yesterday's hapless Okies endured desiccating woes that make Katrina look like a cakewalk.

As a documentarist whose previous works pondered (among other subjects) bomber aircraft, road construction, and an aging movie studio, Bitomsky is known for his wry repurposing of found footage. In *Dust*, he's outdone himself by finding some grainy reels literally eaten up with dust. These are writhing, spotty, and ontologically horrible, like some Man Ray experiment in cinematic autocannibalism.

In Oulipian fashion, *Dust* is a 35-mm film that tackles the smallest object that can be captured on film. As is pointed out in voice-over, film itself is merely colored micrograins haphazardly stuck to a frail plastic substrate. One hates to contemplate the inspired riffing Bitomsky might bring to digital bits, which are just like dust, only not even visible.

*Dust* "has its own life," intones our narrator, who is a definite presence in many of the scenes, although nameless and persistently invisible. This sardonic, gravelly character becomes quite sinister when, still invisible to us, he slyly infiltrates a woman's home to interrogate her as she twitchily vacuums the upholstery.

Rather than working itself up to a Wagnerian crescendo, the film slows in its closing moments. *Dust* is finally overwhelmed by its own fine,

choking substance, and loses its ability to breathe. One section near the end is downright pedantic, although its topic, the cosmic physics of dust during planet formation, ought to glitter with Carl Sagan-like pop-sci brio. Instead, hapless astrophysicists, trying to get dust to adhere and cohere, find themselves puzzled and frustrated.

*Dust* is a world of true grit--even our stellar aspirations are grit. We're

compounded of Stardust, which, under Bitomsky's microscope, looks as glumly unpromising as an East German Trabant. Under this film's shrouded skies--a leaden miasma of coal exhaust, factory smokestacks, and the wind-lofted grains of the perpetually stricken Sahara--we can no longer aspire, or even respire. Our feet are still firmly in the gutter, but the stars are denied us, these days.