NALANS JOURNAL OF NARRATIVE AND LANGUAGE STUDIES | ISSN: 2148-4066

Melville, Media, and Narratives– Special Issue 2024, Volume 12 – Issue 25

"He would do nothing in the office": Work and Alienation in Cinematic Adaptations of Herman Melville's Bartleby

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.59045/nalans.2024.46
APA Citation:

Müller, A. (2024). "He would do nothing in the office": Work and alienation in cinematic adaptations of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, *12* (25), 104-118.

Abstract

This paper analyzes the representation of the office workplace in filmic adaptations of Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener". Following a brief overview of film adaptations of Melville's short story, this article will discuss Miro Bilbrough's (2001) and Gerard Amsellem's (2013) short films, Andreas Honneths (2010) experimental interpretation as well as Laura Naylor and Kristen Kee's (2017) stop-motion movie. By, for instance, analyzing how the movies try to replicate the first-person narration, find visual images for Melville's uncinematic descriptive prose, or underline the thematic importance of writing by incorporating different forms of written text, I will firstly examine techniques of intermedial transposition. Since the filmmakers deploy the setting to reimagine or modernize the story, the set design is to be regarded as an essential part of the adaptation process. Paying particular attention to the usage of space, the visual presentation of physical and metaphorical walls, as well as the utilization of non-human entities as 'actors,' I will seek to demonstrate how the movies under study reflect contemporary office environments and dynamics of work culture. Updating the nineteenth-century quills and inkpots to modern office technology, for example, allows the directors to reflect upon how electronic communication can cause or reinforce isolation. Different concepts of alienation serve as an essential theoretical framework for the movies. The adaptations concern themselves with social disconnect, engage in questions of ecological alienation, or focus on a political and socioeconomic interpretation of Bartleby's passive resistance to productivity and consumption.

Keywords: Bartleby the Scrivener, office, literary film adaptation, short film, alienation

Introduction

At first glance, Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853) does not present itself as an ideal cinematic subject. Dominated by descriptive and reflective prose, the opaque first-person narration lacks filmable action and does not offer conventional 'cinematic' emotions like romantic love, anger, or grief. Moreover, there is no consensus over the meaning of the text or its eponymous protagonist. Adapting "Bartleby", therefore, is not an easy task and it is no surprise that the short story so far has not gotten the blockbuster treatment. Nevertheless, the text has produced an eclectic number of international low-budget adaptations that take advantage of the indeterminacy and aesthetic openness of Melville's masterpiece in order to create original cinematic re-imaginations. There are two box office-wise disappointing theatrical releases, one by American filmmaker Jonathan Parker (2001) and the other by British director Anthony Friedmann (1970).[1] Additionally, since the 1950s, *Bartleby* has sparked a number of teleplays; some of them, however, are no longer accessible. For instance, John Guillermin's version *The Strange Mr. Bartleby* (1953), produced for the television series *Your Favorite Story*, is "believed lost" (Hischak, 2012, p. 19). Furthermore, there are two French televisual adaptations by Claude Barma (1957) and Maurice Ronet (1976), two German feature films—directed by Ludwig Cremer (1963) and Andreas Honneth (2009) respectively—, which were shown by public-service television broadcaster ZDF, as well as a Yugoslavian (Galić, 1966), a Spanish (Montolío, 1972) and a Finnish version (Koiranen, 2003).[2] Appropriately, the short story, which was first published in two installments in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art* and which garnered little public or critical interest at the time, has been most frequently adapted into short film formats—an art form that similar to the short story in the 18th century is perceived as an "apprentice genre […] of relatively minor importance" (Urie 2021).

Most of these filmic transformations are only presented theatrically during the festival circuit, but many of the newer movies can be watched on the Internet. In addition to the feature-length films of Honneth and Ronet, I will more closely examine the following short films: Miro Bilbrough's period piece from 2000, Gerard Amsellem's modernized interpretation from 2013, and Kristen Kee and Laura Naylor's stop-motion re-imagination from 2017.

The research interest of this paper is twofold: On the one hand, I will examine techniques of intermedial transposition. How does one, for instance, visually depict Melville's verbal descriptions despite their uncinematic nature? How does one adapt a story to the screen that is so closely related to writing? On the other hand, I am interested in how the adaptations comment on the source text. Do the movies under study reflect contemporary office environments and dynamics of work culture? What does "preferring not to" mean to a mid-nineteenth-century scrivener versus a modern cubicle worker? I will explore how the films depict social change and cultural transformation in the habitual acts of working life. In order to answer these questions, I will take a closer look at the *mise en scène* of recent adaptations of Melville's short story and demonstrate how texts become pictures. Of particular importance will be the usage of space, the visual presentation of physical and metaphorical walls, as well as the utilization of non-human entities as 'actors.'

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[1] For an interpretation of Parker's adaptation, see Middleton-Kaplan (2009, 66-71).

[2] Moreover, there are a couple of televised theater performances: E.g., *Bartleby le scribe*, directed by Jérémie Carboni (2010) or a broadcasted performance of *Bartleby* directed by Tom Barnett (1978).

Intermedial transformations: Adapting "Bartleby"

One of the earliest dramatizations of Melville's short story was an American radio play from 1948 called *The Strange Mister Bartleby* that reduced the multilayered text into a simple mystery narrative with an unambiguous resolution at the end: "Men go mad because they are charged with such grief or emotion that their minds give way beneath the strain" (Lawrence, 1948, 01:26-01:29). The story turns Melville's epilogue about the scrivener's rumored employment at the dead letter office into the main focus of the play. After his employee's death, "the lawyer visits the scrivener's former workplace, which he finds to be "sad, so odd, so lacking in hope" (Lawrence, 1948, 21:01-21:05) and discovers that Bartleby once wrote a letter to a woman that returned "unopened, unanswered" (Lawrence, 1948, 32:17) to the dead letter office. The film versions do not spell out such a straightforward explanation for the protagonist's puzzling behavior. However, since adaptations necessarily are interpretations of the source material, most of the movies tend to allude, often visually, to a particular cause for Bartleby's conduct. Klaus Wyborny's adaptation from 1976, for instance, envisions Bartleby as a symbol of counterculture. His refusal to be productive mirrors the artist's rejection of bourgeois society—the movie is interrupted by documentary recordings of German suburbia—and his indifference to his precarious existence. The office setting becomes a venue for the ancient confrontation between Bohemian and Philistine (Wyborny, 2009). The artist is willing to become a pariah and potentially die for his non-conformist art. The experimental filmmaker's *Bartleby* can hence be read as an autobiographical portrayal—a theoretical framework that has also been frequently invoked in connection with Melville's own insecure writing situation, which resulted from his no longer preferring to 'copy' his popular adventure novels and not to turn away from metaphysical questions that were of no interest to his audience.[3]

Larry Yust's adaptation, produced by *Encyclopædia Britannica Films* as an educational classroom film for schools and libraries, resists sending an obvious message to its young audience. The movie version reduces the complexity of the numerous "ideological possibilities" (Stern, 2009, p. 19) of the literary text and instead focuses on the Gothic undertones of the short story, which, as William Vaughn declared, "could be read as one of the great ghost stories in American literature" (1999, p. 537). Even though no supernatural events occur in Yust's haunted office, the movie succeeds in creating a spooky atmosphere by relying heavily on horror tropes: Bartleby's ghostly presence and his "cadaverous" (Melville, 2002, 29) demeanor are implied by the interplay between lighting and shadows. The employer exhibits genuine terror, indicated by his dilated eyes, sweaty brow, and frightened manner, when he finds out that Bartleby is living in the office (Yust, 1969, 14:31-14:33). The movie's score heavily borrows from characteristic instrumental horror music such as violin tremolo, weird tonalities, or xylophone motifs. Furthermore, extreme close-ups during moments of character interaction add to the claustrophobic feeling that the cramped office setting is already exuding. Repeated shots of walls, closed doors, and screens emphasize the element of confinement—the office is inescapable for the "ghost" (Melville, 2002, p. 15) Bartleby, and for the lawyer who, after eventually leaving the building, is still haunted by the memory of the scrivener. The movie, however, offers no determinate answer, whether this haunting is caused by a particular—social, mental, or economic—conflict. In contrast, as I aim to highlight, Honneth, like Kee and Naylor, offers a political interpretation of Bartleby's passive resistance without over-explaining the original story, while Renot tells a story about isolation and loneliness, and Bilbrough's movie reflects upon urban alienation.

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[3] See, for instance, Marx (1953).

Because of the medium's visual nature, transforming Melville's short story into a film forces the directors not only to specify aspects that the original text can leave ambiguous, but also to find ways to *show* a story that is told from a first-person perspective. While Yust uses elements of *mise-en-scène* like lighting, set design, or acting, elements of *mise-en-cadre* such as camera angles and shot types, as well as features of post-production like music in order to convey that the unfolding events are shown from the perspective of the lawyer, Honneth resorts to voice-over narration to communicate the thoughts and feelings of the employer. Ronet, on the other hand, invents scenes that visually define the psychological and emotional space in which his protagonist moves. Following the concept of showing, not telling, descriptive paragraphs are converted into filmable action to visually draw attention to aspects on which the lawyer-narrator in Melville's text verbally comments: several sequences throughout the movie, for instance, show how bricklayers are building a wall in front of the office window. Thus, by getting the wall 'in motion', its symbolic importance is foregrounded; it cannot be easily overlooked as simply a part of the setting. The completion of the wall concurs with the total cessation of communication between Bartleby and the employer. The external wall is interrelated with their inner walls, while the physical environment metaphorically portrays their psychological barricades.

Gerard Amsellem's 12-minute short film, which updates the story to the twenty-first century, replicates the first-person narration using 'talking head' interviews. The lawyer and two of his employees talk directly to the camera about their encounter with Bartleby, a word-processing operator who one day stops working. Bartleby, on the other hand, does not speak (he does not even utter his famous sentence); he is only talked about. The mockumentary format, I would argue, is not only employed by the director to convey the characters' private thoughts and feelings but is also intended as a stylistic allusion to one of the most popular filmic portrayals of office life: the TV sitcom *The Office*. The format choice can be seen as a comment on the opening statement of Melville's lawyer, who muses on the "somewhat singular set of men of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written." (Melville, 2002, p. 3) While scriveners were indeed a rather unusual literary topic in the nineteenth century, the (working) lives of office employees are nowadays a very common subject in literature and film.

However, finding visual images for the descriptive prose of the lawyer's first-person narration is not the only difficulty the short story poses. In order to underline the thematic importance of writing in the story, some of the adaptations try to incorporate different forms of written text. In addition to the text presentation in the film's diegesis through acts of writing, copying, and reading, Wyborny, Yust, and Honneth, for example, insert intertitles that fulfill narrative functions. Elena Arroyo Serrano, in contrast, connects film and text by creating an experimental "non-movie" (Serrano, 2022, p. 149). Her *Esta Versión del Bartleby* (2018) has neither sound nor images, and it only consists of animated text that describes the set-up of a potential adaptation in conditional tense. Words appear and vanish irregularly for over twenty minutes on a black (computer) screen—sometimes one letter is typed after another, and sometimes a whole sentence is copied in—, thus generating a visual movement that effectively captures the monotony of the scrivener's work. Laura Naylor and Kristen Kee, too, do not use spoken words for their stop-motion re-imagination of *Bartleby*, which updates Melville's story to the year 2011. In their version, written text does not simply tell the scrivener's tale; it becomes an agent that interacts in different ways with the human characters. The visual narrative uses various forms of text like social media posts, chyrons, documents on pin boards, letters of application, or slogans on posters to convey personal information about the mute claymation characters, such as feelings, hobbies, or sexual orientation. Even Bartleby's famous expression "I prefer not to" is turned into written text: It turns up on the employer's computer screen as e-mail subject lines. Bartleby's lonely death in the abandoned office at the end of the movie is likewise revealed through text—via an online news article that the lawyer got sent by his employee Stickybun. The last words of the short story, too, are presented as text messages on a computer screen in the lawyer's new cubicle workstation:

Stickybun: AHHH Bartleby!!
Lawyer: Ah, Humanity …
Stickybun: LOL (Kee & Naylor, 2017, 10:03-10:07)

In the style of social media text-talk, the lawyer's humanistic pathos is transformed into bathos that does not even elicit a real response, just an acronym that by now has turned into nothing more than an indicator of presence. The moment of meaningful connection that the lawyer experiences in the short story is missed since there is no time and place anymore for humanity while running on the capitalist treadmill. Updating the nineteenth-century quills and inkpots to modern office technology allows the directors to reflect upon how electronic communication can cause or reinforce isolation. Consequently, a new layer of meaning is added to the "miserable friendlessness and loneliness" (Melville, 2002, p. 17) that is at the heart of Melville's story.

Written text is also used in the short movie to make spoken language visible: we do not hear the claymation characters speak, we only see letters coming out of their mouths. Sometimes those letters form words, but most of the time they fail to transport meaningful messages. Often the letters do not reach their recipients, like tangible objects they shatter on a wall or pile up to an unsurmountable barrier, thus visualizing metaphors like 'broken communication' or 'wall of silence.' The human voices are substituted by noises of office machinery, instead of dialogue we hear the unintelligible sound of objects like printers, fax machines, copiers, or shredders. On the one hand, this demonstrates the reliance of modern office communication on technology and the isolation that results from asynchronous communication channels. On the other hand, by showing the materiality of language the movie emphasizes the material effects and physical impacts that language can have. The letters are pestering the lawyer, they are chasing him through the office—one letter even turns into a bullet that kills Bartleby in a fantasy sequence.

Office Space: Walls, facades, and screens

While Kee and Naylor objectify spoken language, many of the movies make objects 'speak.' In Melville's text, walls function as an important architectural metaphor. In the adaptations, walls, partitions, and screens are, in a similar way, of vital importance to convey meaning and to guide the audience's reception of the movie. Hence, because they act upon human characters, they cannot be considered mere objects. In Maurice Renot's updated adaptation, which relocates the action from New York in the 1850s to Paris in the 1970s, the *mise-en-scene* is used to symbolize the dynamics between Bartleby and the bailiff. The employee is not confined to a corner of the office, hidden behind a screen that serves to retain the lawyer's privacy; a massive black partition wall divides the office space equally between employer and employee. Shots in bird's eye view underline the importance of the spatial arrangement to portray the relationship between the two protagonists. Moreover, these shots make visible that both characters resemble each other—they have adopted the same posture, hunched over, eagerly writing. The spatial arrangement indicates that Bartleby is supposed to be read as the bailiff's double. Furthermore, the partition wall is equipped with a service hatch that can be opened and shut by the employer and which is supposed to function as a means to communicate and pass along documents.

Renot’s representation of Melville’s “green folding screen” (Melville, 2002, p. 10) resembles a prison door. This visual impression is audibly supported: whenever the bailiff closes the small pass-through, it makes the typical cinematic sound of a prison door being slammed shut. The employer’s sorrowful look makes clear that he not only closes the reach-through on Bartleby but on himself too—both are warden and prisoner in this scenario. In addition, the opening in the partition wall is used as a framing device that simulates mirror effects and emphasizes on a visual level the similarities between the two characters. Bartleby is staged as the bailiff’s reflection, as a “psychological double” (Marcus, 1962, p. 366) who can, for instance, be interpreted as a projection of the employer’s isolation, a manifestation of his withdrawal from life. The movie, therefore, is not primarily about the eponymous character; it is, in fact, a character study of the unnamed employer (Jaworski, 1978, p. 125). Throughout the film, the bailiff repeatedly observes himself in shiny surfaces like windows, mirrors, or his golden office door sign.

In Renot’s version of the story, it is mainly the bailiff who is engaged in dead-wall reverie. Furthermore, the presentations of the living arrangements of employer and employee are used to underline the connection between them. The bailiff’s exploration of Bartleby’s ‘abode’ (Renot, 1976, 0:38:30-0:41:10) follows exactly the itinerary, namely bedroom, bathroom, and living room, which was used to introduce the audience to the lawyer’s apartment at the beginning of the movie. A blanket on a sofa in the waiting area is a stand-in for a bedroom, and shaving equipment and a washing cloth turn the office’s lavatory into a bathroom. In the sitting room, we see the bailiff in full shot in his business attire, holding his briefcase and having a croissant and coffee for a quick breakfast next to the fireplace. In the office, he finds Bartleby’s spare clothes, a suitcase, a baguette, and a bottle hidden *in* the fireplace. Thus, the earlier breakfast scene is replicated via objects and spatial similarities. This play with reflection and reenactment reinforces the importance of the doppelganger motif for the movie’s central subject of identity crisis.

Their mutual mirroring culminates in a conflation of the two characters. After the bailiff discovers that Bartleby is living in the office, he writes him a letter offering his assistance. The writing, however, does not take place at his own desk; he sits down on the other side of the partition wall, literally taking Bartleby’s place. Moreover, after he vacates his old office because Bartleby refuses to leave, he does not immediately move into a new office space. Both characters repurpose space, and the movie’s mirroring of places turns into a spatial transposition: the bailiff works from home while Bartleby lives in the workplace. His tidy apartment transforms into a messy office; piles of documents and unpacked boxes disturb the homely order. He looks disheveled and unshaven and is no longer impeccably dressed. His professional appearance, his facade, begins to disintegrate. The encounter with Bartleby has led to an “agonizing reappraisal of himself” (McCall, 1989, p. 108); it has made him realize his own loneliness and disconnect from his fellow human beings to whom he has only pecuniary ties (his clerks, his maid, a bartender). Written over his face in the reflection on his office door sign is the word “huissier” (the French word for bailiff), indicating that the nameless protagonist’s life is reduced to his occupation. His only sense of identity stems from his profession.

In Renot’s adaptation of the short story, alienation is not interpreted in a Marxist sense (and therefore illustrated by the exploited clerks) as an economic, class, or labor issue but as an encompassing social issue of a capitalist society in decline. The bailiff’s profound loneliness, which is already alluded to in Melville's story, becomes the central subject and an important visual frame of the movie. Shots with a wide angle of the bailiff crossing empty places are contrasted with the stuffy narrowness of the office setting. The office is located in the vicinity of the *Galerie Vivienne*, an upscale arcade that was built in the first half of the nineteenth century and was struggling in the 1970s: a place once associated with luxury, money, and privilege, "where the leisured classes could worship the latest commodities" that was by then deserted and silent, "a necropolis" (Elliott, 1985, p. 6). Paris, like Melville's New York, is not presented as a burgeoning urban metropolis, but is shown as exuding a petit bourgeois atmosphere of stagnation and obsolescence. The movie ends with the bailiff realizing that there is more to human existence than work: in prison, he pleads with his counterpart Bartleby to come to the same realization. However, his former employee has already given up on life. In his failed attempt to rescue Bartleby from his solitude, he (potentially) liberates himself from the walls he has erected around him.

In Gerard Amsellem's narrative short in black and white the wall is similarly used to symbolize questions of work-life balance. The exposed brick wall is now an interior design style and not a testament to horrendous labor conditions. It is utilized as a backdrop for the talking-head interviews with the lawyer and his two remaining employees and implies that the characters are trapped in the workplace. Bartleby, in contrast, is shown wandering outside by the sea. He is not described by his colleagues as having actually lived in the office. It is simply his refusal to work that is transforming the workspace into a living space. Not working equals living; work—as in the expression 'work-life balance,' that was coined in the 1970s—is seemingly not imagined as a part of life but perceived as counterpoised.

Bartleby's passive resistance is not aimed at a specific economic constellation; it is in general directed at the life-consuming nature of work in a productivity-driven world. Accordingly, the lawyer is presented as more ambitious than his Melvillian counterpart. The mockumentary movie reimagines "Bartleby" as a drop-out story with a happy ending. Since we do not see Bartleby interact in the office environment, his famous phrase is uttered by his colleagues, who ultimately get infected by the repetition of "I would prefer not to" and develop a new outlook on life and work. The process of contamination to which the short story alludes leads in the movie to an 'outbreak': "[H]is lunacy (like his language), is communicable; he touches others, and renders them unreasonable" (Weinstock, 2003, p. 33). After the infection, the black-and-white film turns to color, and the interview continues outside the office building. The wall behind the interviewee that had restricted the lawyer from the world beyond the workplace has vanished. Moreover, similar to the imagery in Renot's movie, his business facade collapses. He undergoes a hippie make-over—he suddenly sports a ponytail and a beard and wears casual clothes, all in all resembling the movie's Bartleby—, and adopts a new business philosophy: "My vision of what I think will happen for me in the future?—I haven't thought about it. I haven't thought about it at all" (Amsellem, 2013, 09:36-09:49). The melancholy pictures of Bartleby at the beach, which were shown at the beginning of the short, are in hindsight not to be interpreted as illustrations of solitude and desperation but as images of freedom and inner harmony. The natural environment thereby functions as a counter-space to the workplace.

Nature is also an important reference point in Miro Bilbrough's period piece, which deploys the brick wall in front of the clerk's window as a topological element to scrutinize the relationship between binaries of culture and nature as well as humanity and the environment. The movie's establishing shot lingers on the aforementioned wall, which here is not at all a "dead-wall" (Melville, 2002, p. 32), "black by age and everlasting shade […and] deficient in […] life" (Melville, 2002, p. 5). Overgrown with moss and lichen, the wall is brimming with (nonhuman) life. The wall, thus, oscillates between cultural artifact and natural organism and as a threshold between inside and outside, holds a liminal position. In long, zoomed-in shots, accompanied by running water noises, the wall is less and less recognizable as part of a building and begins more and more to look like a miniature forest. The inanimate object becomes animated. On the one hand, these defamiliarized shots can be interpreted as a means to show Bartleby's idiosyncratic perception of the (not-so-)dead wall, to render visible that the wall offers something to Bartleby that the lawyer cannot perceive. On the other hand, it implies that the clerk feels alienated from the natural world in the industrial, urban environment of New York. His dead-wall reverie—or rather, his meditation—, thus, can be attributed to a romantic longing for nature. This impression is supported by the interior design of the office which incorporates various forms of representation of nature: On his folding screen is painted a forest landscape, the wallpaper of the lawyer's office depicts an ornamental foliage pattern in green and gold, and the natural light is replaced by gas lamps.

As a consequence, Bartleby works in a room that artificially imitates a natural environment. Nature has been reduced to a representational function. While Bartleby is talking to the lawyer in the stairway about how he would feel confined by entering into a clerkship, a man with a bird in a cage passes by (Bilbrough, 2000, 15:24), referencing again via the domesticated animal the industrial exploitation of nature. The plant cover on the wall serves as a counter-image and as Bartleby's, albeit flimsy, connection to nature. When Bartleby stops to "gorge[…] himself on documents" (Bilbrough, 2000 01:15-01:16), it means that he refuses to any longer "participate in the abstract mechanisms of a social world from which the natural world seems to be entirely absent" (Zapf, 2016, p. 135). Copying and writing, in this context, are therefore not rejected as specific labor operations but as cultural techniques. The overgrown wall frames Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" as a rejection of urbanity and modernity, as an attempt to back out of the "human-made prison of civilization" (Zapf, 2016, p. 135).

This comparison between the alienation from nature and prison is rendered visible at the end of the film. The camera does not accompany Bartleby into his prison cell, he is filmed from the outside through a prison window. Here, again, uncultivated vegetation—climbing plants that cover the prison wall—is encroaching on a building. Outdoors, barking dogs and birdsong can be heard. Nature is out of reach for Bartleby, who continues his reverie by staring at the plants in front of the window. The greenery can be seen as a reference to Melville's "imprisoned turf", the "grass-seed [that] had sprung" (Melville, 2002, p. 33) in the prison yard. By placing the plant outside the prison complex, Bilbrough (like Kee and Naylor, as mentioned before) denies the lawyer his moment of connection, of bridging interspecies borders. While Leo Marx, for instance, points out that the tuft of grass can be read as a symbol of hope (1953, pp. 623-624), the movie's creepers do not offer such an optimistic endnote. The disconnection from nature is not dissolved. In a topological sense, the spatial arrangement that adheres to an inside/outside dichotomy shows nature as the 'other' pushed to the periphery of modern society. The director's interpretation of the story of "Bartleby" as a refusal to partake in modern civilization draws parallels from her own life. In her memoir *In the Time of the Manaroans,* she writes about her upbringing in a 'hippie commune' without electricity or running water, which was founded in connection with New Zealand's back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s. The "dietary zealotry" (Billbrough, 2020) that is part of the middle-class environmental activists' rejection of the industrial system leads to partial starvation and is evocative of Bartleby's abstinence from nourishment.

Office work: Dehumanization and labor disputes

While Renot and Amselle’s adaptations concern themselves with forms of social disconnect and Bilbrough’s engages in questions of ecological alienation, the movie of Kee and Naylor as well as Honneth’s film put a greater focus on the political interpretation of Bartleby’s passive resistance to productivity and consumption. They tell stories of Wall Street and their walls, accordingly, represent socioeconomic barriers. The stop-motion film’s political context is the financial crisis of 2008. As mentioned above, Kee and Naylor utilize office noises to evoke the isolating world of technological communication. Furthermore, substituting human voices with the sound of technical devices points to the mechanization of human resources in corporate capitalism. Bartleby is no longer a scrivener; he is a data processor—an automaton not only by name but also by occupation. The scenes that show him typing on the computer are speeded up and add to the impression that the “dehumanizing efficiencies of […] capitalism” (Castronovo, 2014, p. 254) have turned him into a machine. That Bartleby is living in the office, indicated by a pillow and blanket under his desk and a toothbrush next to his computer (Kee & Naylor, 2017, 03:53), is initially not considered to be a problem, but a sign of efficiency—if the employees have to work non-stop, they can just as well live in the office. In modern-day work culture, such ‘office dwellers’ are not as rare as in Melville’s time. In addition, the soullessness of the mechanized tasks that he has to perform, is depicted by a natural symbol. A moth—a symbol that represents the soul or the psyche—is frantically flying against Bartleby’s closed window, trying in vain to escape (Kee & Naylor, 2017, 03:55).

Office items like the popular “Hang in there” poster on Bartleby’s desk (instead of, for instance, family pictures) are used to visualize the depersonalization of office workers, already diagnosed in 1951 by the sociologist C. Wright Mills: “When white-collar people get jobs, they sell not only their time and energy but their personalities as well.” (p. xvii) The motivational slogan, however, also reveals the powerlessness of the worker who essentially cannot do anything but hang in there, to continue with his mindless job. In response to Bartleby’s refusal to hang in there, many of the background texts, such as inspirational wall hangings (“Life is a beach”), transform into versions of “I prefer not to.” According to the directors of the movie, this is meant to be a “visual nod to the power of passive resistance to affect the people and world around you” (Fessier, 2017, n.d.). It also alludes to the Occupy Wall Street movement whose participants used Bartleby’s famous phrase as a slogan for posters or t-shirts: “Like the scrivener who refuses the narrator’s charity because its ultimate goal is to justify the system for accruing wealth that the lawyer represents, the occupiers […] proved uninterested in reforms that seemed intended merely to ensure that the financial system could go on functioning as before” (Castronovo, 2014, p. 253). That the employer himself cannot escape the exploitative structures of late-stage capitalism is illustrated by his new work environment. After refusing to join Bartleby in his protest, he has to trade in his private office for a cubicle in a co-working space. He does not realize that he, too, is part of the 99 percent and he simply acquiesces to the deterioration of his working conditions.

Andreas Honneth’s experimental film also correlates Bartleby’s story with active labor disputes. The adaptation is set in the nineteenth century but cannot be described as a costume drama since the director utilizes estrangement techniques to discuss issues such as consumerism and globalization with regard to modern developments (in the background, we can, for instance, discern a company sign of the Lehman Brothers). The movie is narrated by the lawyer via voice-over and, in doing so, it produces a distancing effect. With few exceptions, the spoken script follows the original text. On the visual plane, however, the story is significantly transformed.

The artificial style of the scenic design of the movie echoes a theatrical production. Photographs of Wall Street, for example, are used as a coulisse for 'location shots', and the action of the black-and-white movie is interspersed with surrealistic dream sequences, which are realized through stage effects. Above all, the film is a montage of fictional scenes that tell the story of Bartleby, and documentary footage showing industrial conflict, poverty, or the stock market in New York around the turn of the century. Moreover, the director re-creates a silent film aesthetic by translating Melville's grotesque descriptions of the clerks into comically fast slapstick scenes, in which objects develop lives of their own against their owners' will. This genre not only adequately captures Melville's humor, but it is also deployed to emphasize the dehumanization of the workers. Nippers fights against his desk, "a perverse voluntary agent" (Melville, 2002, p. 17), and Turkey is in a battle with ink and quill: Objects turn into subjectified characters and are elevated from props to active agents, thereby shifting the focus away from the human actor, who in turn, becomes "conscious of his passive role as an object of consumption and a character upon which the lawyer exerts his narrative power. [He] is only able to unleash violence once the abstract economic relations—the cause of his suffering—are personified as an object" (Benack, 2015, pp. 42-43). A longer scene shows Bartleby, who, as a homage to the silent movie era, is played by James Spencer Thiérrée, the grandson of Charlie Chaplin, in a very physical altercation with his documents. The papers keep sticking to his hands, they get mixed up, fall from the table, spread, and finally take up all the office space; eventually, Bartleby gives up his futile attempt to end the 'paper war' and he is engulfed by a tsunami of pages. The clerk is struck by the meaninglessness of his never-ending drudgery—he does not produce anything substantial, only more paper. As a consequence, he refuses to continue his occupational duties. By rejecting the role that business dictates to him, he stops being perceived as a human being and is treated as a dehumanized office object. In a fantasy sequence, an enraged Turkey beheads Bartleby with giant scissors, and the lawyer puts a doll head back on his mannequin body. On the one hand, this scene again portrays the office worker as an automaton; on the other hand, it can be interpreted as an intertextual reference to Heinrich Hoffmann's didactic children's books like *Struwwelpeter* or *The story of the Thump-Sucker,* which depict similar grotesque violence in order to discipline children's behavior. In this context, Bartleby's punishment alludes to and criticizes the paternalistic employment relationship that was dominant in the nineteenth century and which rendered the employee (the child) dependent on the goodwill and charity of an authoritarian employer (the father). Without protective labor laws, the working class has no means to assert itself against the interest of the ruling class.

Bartleby and the lawyer who allegorically represent those opposing class interests are connected to different visual planes: the narrator's fantasy scenes are influenced by iconic signs. He daydreams himself into symbolistic paintings, turning the artworks into *tableaux vivants*. In one vision, he visualizes Bartleby as the ferryman Charon, who is rowing down the Styx in order to take the dead lawyer to Hades, whose entrance resembles the island depicted on Alfred Böcklin's *Toteninsel* (Isle of the Dead). By creating the water of the river through stage (rather than cinematic) effects, the artificial, unrealistic look of the scene is enhanced. Bartleby, on the contrary, is connected to indexical media technology: the photographic and documentary footage from the turn of the century, which constitutes a vital part of the movie, can be interpreted as the visions he sees while staring at the brick wall. While the text refers to the biblical story of Job to explain Bartleby's passive resistance, the movie draws a parallel between Bartleby and the prophet Ezekiel and his active engagement with problems concerning the socioeconomic system. The clerk paraphrases Ezk. 8:8, in which verse God instructs Ezekiel "to dig now in the wall" in order to see the godlessness of his people (Honneth, 2009, 0:58:09-0:58:16). The Bible's metaphorical wall, behind which the Israelites commit idolatry, corresponds in the movie to Wall Street and its worship of mammon. Bartleby's visions, the documentary material that interrupts his story, accordingly, show what hides behind the 'walls' of Wall Street: exploitation, poverty, hunger, and homelessness caused by unregulated capitalism. While Wilson points out that Melville's protagonist fails to make a connection "between his own individual alienation and the class alienation of the propertyless worker" (1981, p. 340), Honneth's Bartleby solidarizes himself with the working class. During his work stoppage, which is complemented by historical shots of striking workers (for instance of the Uprising of the 20,000 in 1909, Honneth, 2009, 01:04:48), he disposes himself of his white-collar attire—a status feature that divides office from manual workers—and is pictured sitting on a set wall (Honneth, 2009, 01:04:28-01:04:36), thereby imitating iconic pictures of iron workers sitting on steal beams during the construction of New York's skyscrapers. Bartleby's death, according to the director, in a Marxist sense can be considered an allegorical liberation. As a dead body, he does not have any utility value and therefore stops being a commodity (Honneth, 2013, n.d.).

Because he is visually connected to the traditional art form of symbolic painting, which embellishes rather than documents reality, the lawyer is marked down as a part of bourgeois society. By not putting back his paintings on the wall of the new office, he indicates that the encounter with Bartleby has somehow changed him. There is no longer a drawing of old New York behind his desk but a large window that shows the actual city. The view of New York is simulated by using a still photograph of the metropolis. By switching semiotic planes, the movie implies that the lawyer starts to recognize Bartleby's very different reality. Moreover, by shooting Bartleby's dead-wall reverie as a direct look into the camera (Honneth, 2009, 0:52:44-0:52:54) and thereby breaking the fourth wall, the audience, too, is implicated in his reality. Via an extradiegetic song about Wall Street, the viewer is invited to answer the question: "Which side are you on?" (Honneth, 2009, 0:52:54-0:54:13).

Conclusion

As has been illustrated, in all the discussed movie adaptations, walls serve as a central motif. However, the various screens, brick walls or room dividers are all designed and arranged very differently in order to make the directors' differing interpretations of Melville's short story visible: The walls can thus symbolize the divide between man and nature, or the barriers erected by our capitalist culture, they can function as a mirror or as a projection screen. The set design, therefore, is to be regarded as an essential part of the adaptation process. While the majority of the movies follow the general plotline of the short story and the dialogue and narration are often lifted verbatim from the original text, it is primarily the setting that is deployed to reimagine or modernize the story. The setting, therefore, is treated by the filmmakers as an intrinsic part of the 'Bartleby myth.' Unlike philosophical interpretations that claim Bartleby as an exemplary character of resistance and refusal or treat him as a metaphor or a formula by focusing on his famous utterance,[4] the films show the character as inseparable from his workplace. Accordingly, approaches that do not concentrate on the socioeconomic context, such as the idea of the scrivener as a religious or Christ-like figure, which was prevalent in the literary criticism of the 1960s, do not figure as reference points for the movies. The lawyer's conflict between humanist morality and capitalist practice, as well, is not featured as an important theme in the adaptations. Kee and Naylor's version seems to outright refute such an interpretation: in the stop-motion picture, the bust of Cicero, which literary critics read as an indicator of the narrator's adherence to a "Ciceronian code of ethics" (Miskolcze, 2013, 43), is no longer prominently displayed in the office, but misused as a bookend. During a fantasy sequence, the employer even murders his employee with the bust, thereby indicating that there is no longer a place for humanist values in the neoliberal era of unleashed capitalism. On the contrary, as has been shown, different concepts of alienation serve as an essential theoretical framework for the movies. It is noteworthy that the films of the 1970s conceive of alienation mainly as an individualistic problem that results from personal decisions or inadequacies. Wyborny shows Bartleby as an artist who divorces himself from society in order to protect his art; Ronet's lawyer, in the end, frames his isolation not as an economic or social predicament, but as a personal failure that he alone has the power to overcome. The British adaption by Anthony Friedmann that relocates the story to 1970s London corroborates the observation that the older renditions of the story do not portray the clerk's alienation from society as a social phenomenon. Here, Bartleby's opting out of all forms of social engagement is depicted as a result of a potential mental or developmental disorder.[5] Consequently, at the end of the movie, he does not die in prison, but in a mental health facility. By means of pathologizing Bartleby's passive resistance and his refusal to conform, his actions are 'individualized' and thus the possibility of understanding his otherness as a protest against 'the system' is more or less foreclosed.[6]

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[4] See, for instance, Agamben (1993), Deleuze (1993), or Vogl (2007).

While the adaptations of the 1970s do not display Bartleby's resistance as a form of industrial dispute,[7] the movies that were shot after 2001 and hence are set against the backdrop of several global financial crises and subsequent economic collapse, as well as an increasing precarisation of (white-collar) work, describe Bartleby's alienation from society as primarily work-related and above all as systemic in nature. The story of the nineteenth-century office worker is, as this article has demonstrated at length, retold by Honneth, Kee and Naylor as well as Amsellem in order to convey social criticism and to explore labor (mal)practices of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[8]

Bartleby in turn becomes less of a mystery and is instead presented as a possible identification figure. Consequently, the film character takes up more narrative time than his literary counterpart, since he is not solely shown via the perspective of his employer. Watching the clerk interact in solitude with the office space and its nonhuman inhabitants, the viewer gets a better understanding of the motivation behind his passive resistance. By expanding the point of view, Bartleby is no longer defined through the gaze of the employer, and he regains some agency. Accordingly, the movies hint at different solutions to the modern-day Bartleby's dilemma. In particular, 'communal strategies' like unionization, collective quitting, active protest movements or even building alternative communities outside of capitalism are presented as a complement to the scrivener's "I would prefer not to." In today's corporate culture in which offices have become mobile, nine-to-five has been replaced by 24/7 and occupational illnesses like burnout are prevalent, Bartleby's behavior and his conflation of private and public space can no longer be considered an unheard-of event. In the twenty-first century, Bartleby has become an Everyman.

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[5] Bartleby's answer in the following dialogue, for instance, mimics the literalness of autistic language: Employer: "It is an excellent way to save work for both of you. You verify your work with the same stroke – kill two birds with one stone, as it were. Don't you." Bartleby: "I would not like to kill two birds with one stone." (Friedmann, 1970, 26:31-26:48).

[6] The director talks, for example, about the underlying political implications of a story about a 'dropout' in context of the protests against the Vietnam war and 1960s youth culture: "[T]he portrait of a loner who would not cooperate with an employer or with social norms, seemed intensely relevant to a post-Vietnam world of political protest and a generation of youth who did not by into the social contract. The story seemed to be a commentary on the contemporary social phenomenon of the dropout." (Friedmann, 2001, 235).

[7] Marxist interpretations of Bartleby likewise seem to not appear until the mid-1970s. See for example Barnett (1974) or Wilson (1981).

[8] Nyima Cartier's *L'homme silencieux* (2021), which is loosely based on *Bartleby*, and the video installation *The Trainee* (2008) by the Finnish performance artist Pilvi Takala that shows Takala as a modern-day Bartleby who refuses to do her work while interning at a consulting firm, should also be mentioned in this context. Both films focus on the reactions of 'Bartleby's' co-workers and scrutinize the corporate world.

Notes on Contributor

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