

How to adapt melville's "bartleby the scrivener" for film

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The two existing adaptations of Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener," released in 1970 and 2001, show two legitimate interpretations of this dense, strange story. The 1970 version, starring John McEnrey as Bartleby, elects to prioritize the drabness of Bartleby's laconic take on life in its color palette and generally dreary atmosphere. The more recent adaptation, starring Crispin Glover in the titular role, is more comic and, in the parlance of our times, "screwball" in its portrayal of office life.

Such an interpretation seems closer to the text for me: while Melville's story is profoundly sad, this sadness is not a uniform, blanketing affect, falling like Joyce's snow over the living and the dead, but the failure of even comedy to overcome the characters' alienation from themselves and each other. Melville's tale is strange, and as such it calls for a strange adaptation to make it fit on the silver screen. What continues to be amiss in these adaptations is that Melville's story is about misunderstanding Bartleby, yet both adaptations aim to understand Bartleby.

The pathos of the tale, which in its literary form instantiates itself in the relationship between the reader and the text, is lost when a film version purports to offer mimetic verity. The reader of "Bartleby" is made to feel that she has missed something, that there is some clue to the secret of Bartleby and "Bartleby" that has been overlooked and which would resolve the pervading feeling of dislocation. In a crude sense, Bartleby represents the very incapacity of language to say what it means to say--that it always says too much and too little, and that even a simple mantra like "I prefer not to" can become opaque if we look too closely.

Any interpretation of “ Bartleby” will fall into this trap to some extent, of offering a definition of what is essentially nebulous. To circumvent this problem, I propose the same tactic that Melville employs in his framing of “ Bartleby. ” Rather than focusing on the titular character, the film should focus on the story’s narrator, the lawyer who will become Bartleby’s boss. After all, what we learn from reading this story is that a name does not tell us who someone is, but misdirects us into the illusion of knowledge.

The word “ Bartleby” remains an enigma, and the attached epithet--“ the Scrivener”--further obscures the “ real” Bartleby that this story invites us to seek. Bartleby’s job as a scrivener is seemingly the least interesting, unique, or existentially relevant fact to know about him, and yet this is what we are misled by the title into defining him by. The narrator, on the other hand, is unnamed throughout. While Bartleby is anomic in the existential sense, he does at least have a name.

The narrator, who generally fits in well with the boring injustice of his socio-economic position, is anomic in that he does not have a name. If “ Bartleby” is in some way a cultural critique, and it is hard not to think so, then this is the man who we should focus on to make him claim a name for himself. Bartleby’s name gives the reader and people around him a false sense of knowledge of him, as does his identification as “ scrivener”--as if a rote task could actually define him. The weapon of naming should be turned back on the class who is entitled to wield it.

Giving a name to the narrator is not the solution to this problem, as that would repress the whole issue of the name. Instead, the film should be

framed as an implicit challenge to the narrator to find his name and reveal it, to pick a fixed location in the world of words where he can be found and confronted. (This is similar to the protocol of protesters who ask for police badge numbers so that there is accountability for police actions.) This need not be an overtly or clumsily militant film.

The demand that the narrator name himself cannot be proclaimed literally by the film without adding an additional interlocutor, perhaps the filmmaker as documentarian, and this would only redouble the economy of the shield of namelessness. This would almost be worse, since it would decenter the mechanism of namelessness from the dominant class--where it can at least be located to some extent in the sole nameless character of the narrator--and make it into a roving weapon for all parties vying for power. Rather, we should remember that film can function without gimmickry as a demand for characters to name themselves.

The characters in Little Miss Sunshine are all suffering from disparate types of personal flux and the film comes to a conclusion when they are able to define themselves through their relationship as a family. What we have here are actually two forms of social policing that need to be clearly articulated for the purposes of effective translation between literature and film. Literature operates in the domain of words, and so its dominant procedure is naming; film operates in the domain of image (as well as sound, but the eye is the vastly dominant organ for human perception) and its dominant procedure is the gaze.

So while Melville's text puts pressure on the narrator to reveal his name if he truly wants to be Bartleby's comrade, rather than his patron, we need to switch methods for film adaptation and focus the gaze on the narrator. Simply by looking at him we pose the film question analogous to revealing his name. Appropriately enough, an excellent example of this technique can be found in the television show *The Office*. The character Michael Scott, a low level manager played by Steve Carell, is shown to be a buffoon just by showing him.

With different editing--removing his gaffes, inappropriate pauses and laughter, and the apathetic and uninspired responses of the employees he manages--he could appear to be confident and in control. The persistence of looking determines the difference in social perception. I would support using a camera technique similar to that of *The Office* in which camera movement between characters often supplants cuts so as to give the effect of the camera belonging to a person in the room.

This technique would not be used quite as aggressively as on *The Office*--characters in my version of "Bartleby" would not look or speak directly into the camera, nor would there be out of sequence cuts to characters' interviews or commentary. A mobile camera, both moving between characters during dialogue, and following characters when they are walking, would help to prevent this from becoming a visually boring adaptation (a dangerous temptation for a movie about people stuck inside doing repetitive labor).

At the same time, this camera technique would also reveal that this place and this job are boring. Cuts to close-ups obscure the alienation of the figure in his office landscape and falsely re-face persons who professional context de-faces. Coupling this camera technique with the above mentioned preference for showing the narrator and ignoring Bartleby would add an extra layer of visual intrigue, even suspense, as Bartleby would only appear sporadically, incidentally, contingent on his relevance to other characters.

Although I would not want to entirely mimic the cinematography of *The Office*, one thematic element that informs both the style of the television show and my production of "Bartleby" is the camera as confessional. The demand for a name as the opening for confession creates a stylistic tension: on the one hand, to depict a figure against its ground asks for a wide angle shot that minimizes the proportion of character to environment; on the other hand, the visual poetics of the confession work best when the face of the individual is highly legible.

This legibility is one of the oldest criteria of the confession. Without being able to read the face, the veracity of the confession is uncertain; it might be a feint. So when the narrator is interacting with other characters, we would use a wide shot that would pan between them as they took turns speaking, catching Bartleby almost by accident in the marginal, in-between-space, that happens to exist within the zone of the camera's movement. When the narrator is agonizing over his problematic relationship with Bartleby, the job of the camera is to listen closely and to watch him closely.

The internal monologue, the narration as heard/read by the reader, would be performed as spoken monologues that provide dramatic action during the actionless life of the narrator--as he walks the streets of New York or sits at his desk. To reinforce Bartleby's marginalization, these internal monologues (in Melville's text) could be performed in Bartleby's presence to emphasize his non- or quasi-existence. As far as color palette, a unified scheme would help to portray "Bartleby" as a story about analyzing a single form of consciousness, and hence not guided by the mimetics of realism.

Heavy monochromaticism through tinting the film stock is a bit too heavy handed. I think a very light use of a gray-scale filter would be beneficial, but to really capture the horror of "Bartleby" the muted light and gray-scale lifestyle should be immanent in the mise en scene and costuming. By dressing all the characters and their surroundings in similar colors their alienation is made apparent by the absurdity of them all appearing like chameleons in a colorless environment.

Turkey, Ginger Nut, and Nippers, Bartleby's co-workers, have powerful distinguishing traits that Melville comically exaggerates, and these caricatured personalities appear best against an equally caricatured ground. With everything draped in unending gray, small colorful details could easily mark the personality of these characters--as well as marking how ludicrous it is to think that personhood can be signified by the single note characteristics that Melville uses to mark these apart.

The soundscape of this film would take after the blurred, mechanically processed effects of Jacques Tati's *Playtime*. This would help to take the

magic out of Bartleby's somewhat famous mantra, " I would prefer not to. " Nothing would be worse than for a fetishist of Melville to be waiting breathlessly for the story's catch phrase, to construe this refusal of everything (including refusal) as a catchphrase. The narrator does not truly pay attention to Bartleby when he first begins to defer activity because this deferral is virtually unthinkable.

In the manner of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, refusal to participate in capitalism almost conceptually impossible for the narrator to process. Bartleby's proclamation originates almost entirely out of mind, sight, and hearing. But as the narrator is forced to notice that work is not being done, he and the directionality of the microphones close in on the source of the trouble. Bartleby is saying something very strange: he would prefer not to.

In giving attention to Bartleby's speech it is important to register his words as they occur to/within the consciousness of the narrator. The audio is not supposed to suddenly begin listening to Bartleby as if he is a messianic figure (as he has been construed in the past) but to take note that his deferral has become a (troubling) object of thought for the narrator. The narrator's responses would always be louder than Bartleby's words, except when he is repeating them to himself later, fitfully.