



HAL
open science

”Je ne sais rien de lui”. Ronet’s adaptation of Melville’s Bartleby

Aline Mocellin

► **To cite this version:**

Aline Mocellin. ”Je ne sais rien de lui”. Ronet’s adaptation of Melville’s Bartleby. Literature. 2012.
dumas-00931287

HAL Id: dumas-00931287

<https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00931287>

Submitted on 15 Jan 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



« Je ne sais rien de lui » Ronet's adaptation of Melville's *Bartleby*

Nom : **MOCELLIN**
Prénom : **Aline**

UFR **ANGLAIS**

Mémoire de master 1 - 12 crédits - **Mention**

Spécialité ou Parcours : **PLC Anglais**

Sous la direction de **Dr.Ronan LUDOT-VLASAK**

Année universitaire 2011-2012

AKNOWLEDGMENT

Before I start this dissertation, I wanted to underline the precious help I received from Dr.LUDOT-VLASAK. All along the schoolyear, Dr.LUDOT-VLASAK guided me in my research, corrected what needed to be and offered me some of his time in order to lead me to work as efficiently as possible. This dissertation is the result of numerous hours of work, but this would have been nothing without the patient and always fair remarks of Dr.LUDOT-VLASAK. For his patience, his support, his advice and his kindness, I wish to thank him for helping me, even if thanks will never be enough to express my gratefulness.

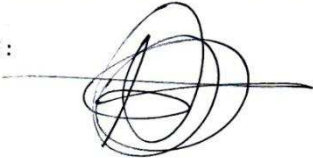
My appreciation also goes to the different libraries of GRENOBLE Universities. During the writing of this dissertation, there was always someone to guide me, help me and drive me in the good direction for my research. Their help, support and professionalism was essential to the realisation of this dissertation.

I also would like to add a word for Professor Claire MANIEZ, whom I thank for giving me some of her time to read and to judge this dissertation which, I hope she will enjoy.

DECLARATION

1. Ce travail est le fruit d'un travail personnel et constitue un document original.
2. Je sais que prétendre être l'auteur d'un travail écrit par une autre personne est une pratique sévèrement sanctionnée par la loi.
3. Personne d'autre que moi n'a le droit de faire valoir ce travail, en totalité ou en partie, comme le sien.
4. Les propos repris mot à mot à d'autres auteurs figurent entre guillemets (citations).
5. Les écrits sur lesquels je m'appuie dans ce mémoire sont systématiquement référencés selon un système de renvoi bibliographique clair et précis.

NOM : MOCELLIN PRENOM : Aline

DATE : 14/06/12 SIGNATURE : 

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT p.3

INTRODUCTION p.6

I – FROM A STORY TO A MOVIE p.9

“Narrating I” and “Narrating eye” p.9

The treatment of Space p.12

II – STORY OF A CONTAMINATION p.20

An obsession for order p.20

From order to disorder p.22

The contamination of the office and its members p.26

III – GAZING DOES NOT NECESSARILY RESULT IN KNOWLEDGE p.30

The importance of gazes in Ronet’s adaptation p.30

Bartleby, a mystery that will remain unsolved p.35

CONCLUSION p.39

BIBLIOGRAPHY p.41

APPENDIX p.43

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I would like to analyse the adaptation of Herman Melville's *Bartleby* into a movie by Maurice Ronet for French television. The movie is a French adaptation of the short story in which the reader can follow the life of the different characters in the context of a lawyer's office, (turned in the movie into a bailiff's office) and especially the life of a silent man named Bartleby. The story simultaneously represents the "absence of everything" that is Bartleby's life and behaviour and how such a person can affect the life of others. The story is told as a memory that has no equivalent for its narrator. It represents the fall of a man through Bartleby's complete withdrawal from his life, a fall that is not to be explained, even at the end where only a few elements that could help him to understand this experience are given to the reader.

My decision to work on this story has been reinforced by the curiosity that was created by the discovery of its adaptation into a movie for French television, a movie whose director had to deal with the effects used in the story and with Melville's style. The story depicts unusual circumstances, which makes it hard for the reader and for the spectator to identify with the characters, and, to me, this is the most interesting part of the story. It creates for the reader a desire to know, to understand, and makes him/her lose his/her landmark. This absence of reference to "normality", put in the context of a common work place environment forces the reader to question his knowledge. Amongst the adaptations of the short story into a movie, I selected the one directed by Maurice Ronet, because I was interested in exploring the interpretation of Melville's style by a Frenchman. The film is set in Paris in the 1970s and several elements have been changed in order to make *Bartleby* a movie. The two major parts are played by Maxence Mailfort (Bartleby) and Michel Lonsdale (the bailiff).

Bartleby is the story of a lawyer, who, one day, hires a copyist named Bartleby, in 19th century New York. He first accomplishes a tremendous quantity of work, but slowly begins to work less, to the point that he completely stops copying, saying "he would prefer not to", this sentence being, at some point, his only way of communicating with others. The story is a first person narrative, told by a homodiegetic narrator and we know the event only from the lawyer's point of view. On the very first page of the short story, the narrator tries to convince

the reader of his reliability and of his mental sanity; he gives references such as the people he worked with and does his best to appear as a sane person that can be trusted. This introduction of the lawyer as a serious man attempts to create a form of stability that is going to be questioned as the story plot unfolds.

There is, in the story, a general lack of information: as mentioned before, we do not know the name of the narrator, the story of Bartleby, and this point is a very important part for both the story and the movie. This creates a desire to solve the obvious mystery of Bartleby, a desire to know, to classify, to understand, and this desire is not to be fulfilled. Even at the end, some blanks of the story are not to be filled, as Philippe Jaworski points out: “Le récit progresse de telle sorte que, d’inquiétudes en demi-révélation, de déceptions en hypothèses nouvelles, l’interrogation capitale est vouée à ne pas trouver de réponse claire et satisfaisante” (MELVILLE, 1996, p.27). Indeed, not only does the story bring no answer, but it also creates in the reader an absence of knowledge. The absence of landmarks and certainty gives an impression that the story does not have any real beginning or end, an impression to have been placed in the middle of something undefined.

In this story, communication, rules and perception are blurred, which is a point that is developed in both the short story and the movie, and this dissertation will try to focus on the adaptation of these elements in the movie. In *Bartleby ou la création*, G.Agamben talks about the story and says about Bartleby: “ [l’histoire] ouvre une zone d’indiscernabilité entre le oui et le non” (p.43). Indeed, the story constantly questions the limit between Bartleby and the rest of the world.

I will focus here on several points in order not only to describe and compare the adaptation of the short story into a movie. Some of the elements that have been modified or changed in order to turn a short story into a movie are going to be analysed, as well as the way the characters are introduced, the information that the spectator has, and the techniques which are used to represent Bartleby’s withdrawal from any kind of contact with reality and with the world.

The development of the story can be seen through dialogues, symbols and a lot of visual effects. The concept of limits is central to the story, and there is a constant opposition between light and darkness, (which may be linked with the treatment of space in both the story and the movie), efficiency and absence of progress and sound and noise. All these elements, which are present in the story, have been amplified and used in order to drive the

spectator along the story in the same way that the short story did. As the main point of the story is the difficulty to communicate that the different characters encounter, visual and sound effects are the elements of the movie that play with the spectator's nerves and feelings. As there are only few dialogues in the movie, these elements are important not only for the development of the story, but also because they represent what is unsaid, like the feelings of the characters. Like Melville's reader, the spectator must try to fill in what is left unsaid in the narrative.

The adaptation of a short story into a movie implies some modifications, but it also implies the appearance of a new eye: that of the camera. This modification brings a new dimension to the plot and allows the director to use several elements in order to transcribe the atmosphere of the book. The shots, the points of view, space, light, music, all these elements need to be taken into consideration when one turns a story into a movie. This dissertation will attempt to analyse the main themes of the story and the elements that have been used in order to transmit it to a spectator.

We will focus first on the adaptation of the story, what it implies and what was used in order to perform it, then move on the effects of Bartleby's presence over the office and its members, moving from order, to disorder, to then end with the desire to know that Bartleby creates and the impossibility for the reader, the spectator, the characters and the narrator to complete successfully this quest for meaning that is to remain unfinished.

CHAPTER I – FROM A STORY TO A MOVIE

« Narrating I » and « Narrating eye »

The adaptation of a short story into a movie implies certain changes. A book cannot be adapted in the exact same style and some details must be changed. The point is to convey the main themes, elements and events in a way as accurate as possible. In the adaptation of *Bartleby the Scrivener* for French television many elements were changed, such as the time, set in 1978, and the place: Paris instead of New York, but the movie remains faithful to the short story. We will not list here all the differences but consider one of the main differences between Melville's *Bartleby* and the film. The short story is a first person narrative, we have a homodiegetic narrator who is present in the story, but who is also one of the two main characters. In the short story, the narrating I and the narrated I are mixed so that one has to read between the lines in order to see what lies beneath the surface of the unreliable narrator's discourse.

The simple fact to move from a short story to a movie has an impact on the narration, so the greatest change of the adaptation is that the bailiff loses his role as narrator and becomes a character amongst the others. The short story begins with a four-page introduction of the bailiff by himself and one can feel a desire to impress and to prove his reliability through the examples he uses to promote himself and his self description of his own personality as well as a clear self-centred man: he focuses on his image and the perception people have of him. But in the movie, the bailiff is not the narrator. He is still the one the camera follows most of the time and the particularity of the book to show things from his point of view was partly kept in the movie: the spectator cannot see things the bailiff does not see.

The short story and the movie have in common to be centred on the bailiff and they both begin with an introduction of this character. As we mentioned, the plot of the movie takes place in a bailiff's office. But the first scene is set in the bailiff's house, one morning just before he goes to his office. The first sentence of the movie is a remark about the bailiff's maid being late (0'45). We can then see the bailiff doing his hair (0'50), checking at his face (1'05), calling the maid again and asking her what happened and finally checking with his finger the cleanliness of the breakfast table. After this, he gets irritated when he notices that one figurine of his collection is not in the right place, then the camera shows the room, where every single piece of furniture is properly arranged and perfectly clean. The maid says "Comme d'habitude" (1'23) and it seems clear that this attitude is the everyday behaviour of the character and that the director wanted to put the emphasis on this aspect of one of the main characters' personality.

Like the first four pages of the short story, the first four minutes of the movie focus on him and his behaviour. In the movie in general, this role of the narrator that was taken away from the bailiff is replaced by long monologues or shots where the expressions on his face replace the comment he cannot make as a character. For instance, when he realises that Bartleby lives in the office, he suddenly has the idea to write him a letter. In this scene, we can see the bailiff smile, visibly pleased with his idea (41'11). Some passages of the short story when the narrator describes what he sees or discovers (again, when he realises that Bartleby is living in the office) are replaced by camera shots showing to the viewer what was described to the reader (38'39). (See screen capture n°1 p.43)

This passage from a first to a third person narrative has an impact on the story itself. Indeed, the adaptation includes a new view point in the movie: that of the camera. This introduction of a new character in the story has an impact on the viewer.

La dernière observation de Genette notifie une importante caractéristique du matériau filmique. Au cinéma, il n'y a pas de focalisation sur un objet sans une focalisation par un sujet, c'est-à-dire par un foyer optique/auditif. (PERRON, 1993, p.28.)

It often replaces the comments the bailiff cannot make, which gives the impression of a more objective point of view. Indeed, when one reads a book, one expects to see things from the angle and the point of view of the narrator. In the case of a homodiegetic narrator and especially someone as self-centred as the bailiff, many comments complete the narration and the reader can feel that he is obviously explained the facts in a subjective way. Gérard Genette develops a classification of the different types of narrators and their reliability

according to their distance with the story and with the narration. In *Bartleby*, the narrator is also a character, one of the two heroes of the story, which is entirely told from his point of view. The fact to analyse the point of view of the story and its type of focalisation is very representative.

En focalisation interne, le foyer coïncide avec un personnage, qui devient alors le « sujet » fictif de toutes les perceptions, y compris celles qui le concernent lui-même comme objet : le récit *peut* alors nous dire tout ce que le personnage perçoit et tout ce qu'il pense. (PERRON, 1993, p.30.)

In the short story, there is an internal focalisation, the reader is told the story through the point of view of a homodiegetic narrator, “je”, who gives only his point of view throughout the story. Later on in this dissertation, we will see that even though the lawyer/bailiff tells the story of Bartleby, the only person he and the reader/spectator gets to know is the lawyer/bailiff himself. In a movie, as the viewer is shown things at the same time as the bailiff, or through his eyes, he has in his possession the same elements, but has the feeling that he can interpret what he sees in his own way. But behind the eye of the camera hides the director, who shows things not only from what was described in the book, but from his own interpretation of his reading. Nathalie Dupont talks about the interpretation of the director as a ‘filter’ placed on the story:

Par rapport à un film au scénario inventé de toutes pièces, le processus d’adaptation cinématographique est une sorte de filtre visuel posé sur le texte écrit original. Le processus de réadaptation y superpose un autre filtre visuel que l’on compare parfois au premier, tout en posant la question de la fidélité des deux versions à l’œuvre originelle. (HUDELET-WELLS, 2011, p.59.)

Thanks to the angle, the type of shot, the music and the way the scene was shot, the camera can lead the reader exactly where it wants to. At some moment of the movie the camera acts on its own, as for example when the bailiff leaves his office for a moment to lock the door, the camera still focuses on the blind behind which Bartleby is sitting (1’04’16).

The fact to turn the short story into a movie also allows a certain freedom in the representation of what goes on throughout the story. Some elements about the story, such as the bailiff, who is obsessed with his physical appearance, obviously a wealthy man, turning into a tired, not shaved and inefficient boss could be emphasized thanks to the use of the camera. The bailiff is the most obvious example to give when it comes to the details the camera can add to the story. His undone hair, his stopping to check his clothes, for example when he watches the police taking Bartleby away and where we can see his tie loosely tied (1’22’39) are some elements which have been added to the movie in order to create the

atmosphere that could not be described. Another example of these details is the bags under Bartleby's eyes growing along the movie. When the bailiff first comes to see him after he was taken to jail (1'25'46), the bags under Bartleby's eyes are so visible that they seem to be a part of the features of his face. Using the clothes, the makeup and the expressions on the face of the characters/actors gives a new dimension to the story: while reading leaves a possibility for imagination, cinematographic images are here more concrete and literally give life to the characters.

Even if, in the movie, the camera focuses most of the time on the bailiff and on what he sees, it offers more distance to the viewer. There are several scenes in which we see the bailiff from far away or in contact with characters who do not exist in the short story, which helps to take a step back and to analyse the bailiff as a full character. For example in the scene that takes place just before the bailiff finds out that Bartleby lives in the office, he goes to a pub and asks for a drink. The bar-tender does not pay attention to him, but the bailiff tries to start a conversation, asking him "Vous buvez quelque chose avec moi?" (36'42). The camera offers possibilities which do not exist in the book to bring more elements in order to create this particular atmosphere of this short story coming from Melville's universe. Indeed, in his interview, Maurice Ronet mentions this necessity to make some modifications:

J'ai tout de suite écrit l'adaptation, et cela n'a pas été facile. [...] C'est une histoire contée à la première personne, faite de petites touches, qu'il n'était pas possible de faire passer telle quelle au cinéma. [...] Comme toujours avec une œuvre très forte en littérature, il faut un peu trahir la lettre pour rester fidèle au thème. (JAWORSKI, 1978, p.115.)

But in *Bartleby*, the camera seems to offer the possibility to multiply the points of view and the way the director treated and used space also contributes to bring the particularity of Melville's style in the movie, which is a part of the faithfulness of the adaptation.

****The treatment of space****

The short story presents a strange atmosphere. An office where only men work, each of them being deficient in a way, a place where work cannot be performed in time, a new employee barely speaking, working, and then being a burden for the rest of the team: this is the environment Melville imagined for the plot. The way characters are introduced in the

movie and the elements that were shown about them influence the spectator's vision, as well as the treatment of space in the movie. There is an obvious fragmentation of space, which is divided in tiny parts, or shown as a whole with very large shots.

We mentioned the fact that adapting a short story into a movie implies the appearance of a new point of view on the story: the camera. In the movie large shots are used every time the action is not set in the office. This seems to be a way to contrast and show the difference between the limited and fragmented universe the characters live in compared to the size of the world around them. Most of the scenes showing the bailiff driving his car outside the office are large shots, followed by a progressive close up on the bailiff's face, as for example in the scene in which we see the bailiff bringing to the office the blind he bought to separate his desk from Bartleby's (14'19). This way of showing the bailiff is also very representative of his personality. Indeed, the bailiff is a self-centred man, who sets great store by what people think of him. The camera showing the street, the buildings then the bailiff, walking has a double effect: it shows the bailiff's attitude in the street, looking at no one, as if he were not at ease. When we are far from the office, the shot is really large and shows a whole neighbourhood, but as we are getting closer to the office, the shots progressively limit our vision and focus on the bailiff's face, as well as on the office itself. For example, the first time we follow the bailiff going to his office, we first see him walking in the street (3'39). Then, when he enters the "Galerie Vivienne", where the office is located, we have an American shot (3'54) and when he arrives at the door, we see him from the back, while the camera progressively focuses on his face, just before he enters the office (4'19). The camera also shows wider shots as the bailiff moves away from the office. For example, in the last scene, when the bailiff and Bartleby are together before Bartleby is taken to jail (1'18'02), there is a close shot where we can only see their faces. Then, when the bailiff moves to the stairs and talks to Bartleby, we have an American shot (1'18'25) and as he goes down the stairs, we see him entirely, (1'19'15) and when he finally leaves the office building, we see the street and the buildings around (1'20'16).

Another element to mention is that in the movie, we often follow the bailiff from the sky, as if the eye was just above him. For instance when he gets out of the pub he went to after he discovered Bartleby lived in the office, in the street, the high-angle shot enables the viewer to see him from above (42'27). We also see things from the bailiff's point of view, these scenes being set only where he goes: the spectator never sees a place or a character if the bailiff is not present. But the camera also has its own point of view, staring at the bailiff

when he walks in the street. Throughout the movie, space occupation also changes in the wide shots. At the beginning, when the bailiff walks in the street, for example when he goes to the office (3'24), or when he brings the blind to Bartleby (14'20), the streets are full of cars and people. But as the plot unfolds the streets get more and more empty. For example, when the bailiff enters the church, only a few people attend mass (44'08), or again when after Bartleby is taken to the police, the bailiff leaves the office (1'20'15). These scenes also show the contrast between the bailiff as a bailiff, at work, and the bailiff as a man, when he is not in the office. For example (34'11) when the bailiff and the employees expect Bartleby to go out of the restaurant on a working day, the street is full, and a lot of people are walking around them. But when the bailiff is not at work (35'10), the streets are completely empty. There are no cars, no people; he is completely alone. The fact to show the streets being empty when the bailiff is alone and crowded on working days seems to be a way to put the emphasis on the fact that the bailiff is defined by his function. In the short story, the lawyer has no name, we only know him through his job. The treatment of space in the streets seems to accentuate the fact that the bailiff has relationship with people only when it concerns work. In fact, the only people we see interacting with him are people linked to a job, such as the maid, his employees, the taxi driver, the bar tender, the priest, the director of the prison and the cleaning lady. When he is alone, we can see him walking, always alone (42'31), as a way to represent through space distribution that like Bartleby's, his life is completely empty and tasteless outside of the office. Another element which puts the emphasis on this contrast between the bailiff's private and professional lives is that: when he is on a working day with the streets being crowded, there is a lot of noise. But in the scene where we can see him walking alone, the only sounds breaking the silence are the bailiff's steps in the street (42'35). This use of space added to sound effects was a way for Maurice Ronet to represent the relationship between the two characters and their similarities, which we will develop later in this dissertation.

The way space is represented in the movie also aims at representing the organisation of the office and its hierarchy. When we discover the different members of the office at the beginning of the movie, we can see that one part of the space is reserved for the bailiff, and that the rest of the office is fragmented: Turkey's desk is on the left, Nippers' on the right and Ginger Nut's in the back (4'45). The waiting room also limits the part of the office that the customers are allowed to see. This organisation of space seems to represent the characters' importance for the office. The employees have a special room for them and the space is

distributed in a fair way for each of them. Moreover, the three employees have identical desks (07'40), which shows the equality which prevails in the place and the function each employee occupies in the office. The absence of decoration and the furniture being identical also brings some kind of monotony to the room, which put the emphasis on the monotony of the task of copying. The bailiff, being the boss, has a much bigger space available and he is close to one of the two windows of the place (4'51). When Bartleby arrives, the way space is organised is again very representative of the place he will occupy in the office: although he is a simple employee, his desk is next to the bailiff's. The director used space in order to represent the special status given to Bartleby by the bailiff. Not only does he share the space of the bailiff, but he is also offered a blind in order to create a quiet space for himself, which contrasts with the uniformity of space and furniture, which characterises the employees' office.

Bartleby's presence creating tensions has been represented by the impact his presence has on space in the office. Indeed, compared to the rest of it, Bartleby's corner seems to be a world apart. The other employees and the bailiff himself have piles of papers on their desks, furniture in order to classify the papers, and a special room is dedicated to the archives. Bartleby is the only one to have a clean desk and starts to put his belongings in the archives room and everywhere in the office, which we see through the eyes of the bailiff (40'00). His presence does not only upset the order of the office and the specific place given to things and to the employees themselves, but it also creates a disruption in the organisation of space, and even brings disorder in the room, presented at first as a tidy place: meant to represent law, precision and order.

Although some scenes were shot with a wide angle, there is a contrast between the outside of the office, spacious and bright, and the office itself, where space is fragmented and vision is limited. Space is fragmented in a very organised way (every element and member of the office has a particular task and function), but space is also limited.

On a déjà vu s'établir autour des personnages un lieu clos, défini par les murs et par les deux limites symétriques semblables de la fenêtre qui, d'un côté, donne sur un mur blanc et de celle qui, de l'autre, s'ouvre sur un mur noir. [...] Avec la venue de Bartleby, une autre zone de clôture intérieure se crée, limitée par la fenêtre devant le mur à trois pas et le paravent. (JAWORSKI, 1978, p.177.)

There are only two windows in the office, and right in front of these windows, a wall of bricks is being built along the story (see screen capture n°2 p.43), and completely obstructs the light. In the story, the presence of the wall is also announced:

The subtitle 'a story of Wall street' provides the first clue about the nature of the society. It is a commercial society. [...] But the designation has a further meaning: as Melville describes the street it literally becomes a walled street. (BLOOM, 1987, p.13.)

We can see the contrast between the beginning of the movie (5'09) when the wall is being built (some light can still enter the room), and the end of the movie, when the bailiff informs Bartleby that he is going to relocate of the office. In this scene (1'03'38), the wall completely obstructs the view from the window, and light can hardly filter and enter the office.

The blind is another element used to represent the lack of communication between the characters. The bailiff can still see what his employees are doing and check their behaviour. Jaworski says about it:

Déjà cerné de murs noirs, le lieu est entièrement divisé et subdivisé, - quadrillé (il fait l'objet d'un découpage qui en permet la surveillance), - découpé en cellules où sont confinés les monades. (JAWORSKI, 1986, p.268).

But in the case of Bartleby, he separates their two desks in closed spaces and offers him some privacy the others do not have. But if the bailiff cannot see Bartleby anymore through the blind, the other employees can still see him and observe his behaviour, even if Bartleby does not look at anything but what he has to copy, absorbed by his task. The blind seems to have in the movie a function it does not have in the short story: not only does it separate the bailiff's space from Bartleby's, but it also represents the difficulty the bailiff has to judge Bartleby. As the other employees can see Bartleby and are the ones telling the bailiff to get rid of him (while the bailiff, who cannot look at Bartleby, still cares about him and tries to understand him) the blind seems to represent the different ways to judge Bartleby. The blind seems to embody the fact that the employees are the ones who seem to have a clear vision of who Bartleby is: they see him working and giving up copying. They are the ones warning the bailiff about the place Bartleby could occupy in his life and the effects he could have on his business. The blind blocking the bailiff's vision seems to be the symbol of the bailiff's incapacity to judge and to behave as he should with Bartleby. But the blind has another function in the representation of the situation between Bartleby and the bailiff. It has a small window through which the two characters can give some documents to each other. The same small window that is between the waiting room and Ginger Nut's desk, which is the only way for the customers to communicate with the office and to have some news about how long they are going to wait. As we can see in the first scene, which is set in the office where Ginger Nut tells a customer to wait (7'12), the one who closes this little window is the one who has a power over the other. The power to dictate how things are going to happen and the

power to put end to a conversation. In the scene where the bailiff takes the blind to the office, we can see him using the blind window to give some work and to talk to Bartleby (17'11). At this moment, he is still the one controlling the blind window. But later in the movie, the camera focuses on this window (1'04'1) (see screen capture n°3 p.44), closed, which seems to represent a rupture in communication and in the hierarchical aspect of the relationship between the two characters. This first rupture takes place when the papers stay on the bailiff's side of the window, the first time Bartleby tells him he "would prefer not to" (27'59). We can hear the sound of Bartleby closing the blind window. This scene seems to represent the reversal of the power relation between the two characters: indeed, instead of opening the window, the bailiff prefers to leave it closed, get up, and walk up to Bartleby, as if he were respecting his desire for the window to remain closed. Even when he goes to the office alone, on a day off (39'20), during the scene when he finds out that Bartleby is living in the office, he does not open the window, again, respecting Bartleby's will. Later on, in the scene when the bailiff realises Bartleby did not leave the office, and tells him that he will change the location of the office, he monologues, and at some point, the camera zooms on the closed blind window (1'05'22), which the bailiff does not open. He does not decide anything anymore. The only communication will be controlled by Bartleby, who stands up and gets out of his corner (1'06'34) being, again, the one controlling the other. The use of the blind thus seems to represent the degradation of the relationship between the two characters, from the role reversal, to its final rupture.

The blind does not only separate the room and represent the evolution of the relationship between the bailiff and Bartleby, it also materialises the limit of a completely different atmosphere, almost claustrophobic. In the story, there are a lot of limited spaces, and the blind represents one of them. In the same office, in Bartleby's corner, the atmosphere is completely different. As we can see in the scene when the bailiff offers another present to Bartleby, who does not even look at it (27'11), the camera shows the main room of the office from above thanks to a high-angle shot. We can see the side of the bailiff, with a bigger desk, more papers on it, more furniture and a much bigger window. On Bartleby's side, the small window is round, with bars, which makes it a darker corner, and the blind adds even more darkness by projecting a shadow on Bartleby's desk. It seems to represent that Bartleby's corner has a completely different atmosphere, similar to the man: sober, quiet, dark and empty and similar to the description of Melville's short story:

I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of some grimy back-yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. (*B*, p.82)

It also suggests that Bartleby is an enigmatic character whose essence escapes the characters as well as the reader.

The darkest room of the office is certainly the archives room, where there are no windows, but only an artificial red light. It is in this room with dark walls that Bartleby washes himself. This room also contains the only mirror of the office in which Bartleby shaves. The fact that Bartleby can only see himself in the darkest room of the office is also very representative of the character and what little both the reader and the spectator know about the character. In both the movie and the short story, we learn after Bartleby's death that he worked for a while at the dead letters office, where he saw thousands of letters being burnt without delivering the message they contained. This element is given at the end as a part of the explanation for Bartleby's withdrawal from life. There are several scenes of Bartleby looking through the window of the office, but we know that all he can see is a brick wall. For example just after the removers finish emptying the office, they take the blind away, and we can see Bartleby contemplating the wall (1'09'30). When he is taken to jail, the first time we see him from the jail director's window, Bartleby is standing in front of a wall, covered with bars (1'25'32), and during all the scene in which we see Bartleby in jail, for example when the bailiff comes to talk to him (1'26'03) or when he finally discovers that Bartleby is dead (1'30'24), he is staring at a wall. These scenes showing him looking at walls, which represent his giving up life in general also suggest that there is no way out for him. This is represented by the sermon of the priest (44'12) "Pourquoi donner la lumière à celui qui souffre?" where we understand that Bartleby is applying this sentence, denying himself the right to see the light.

In the movie, Bartleby's past as a member of the dead letters office is mentioned on voiceover just after Bartleby died in jail, in a scene where we can see the bailiff walking away in a corridor (1'34'23). There are in the movie several scenes like this one, in which we can see the bailiff walking alone from the back. The office is set at the end of the "Galerie Vivienne", where the bailiff walks through several times in the movie, for instance after he says to Bartleby he is going to change the location of the office (1'06'57). We can also see the bailiff walking down the church alley when he listens to the priest's sermon and walks through an immense passage with arch in the ceiling. This limitation of space in

claustrophobic circumstances such as dark rooms, jail or corridors seems to be a way for the director to show the absence of way out for the bailiff and Bartleby and thus add to the claustrophobic atmosphere of the film. The bailiff imposes to himself a limitation of his own space, in the same way he organises his house and his office. He also imposes his demands to the other character, which reveals a desire to control things and an obsession for order.

CHAPTER II – STORY OF A CONTAMINATION

An obsession for order

In Ronet's movie, the tone is set in the first minute of the movie: the different characters are obsessed with order and this quest seems to be the leitmotiv of the members of the office. The first time the three employees appear in the movie, one of them desperately tries to stabilise his desk with pieces of paper he had already prepared (5'41) and we notice that it seems to annoy him a lot. The second employee to appear is Ginger Nut, who is told off by the bailiff about putting the envelopes in the right corner of his desk (5'54). Then, when we see the third one writing: he shakes his pen, apparently not working, and stains the paper he was working on with the ink (6'09). The presentation of the three characters is short, and the emphasis is clearly put on their desire to do things well, and the effort they are making in order to reach this objective.

Some of the secondary characters also represent order. In the short story, there are no female characters. In the movie, we can only see two, and these two women are only defined according to their jobs and in both cases their jobs are related to order and cleanliness. There is the bailiff's maid, whom we only see on two occasions in the movie: when the action takes place in the bailiff's house, the maid brings him his breakfast. The other female character is the cleaning lady, who complains about the impossibility to enter the office to clean it, because Bartleby not only refuses to leave the place, but locks himself inside. Both of these female characters appear in the presence of the bailiff, which can be interpreted as a way to insist on the importance of order and cleanliness for the bailiff. The presence of the maid shows the punctuality and the strictness of the bailiff as a man, and the maid represents his taste for order.

The movie represented this obsession for order that can also be noticed in the short story. In the first pages, the bailiff mentions John Jacob Astor and the office of Master in Chancery

for example, in order to prove his reliability to the reader, and probably in order to contrast with the obvious lack of sanity that can be found in the story in general. In the movie we never know the name of the bailiff. The camera focuses several times on the door brass plate, on which only the profession of the bailiff can be read (4'27, 15'04, 38'48, 55'17, 1'01'10, 1'04'44 and 1'08'59). We saw that the bailiff is obsessed with order, but he is also in a quest for efficiency. In the first four minutes of the movie, he checks his watch four times. When he arrives at the office, the first thing he does is to check the way he looks in the reflection of the plate indicating "Huissier" and polishing it (4'27). But this control the bailiff is trying to exercise over the people and the world around him seems to be a simple veneer, ready to crack at the first occasion. Indeed it seems that the bailiff cares about the cleanliness of his plate, but when he opens the door eight people are there, waiting for him. This need for cleanliness and order seems to hide the disorder which rules the office in reality. Although all the characters do their best to take care of the appearances, they all have a problem which makes them inefficient.

Newton Arvin mentioned this element in *Herman Melville* (p. 243) and said that the lawyer only hired madmen: Bartleby is obviously an uncommon person, with some kind of wound deeply present within himself which makes him behave the way he does, and Turkey and Nippers are only half-sane (one is an alcoholic, the other is a lunatic) and are not very efficient. Bartleby's answer that is between a yes and a no is similar to his behaviour: once the perfect employee, the other time, a perfectly useless and inefficient employee. He does not communicate at all, barely eats, and even lives at work. He does not have any real life, and it is impossible to know a thing about him. His presence in the office emphasises the lack of efficiency of the other employees. Turkey and Nippers, as Newton Arvin said (p.243), are only efficient during a part of the day and not at the same time. One works in the morning, the other in the afternoon and the rest of the time, they are barely able to do anything. In the short story the description about Turkey is the following:

In the morning, his face was of a fine florid hue [...] till six o'clock, p.m., or thereabouts; after which, I saw no more of the proprietor of the face, which, gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate, and decline in the following day, with the like regularity and undiminished glory. (*B*, p.77)

Nippers' description also shows an employee with some trouble:

The indigestion seemed betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in

copying; unnecessary maledictions [...] and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked. (B, p.79)

And Ginger Nuts is presented in the following way:

Upon inspection, the drawer exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts. [...] Not the least among the employments of Ginger Nuts, as well as one which he discharged with the most alacrity, was his duty as cake and apple purveyor for Turkey and Nippers. (B, p.81)

The lack of efficiency in the story cannot only be described through the behaviour of the employees; indeed, the lack of logic of the one who not only hired them at first, but did not do anything about their behaviour has to be mentioned.

The lawyer apparently represents law, order, logic and efficiency. He is the one making decisions, and the one who is supposed to control everything that could happen in the story. But in the end, the lawyer is at the origin of what goes on in the story. But the lawyer seems uncomfortable with his position of being the one in control of the events, and tries to plead that he did everything he could on every occasion. But this lack of efficiency does not only create a strange atmosphere which contributes to the events that take place in the story, it also creates a lack of efficiency, which contrasts with the image of precision the lawyer cares about so much.

****From order to disorder****

Although a great importance is given to order, it is difficult for the characters to preserve it. At the beginning of the movie, even if the bailiff pays attention to his hair and to his face, he leaves his bed undone. The incapacity for the bailiff to choose and hire some good employees creates an atmosphere which is not the best for some efficient work. The lawyer, who is very proud of his reputation, is actually putting his office in danger because of the absence of efficiency of his employees. They need to be two in order to perform what a normal employee could do, which provokes a huge delay in their work, and papers to copy are piling up. The character of Ginger also embodies this lack of efficiency, as it is represented in the short story in the description of this character: "He had a little desk to

himself, but he did not use it much.” *B*, p.81. He is paid only to achieve some shallow tasks. In the movie, he always stands in the background, usually motionless, which contrasts with the agitation present in the waiting room.

At first, Bartleby contrasts with the other employees of the office. As we said before that when Bartleby arrives in the office, he begins to achieve an enormous quantity of work, represented in the movie by a big book that Bartleby, at first, fills really quickly. We can see Bartleby’s efficiency in a scene taking place during Bartleby’s first day in the office (13’27). In the movie, the voiceover says :

Au début, Bartleby abattit une immense quantité de travail. Sans dételer, il écrivait page après page d’une manière morne, silencieuse, automatique. Il exécutait sans laisser paraître la moindre trace de fatigue cette besogne ennuyeuse, monotone.

But at some point, he suddenly decides to stop working. The first time he refuses to accomplish the task the bailiff gave him, before he says anything, the camera focuses on the papers the bailiff dropped for Bartleby, papers that he will refuse to check. But not only does Bartleby become even more inefficient than the three other employees, but he delays even more the unfinished work he was supposed to catch up with. His motionless and silent presence in the office provokes the anger of the other employees, who end up presenting the lawyer with an ultimatum: they would not come back at the office until Bartleby is in it. In the movie, we can see a scene in which the lawyer asks Bartleby if his aim is to ruin the lawyer’s career, and throws non-copied papers everywhere in the room, offering him more money than he is supposed to give him. This scene is dark and no noise can be heard but the voice of the lawyer shouting at Bartleby, and there is nothing in the room but the papers that Bartleby was supposed to take care of. The lawyer ends up making the decision to change the location of the office, which makes him lose even more time.

A series of wrong decisions leads the office to be in a dangerous position, with some delay at work, dissatisfied customers and -we can guess this from the change of location of the office and the money the bailiff proposes to Bartleby- probably a deficit in the bookkeeping and budget. The bailiff, who is presented at first as a wealthy, strict man obsessed with order, eventually creates disorder, which worsens the situation of his business. In the world of justice, where order, law and preciseness should prevail, both the reader and the spectator realise that it is not the case in this office where order seems difficult to maintain.

There is an obvious paradox between the quest for order which animates the bailiff and the world he actually lives in. At the beginning of the movie, motionless shots show him in the morning, obsessed with order in his house (1'30). But as soon as he leaves his house and takes his car, everything starts to move (1'51). There is a lot of noise in the street compared to the silence of the first scene. The bailiff checks the cleanliness of his car, while a journalist is talking on the radio about a city destroyed by a fifty-seconds seism which made two thousands victims, that is to say a third of the city (1'57). “ Partout, le spectacle de la désolation s’offre aux yeux” (2'32). The bailiff is annoyed again, changes the station and hears news about the war and changes again for a station also speaking of the city that was destroyed. It seems that no matter what he tries to do and no matter how much energy he puts in the fact to check all the details, the world around him works independently of his will and slowly moves to a form of chaos.

The quasi invisible and silent presence of Bartleby changes everything the bailiff believed in and his behaviour towards himself and the others. One of the main changes is that the bailiff, who is obsessed with order, respect and efficiency, will stop behaving as a boss, not being that concerned anymore about order and cleanliness. This man, who was obsessed with details and the appearances, even puts his reputation in danger: indeed, the customers, tired of waiting, finally left the office. In the scene just before the bailiff tells Bartleby to leave the office, he realises that the waiting room is empty and Ginger Nut tells him “Ah oui j’ai oublié de vous dire, ils sont tous partis” (55'33). This fact does not seem to disrupt the bailiff who only says as a reaction to this “Je voudrais lui parler seul” (55'45). He neglects his customers, is considered by the inhabitants of the building as being responsible for the situation and even visits Bartleby in jail, where Bartleby is considered as a counterfeiter, saying that he is one of his friends. Disorder entered the bailiff’s life with Bartleby and influenced the bailiff so much that he does not care about his reputation anymore, which was though something he was really proud of, which is represented in the short story by what he says about himself and the pleasure he has to give his references.

All who know me, consider me an eminent, *safe* man. The late John Jacob Astor, a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing my first grand point to be prudence; my next, method. (*B*, p.76)

Again, by doing nothing, Bartleby brings disorder to the bailiff’s live, not only speaking about cleanliness and the way things are working in the office, but also completely changing the bailiff’s behaviour, turning him into a man ready to lose everything without blinking.

Bartleby also brings disorder in places where he has never been physically. The bailiff's house for example. It was, as we saw in the first scene, clean and tidy, where everything was in the right place. The house was ruled by order. Bartleby simply refuses to move, the bailiff decides to change the location of his office and all his papers end up in his house. This relocation involves piles of paper mixed together, important things put into boxes and a change in the furniture and different elements composing the office. It also has an effect that Bartleby cannot even realise: the boxes are piled up in the bailiff's house. One can barely recognize the place compared with the first scene. We can see open boxes, with things thrown away, the plate which reads "Huissier" is placed on the top of a box back to front, and the piles of boxes seem to make it difficult to get around the room. The bailiff's desk is hardly visible under the files which cover it. We can see him working in his house, in the middle of all the boxes and he is disturbed by the doorbell. The estate agent in charge of the office the bailiff just left comes into the bailiff's own house to tell him the trouble Bartleby is causing. Even though he never stepped a foot in the bailiff's house, even if the bailiff changed the location of his office to get rid of Bartleby, and Bartleby does nothing apart from remaining silently sitting in the stairs, he still has an influence over the bailiff's life.

The paradox is that the more passive Bartleby is, the more he disrupts the order of the office. T.JOSWICK says about it:

Much of the ironic humor of the story depends on recognizing that disorder, especially at those times when the lawyer tries to define Bartleby by the institutional forms he is accustomed to. What he discovers is that Bartleby cannot be so defined, for he defies the logic of those forms. (JAWORSKI, 1978, p.84)

In both the movie and short story, at first, he arrives in the office as a kind of savior. As mentioned before, his presence is due to both the inefficiency of the employees who have let the documents to copy pile up in a corner, and to the incapacity for the lawyer to hire some competent people. At first, the work he accomplishes creates, for the lawyer, admiration and for the other employees, jealousy. The employees seem to consider Bartleby as a kind of intruder who invaded the calm intimacy of the office. They seem to be afraid of this man whom their boss admires so much and represents precisely what they are incapable of accomplishing. But then, Bartleby suddenly stops working, creating even more delay than there was before he came to the office and disorder both in the papers he does not copy and by monopolizing the bailiff's attention to a point that he does not care that all his customers are gone.

He also brings disorder in the office through its cleanliness, which is something the bailiff really cares about, as we saw in the first scene of the movie we mentioned before (1'30). When the cleaning lady comes to clean the office (1'04'05) and asks "Alors, on peut mettre de l'ordre maintenant?", the bailiff answers "Non, pas aujourd'hui, revenez demain". As we saw in the first scene of the movie, the bailiff is a man who is not only obsessed with order but also with cleanliness. But in the scene with the cleaning lady, even though Bartleby did not say a single word, his presence makes the bailiff - presented from the beginning as a very fussy man- delay the cleanup of the office. Still without saying a word, when the bailiff tries to speak to him about his refusal to leave the office, he throws his papers -both the copies and the documents that were waiting to be copied- everywhere in the room, which can be compared to the first scene in the office where we can see that there is a special room to classify papers and that the bailiff remonstrates Ginger Nut for placing the mails in the wrong corner of his office. In this three-minute-long monologue, the bailiff himself puts his office upside down, without Bartleby saying a word or doing anything else than just looking silently at the bailiff.

Bartleby's behavior or absence of behavior almost led to the bankruptcy of the bailiff. His strength and his power he exercises without even realizing it makes him affect the life of people without doing anything. Not only does he have the power to bring disorder in a place which is supposed to represent the mechanical order and efficiency of justice, but his attitude is contagious, is imitated and has an effect over the other members of the office.

****The contamination of the office and its members****

In the short story, when the new member joins the team, everyone must adapt. As Bartleby only gives little information, every small element he shows becomes very important. At the beginning of the short story, he works a lot "At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. [...] But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically." (B, p.82), and his behaviour is copied by the other characters present in the office. In the movie, this has been also represented. For instance when he arrives in the office, he starts to copy just after the bailiff explained everything to him. And right after Bartleby starts to write; the bailiff answers the phone and announces that the next customer can come in (12'56), as if he were

taking Bartleby's attitude as an example to follow. But as we mentioned before, Bartleby's behaviour also brings disorder. By doing nothing, he creates a change in the habits of the office and his behaviour is a source of conflict, but also of imitation. We can notice that when the bailiff wants to invite Turkey and Nippers for lunch in order to talk to them and fix the situation, they react just as Bartleby would have: they do not say a word, and go back to work. The only sound they make is when their pen scratches the paper (20'19).

Bartleby does not only have an influence over the other employees' attitude: he also contaminates their language. In the short story, the reader can follow the evolution of the vocabulary through the use of the verb "to prefer". As for instance when the other employees start to be angry at Bartleby for his behavior, the lawyer says "Mr Nippers, said I, I'd prefer that you would withdraw for the present"p.95. The lawyer says about this contamination of his vocabulary:

Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. (*B*, p.95)

As the movie goes along, the way characters speak and their vocabulary are also contaminated by Bartleby's. The other members of the office also start to use the verb "to prefer". In the movie, when Bartleby refuses for the first time to answer the bailiff, saying that he would prefer not to, Nippers loses all control and goes at him with the intention to hit him, repeating six times "préfèrerai pas, préfèrerai pas..." (49'53). Turkey and the bailiff stop him, and when he leaves, he says: "Je préfère encore ça plutôt que d'entendre des âneries". Just after this, the bailiff says "j'aurais préféré qu'une chose pareille...", and uses this formulation again when he speaks with Turkey and Nippers: "à l'avenir, je préférerais...". The characters are conscious that they start to speak like Bartleby: (54'13) when Nippers tells the bailiff:

- "Nous préférerions jouer au billard"
- "Ah ben vous l'avez attrapé le mot!"
- "Lequel?"
- "Préférer"
- "C'est bien possible monsieur".

The fact that Bartleby's presence and almost complete absence of communication brings disorder in the office is thus visible when the other characters imitate his behaviour, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, but also in the five minutes described above, when the verb "to prefer" is used more than a dozen times, contaminating the character's vocabulary

and way of talking to each other. The bailiff even starts to use this term with secondary characters who have nothing to do with the office: during the relocation of the office, when the removers want to take the blind away, the bailiff says “Je préférerais que vous ne l’emportiez qu’à la dernière minute” (1’08’32). This form of linguistic contamination is very efficient as it spreads even outside the office, which shows that it is anchored in the bailiff’s way of behaving.

As we mentioned before, the movie begins in the bailiff’s house, where we can see that he is obsessed with order. Indeed, he embodies the law, efficiency and is the boss of four employees. At the beginning of the movie, this impression of order can be seen in the bailiff’s obsession for the exact places of the figurines from his collection, his general appearance which he checks in the first scene of the movie and the remarks he makes to his maid about her being one minute late. The office is also a tidy space, with a room to store all the documents. The arrival of Bartleby modifies this order. As we saw in Part I, his presence influences space distribution, which is also organised in a way to separate his working space from his employees’ and in a desire of unity and uniformity. This aspect of his personality seems deeply anchored in the bailiff’s behaviour, but Bartleby’s presence will influence him to the point that the bailiff brings disorder himself in his office. Bartleby makes him lose his control so that, when he wants to fire him, he is mixing papers together, throwing them and spreading them all over the room (1’05’00).

Bartleby’s presence also has an impact on the cleanliness of the office: not only does he live in the office, but he also prevents the cleaning lady from cleaning the office, telling her that he is not ready yet (1’01’35). Bartleby also contaminates the bailiff’s mind in his relation to himself. He takes care of himself, and is very careful of the way he looks, but Bartleby influences this aspect of the bailiff’s personality. Although Bartleby is always cleanly shaved and with his hair done, the influence he has over the bailiff’s life can be seen through the fact that the bailiff loses his control over himself. After the bailiff told Bartleby to leave, offering him some money, we can see him lying on the sofa, not shaved, drunk and late (58’29). This scene echoes the first scene of the movie, in which the bailiff wakes up and talks to the maid. The difference is that at the beginning there was an obsession for order, but in the other scene in the house, the general physical appearance of the bailiff completely changed, as well as his attitude: instead of telling the maid she is late, he tells her that he does not have the time to have breakfast. This scene happens before the moment when the bailiff rushes to the office, to realise that Bartleby is not gone.

Bartleby's behaviour is also copied by the bailiff who starts to change his way of being and opinion to fit with what Bartleby said. For example, when Bartleby refuses to accomplish a task for the first time and mentions that "he needs organisation", the bailiff tells Turkey and Nippers: "Ce qu'il veut c'est s'organiser comme il l'entend, et c'est peut être à nous finalement de nous plier à ses horaires"(34'35). The bailiff tries to understand and even justifies Bartleby's point of view. He defends him before his employees when they try to convince him that taking care of Bartleby is not his responsibility. The bailiff tells them that Bartleby does not want to die, but gave his desire to live. The contamination of the different members of the office by Bartleby is visible in both the short story and the movie, but the effect it has on the bailiff goes beyond the simple imitation of language skills. Bartleby clearly disrupted the bailiff's life and way of being, to the point that the bailiff asks Bartleby what to do and how to behave: "Bon ben alors je vous écoute, qu'est ce que je dois faire? Hein? Dites le moi! Dites le moi!" (1'05'15). It seems that Bartleby contaminated the bailiff's life so much that he cannot rule it anymore and does not know what to do if Bartleby does not tell him.

Contamination thus informs the characters' behaviour, their language and points of view. Bartleby is a copyist being copied by the people around him. The fact that some characters adopt some elements of Bartleby's personality seems to have a double function in the story: it shows the contamination of an environment by a simple person who, by doing nothing, brings chaos and disorder, and this contamination leads the bailiff to a form of self-introspection questioning his own identity. Bartleby's absence of communication, of action and the little we know about him prevents him from doing anything, and the bailiff can only make guesses. Bartleby seems to have something inside him that creates a quest for meaning. He seems to represent, to embody a mystery that the bailiff wants to solve at any cost. And the cost was expensive: regarding the story, we know from the book that Bartleby could have easily destroyed his career. Though, the bailiff does not give up his quest in order to solve the mystery of Bartleby. In his preface to *Oeuvres I*, Philippe Jaworski talks about Bartleby as "mystère absolument irréductible" (p.12). Indeed, the fact that Bartleby does not reveal anything provokes a desire to know and to understand, a desire which is driving, even controlling the bailiff and that will be the leitmotiv of the whole story.

CHAPTER III – GAZING DOES NOT NECESSARILY RESULT IN KNOWLEDGE

The importance of gazes in Ronet's adaptation

The short story is a first person narrative, which implies subjectivity as the story is told from the point of view of one character. Throughout the story, in both the short story and the movie although the different characters try to understand and to know more about Bartleby whom they do not understand, the character we finally discover and get to know more is the bailiff himself. Through the quest of Bartleby's identity, the bailiff happens to make a self introspection which will question what he knew about himself.

Le récit est bien focalisé sur Bartleby, objet impenetrable, jusqu'à l'obsession; mais du coup il rebondit vers le narrateur et devient le récit de cette obsession. (JAWORSKI, 1978, p.188)

Indeed, we saw in the first part that the story moves from a "narrating I" to a "narrating eye", that of the camera. It has also been mentioned that the wide shots prevail in the movie. The camera goes from very large viewpoints to close-ups, from a global vision to a limited one. In both the story and the film, the characters define themselves through the vision the others have of them. Turkey and Nippers for example judge each other, and, in the movie, they do so very often without a word, only looking at each other in a certain way. For instance when they judge each other's clumsiness, the look they share expresses both the weariness they share (7'28). Ginger Nut is a quite silent character, but most of the time, his best way to communicate is the way he looks at things. This is particularly visible when he looks at the employees (7'24), one trying to stabilise his desk, the other dropping his pen on the floor; the way he looks at them expresses his amusement. The adaptation of the short story into a movie made it possible for Ronet to give importance to the gazes between the different characters.

In fact, most of the gazes which are not large shots are usually contained by a frame which limits both our vision and comprehension. This frame marks the limits between the different characters. For example, at the beginning of the movie, when Bartleby arrives at the office, he is observed by the other employees through the glass which separates their working place from the bailiff's. And more generally in the office, characters must look through a glass or a frame when they look at something or someone (see screen capture n°4 p.44). Their perception is thus limited. The different characters of the office look at each other through the glass, or through the blind that the bailiff brought in order to mark the boundaries between his working place and Bartleby's. Bartleby himself always looks through limited frames. He only sees the outside from the office window, where "wall street" seems to materialize before our eyes, since a worker is building a brick wall just outside the office. In the short story, the action takes place in New York and the lawyer's office is situated on Wall Street. In the movie, the construction of a wall in front of the office's window evokes the location of the story in the original story, helps to represent the closing of communication and of the office itself and also embodies the limitation of both space and vision.

The way secondary characters perceive the world is also limited, which is the case for instance of the taxi driver (1'20'31). Indeed, he only sees the bailiff through the rear-view mirror, and they look at each other on five occasions. Not only do the characters look at each other through this small mirror, but they also do not look at each other at the same time. The office in itself is a place where people can only look through something. The only vision they have of it is or the waiting room, and they can only see what is going on inside through the door when someone opens it. There is another example at the beginning of the movie (7'10): when someone wants to ask something, he has to do it through the little window between the waiting room and the office of the copyists.

The bailiff's vision is also limited. Indeed, not only does he look at his employees through the glass or through the blind, but his looks are often represented as limited in the movie. We often see him looking through the glass of his car or of a taxi, through the rear-view mirror of the taxi, but also through the mirror of his bathroom. The movie begins with a 20-second shot when the bailiff looks at himself in the mirror, doing his hair, checking his face, his bags, his wrinkles and his double chin. He seems to be defined by this image he also gives to the other characters. He also looks at himself in the copper brass plate which reads "Huissier". He does his hair and looks at himself once more, looking at himself as in a mirror through the limited space of the plate, which only refers to his occupation. His vision of

himself is incomplete in general, and he seems to discover it little by little in the movie; the presence of the mirror and of Bartleby's eyes help to define him in a more accurate way. The mirrors are some elements the director wanted to emphasize in order to raise the issue of identity in *Bartleby*: "Pour moi, le film, c'est la traversée du miroir" (JAWORSKI, 1978, p.119). Indeed, the reflections seem to be used to evoke this problem of identity. Right after the bailiff discovers that Bartleby lives in the office, we can see in the expressions on his face that he is bothered by this discovery and we can see him walking, his reflection being visible in the shop windows of the street he walks in (42'10).

The way of looking "through" something limits the range of the characters' vision, but it also has another effect: as the characters look through a frame, they only focus on a limited number of elements. When they look at something through a glass or a window, they focus on one particular element, for instance when the employees look at Bartleby, or the taxi driver looks at the bailiff's face. But when this look goes through a mirror, the limits imposed on the eyes by the frame of the mirror leads the characters to a form of introspection.

As we mentioned, the bailiff defines himself through the others' eyes. We can see in the scene set in the restaurant that he cares so much about what his employees think of him that he invites them for lunch in order to justify his behaviour towards Bartleby (21'00). He also cares about some of his physical characteristics such as his hair, of the marks of time on his face. But the silence of Bartleby seems to provoke a kind of insecurity for the bailiff. He is used to defining himself through the others' eyes, but Bartleby remains silent, and his eyes do not bring any kind of information. He cannot define himself in relation to Bartleby and this absence of feedback leads him to this unusual behaviour towards Bartleby, the incapacity to define their relationship.

This moment of introspection when he looks at himself in the mirror also depends on Bartleby's behaviour. Indeed, he cannot make him give any information about who he is and what is going on in his mind. In the short story, the first time Bartleby refuses to accomplish a task, the lawyer says "Poor fellow! thought I, he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence; his aspect sufficiently evinces that his eccentricities are involuntary" (*B*, p.87). Again, after realising Bartleby lives in the office, the lawyer also says "Immediately then the thought came sweeping across me, what miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" (*B*, p.92). He can only make decisions and suppositions about him from what he can see and Bartleby does not show

much. For the bailiff on the contrary, we know from the beginning that he is a wealthy man. He has a maid, wears nice clothes, has a beautiful car, and several employees. On the contrary, Bartleby lives in the office, and his belongings fit in a simple drawer. But the story and the movie lay emphasis on the fact that there are not that many differences between the two men. In both the short story and the movie, Bartleby seems to be represented as the bailiff's silent double. Indeed they happen to be both very lonely; they have an obvious problem of communication with the other and clearly have difficulties with the fact to behave according to their position. Deeper than this, the relationship between the two characters is controversial. They are supposed to have a boss/employee relationship, but their behaviour makes it impossible. Along the story, the lawyer starts to behave like a kind of father for Bartleby, taking care of him, even defending him in front of the other employees. In order to please him, the bailiff offers him presents and obviously cares too much about Bartleby, which, added to the omnipresence of a closed space and a general claustrophobic atmosphere, contributes to accentuate the ambiguity of the relationship between the two men.

The omnipresence of men in the office also raises an element, even more visible in the story where women have only secondary roles: the relationship between the lawyer and Bartleby, which is ambiguous and hard to define. He offers him some presents and tries to take care of him, but does not get any more from Bartleby. The two men seem to have nothing in common, be it their social position, behaviour or personality. But as the plot unfolds, the bailiff loses some of his confidence. Little by little, his face presents some marks of tiredness, his hair is often untidy, he does not shave that properly anymore. Maurice Ronet wanted to emphasize the similarities between the two characters.

[...] j'étais obsédé par le miroir, par l'identité. Pour moi, Bartleby c'est l'huissier avant les compromissions; c'est une résurgence de sa jeunesse, un retour sur lui-même. (JAWORSKI, 1978, p.125)

The bailiff and Bartleby have the same problem for communicating with other people, and they both happen to be lonely. Maurice Ronet also evokes this point in the interview made by Philippe Jaworski 1978, p.127.

De toute évidence [l'huissier] cherche un langage, à dire quelque chose à quelqu'un. Il y a encore peut être un contact possible avec l'autre. Et tout de suite après, il découvre qu'il est aussi seul que l'est Bartleby. Et il passe de l'autre côté.

Although they are very different, there are numerous similarities between the two characters, which makes it ambiguous and complicated to name their relation. Their duet

within the story creates this ambiguity, emphasised as we mentioned before, by the proximity created by the omnipresence of enclosed spaces. They both act in a way that could be compared to a form of seduction. The lawyer tries to know more about Bartleby's life, about his taste, and does his best to make him comfortable. Just before the police take Bartleby to jail, he even offers to him a kind of submission, and the power to make decision in his place.

Indeed, by using mirrors and the limitation of space between Bartleby and the bailiff thanks to a blind, it seems that the director wanted to present Bartleby as the bailiff's double. A double whose behaviour and absence of information would force the bailiff to think and try to understand Bartleby and show him what his life is really like. In the short story, when the lawyer goes to his office in order to speak with Bartleby before the police takes him to jail, he tries to know what would make him happy and says "Would you like to re-engage in copying for some one? [...] Would you like a clerkship in a dry-goods store?" (*B*, p.106). Even after all Bartleby caused to the bailiff, he even tells him:

‘Bartleby’ said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, ‘will you go home with me now – not in my office, but my dwelling – and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure?’ (*B*, p.108)

It seems that the presence of Bartleby questions the bailiff's well-ordered life. In both the short story and the movie, the lawyer/bailiff does not even have a name, and we only know about him a part of what concerns his professional life, and for Bartleby, as in a reflection in a mirror where the image is reversed, it is exactly the contrary: the only thing we have of him is his name. But despite their loneliness, and incapacity to behave according to their position, the two characters are the opposite of each other and yet Bartleby is his double. The relationship between the two characters changes throughout the movie. At first, they communicate a little and seem to have some consideration for each other. But as soon as the relationship changes, when Bartleby stops behaving as a normal employee and when the bailiff does not behave as a boss anymore, there is a rupture in the fragile balance which had been created in the office. This rupture can be felt in the short story from the communication decreasing little by little, but in the movie, this change in the relationship between the two characters has been shown by the director through the gazes, which, in the movie, appear as a substitute for an impossible communication.

The bailiff and Bartleby often look at each other at the beginning of the movie, but the two characters hardly look at each other at the end of the film. There is a contrast between the

first scene when Bartleby arrives in the office (10'13) in which the bailiff, Ginger Nut, Turkey, Nippers and even the customers in the waiting room all look at each other and the scene taking place in the jail, when the bailiff is placed just behind Bartleby who does not even turn around to look at him (1'23'59) (see screen capture n°5 p.45). It seems that the more the bailiff realises what his life is really like compared to Bartleby's, the more he finds out that in a way, they are not so different. For when Bartleby is in prison, he does not even turn around to look at the bailiff. They talk but do not look at each other; the paradox of this conversation is that they do not communicate. The unbridgeable gap between them reaches its climax with Bartleby's death. When the bailiff realises Bartleby is dead, he closes his eyes, which are not to look at anything anymore.

As Bartleby barely speaks, the camera very often focuses on his very blue eyes, which are another limited space through which the other characters try to see, in order to attempt to understand him. Bartleby's eyes are like a screen between the world and himself. But both the story and the film suggest that gazing does not necessarily result in knowledge, and these blue eyes are an unfathomable surface which will remain a mystery. Blue eyes evoking the surface of water, a lake, an ocean where it could be easy to lose oneself, but that no one can fully know, which is a theme dear to Melville.

****Bartleby as a mystery that will remain unsolved****

Both the movie and the short story show the passage from order to disorder, through the bailiff and Bartleby. The bailiff brings disorder in his own office by giving priority to order in a world prone to chaos. We see him in the movie focusing on small details concerning the appearances and leaving aside the elements which are driving his office on a dangerous path. But although the bailiff has a responsibility in what happens in the story, Bartleby is the disruptive element who will lead the situation to what it is at the end.

The puzzled lawyer [...] concludes that Bartleby is the victim of an 'innate' and 'incurable' disorder; he decides to question him, and if that reveals nothing useful, to dismiss him. (BLOOM, 1978, p.18)

The paradox is that the less Bartleby acts, the more he brings chaos. There is something in him that provokes a quest for deciphering the mystery of his identity. The bailiff is the most concerned and the most involved in this quest.

In both the story and the movie a certain number of elements about Bartleby are also left unsaid. In reality, we only know a little about him. One of the only elements is his name, and at the end of the story, the police can find no identification papers. We can guess that Bartleby is used to paperwork, which is confirmed at the end of the story, after Bartleby's death, since we are told that Bartleby worked for a while in the Dead Letters Office, and lost his position after some administrative changes. This element is the closest thing to an answer that the narrator, the spectator and the reader will ever get about Bartleby. Nothing that the narrator or the reader could ever guess about Bartleby will have the possibility to be confirmed. We cannot know what caused this strange behaviour or this withdrawal from his life that Bartleby inflicted to himself. There is, in the story, an almost complete lack of communication. Bartleby is incapable of approving or refusing anything, his only answer is invariably "I would prefer not to". Which is also indefinite in itself – since "to" is not followed by any complement- it is an answer which does not bring any kind of information. This answer leaves place for a decision of the person it is addressed to, which is the whole point about Bartleby: his absence of communication, of decision seems to be a way to force the others to make guesses about him and decisions for him. In *Bartleby et la Création*, G.Agamben says that Bartleby represents nothing, that his answer "I would prefer not to" contains nothing, and that, by being, and by his presence imposing nothing, manages to exercise a kind of power:

La formule, si obstinément répétée, détruit toute possibilité de construire un rapport entre potential absoluta (dieu, pouvoir) et potential ordinate (volonté). Telle est la formule de la puissance. (p.42)

All along the story, he tries to make Bartleby act as he would like to, and does not manage to. He also links everything that concerns this man to him. When he goes to see Bartleby in jail, Bartleby is in a corner of the courtyard, close to a wall, and does not even look at the bailiff. But the bailiff speaks to him and tells him (1'26'58) "Admettez que j'ai tout fait pour vous éviter ceci. Admettez que sans moi, vous seriez là depuis longtemps. Admettez le". But Bartleby never answers him.

The lawyer would like to see himself in Bartleby's eyes as in a mirror. He would like to see anything in Bartleby's eyes and for some reason, he gave himself the mission to be the

one to take care of Bartleby and to discover what happens in his mind, but despite all his efforts, it seems that it is difficult to find out what is in Bartleby's head. Everything Bartleby does is considered by the bailiff as a direct attack. In the scene where we can see that Bartleby did not leave the office after the bailiff asked him to, the bailiff progressively moves from speaking to yelling at Bartleby. But instead of yelling at him about thing he did or did not do, he says:

“J’ai été assez patient avec vous, j’ai cherché à vous comprendre, j’ai pris votre défense, je vous ai trouvé des excuses alors même que vous refusiez de parler. Alors finalement quoi j’ai plus de clients, j’ai plus de clerks, alors payez vous mes impôts ? Chercher vous à défier mon autorité, à ruiner ma carrière, à jeter le discrédit sur ma réputation professionnelle ? Hein? Je vous le demande ? Qu’est ce que je dois faire?” (1’05’12)

Even though Bartleby is not saying a word and the monologue should be about yelling at Bartleby for the chaos he provoked and his refusal to respect the authority and the order the bailiff gave to him, the bailiff seems to believe that Bartleby is doing this on purpose, in order to hurt him and to ruin his life. Once again by doing nothing, when the bailiff is trying to know what is happening and whereas he asks questions to Bartleby about him, he, irreparably, ends up speaking about himself. As if the fact of speaking about Bartleby was impossible. As if the fact of directly asking him a question about himself was impossible. Bartleby seems to have this power of exercising a control over the bailiff, the power to provoke a mystery about his personality, creating a desire to solve this mystery but with the incapacity to find out what it is about, as if someone that would be interested in his life gave up because of a lack of information and of interest, as the other employees did, or were unable to find out anything about Bartleby, like the bailiff (as if a curse made him unable to untie Bartleby from him).

Bartleby's non-answer seems to provoke this introspection. As Philippe Jaworski says: “L’homme, l’ “esprit chercheur” (inquiring mind), peut-il espérer faire autre chose que proposer sa version de l’intraduisible?” (JAWORSKI, 1986, p.197). Indeed as he says nothing, it forces the other interlocutor to deliver a monologue, and, while talking to Bartleby, actually talk about himself. The repetition of the phrase “I would prefer not to” creates a kind of tension. This answer which is between a yes and a no does not give any clue about what the person who says it really has in mind, as if the truth was too hard to be told. Even when he speaks, this answer is not one.

What he says contains nothing to help an interlocutor to know what he has in mind. In the case of Bartleby, we have no information, which makes it impossible to define him. Like

the whale's face in *Moby Dick*, Bartleby's face is a text that cannot be deciphered. This is the whole point of the relationship between the two characters. Real satisfaction is given to none of them, and, once more gives to the reader/spectator no kind of answer. Even at the end of the story, when the voiceover delivers information about Bartleby, it is only limited information. We never know anything more than what was shown or than what could be guessed from Bartleby's behavior. He seems to work as a foil for the bailiff's own introspection. As Philippe Jaworski says in the preface of *Oeuvres I*:

“Le narrateur peut bien s'évertuer, tout au long du récit, à comprendre Bartleby, c'est lui, lui seul et sa vérité que le lecteur est amené à connaître”. (p.10)

He also mentions:

Ce qui l'obsède et ce qu'il veut faire dire à l'écriture, c'est l'aventure subjective de celui -témoin, narrateur- qui se risque à l'épreuve de la connaissance du 'hors soi même'. (p.12)

Reading the short story or viewing the film thus turns into an experience of extreme otherness. Philippe Jaworski says about it: “Bartleby est un opérateur de recherche” (JAWORSKI, 1986, p.16). Bartleby is a mystery which is to remain unsolved, as he provokes the incapacity for the other main character to accomplish his desire, to help him and to know something about Bartleby. Even at the end of both the short story and the movie, the only form of answer that is given is that Bartleby worked for a while at the dead letters office where he eventually lost the passion for life. The short story begins by the lawyer/narrator announcing really clearly that no answer could be found “I believe that no materials exist, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. “It is an irreparable loss to literature” (p.75). Bartleby entered and got out of the lawyer/bailiff's life and the only thing he got from this experience is the conclusion of both the story and the movie, which sums up what can be said about the copyist:

Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!

CONCLUSION

Adapting Melville's *Bartleby* is not an easy task. One has to consider the general atmosphere of the short story and the difficulties to represent a story about a man about whom we know so little. The aim of this dissertation was to treat the adaptation without just making a list of the differences between Melville's *Bartleby* and Ronet's.

Ce qui est en jeu ici, au-delà de la simple comparaison oeuvre littéraire/ oeuvre filmique, c'est bien la manière dont le réel est mis en forme, par le texte et par l'image, pour lui donner un sens. (HUDELET-WELLS, 2011, p.14)

The changes that were necessary to make in order to adapt the story on screen, the treatment of space, the effects *Bartleby* has on the office and especially on the bailiff, the gazes and *Bartleby* as a mystery that is to remain unsolved were, to me, the elements of the story that needed to be taken into consideration when it came to Ronet's adaptation. The fact to move from text to image brought a new dimension to the story. It seems that Ronet used the freedom offered by the use of a camera to add some details about the bailiff, *Bartleby* and the rupture in communication, but also to emphasize the atmosphere of the office and of the story in general. Visual details such as for instance the grey sky offering a limited light throughout the movie or the general absence of color are some elements belonging to Melville's universe. Maurice Ronet says about it : "Je connaissais très bien Melville [...] J'ai essayé de rester dans ce registre-là tout le temps dans le film- ce qui est aussi une fidélité au conte de Melville". 1978, *Delta* n°6, p.115/117. Phillippe Jaworski says about the movie : "La réussite – exceptionnelle – de l'entreprise de Maurice Ronet devrait être saluée". (JAWORSKI, 1978, p.115-117). Indeed, Ronet adapted Melville's short story faithfully. Karine HILDENBRAND says about the adaptation of a movie:

L'adaptation doit alors être envisagée comme le point de jonction fragile mais fertile où les deux œuvres s'enrichissent et se complètent grâce au regard actif du spectateur. (HUDELET-WELLS, 2011, p.107)

The spectator has a role to play in a movie and despite the amount of elements that could be mentioned to express how respectful of the story was the adaptation, we may wonder if a novice would have sensed and perceived in the same way this tribute to Melville's work.

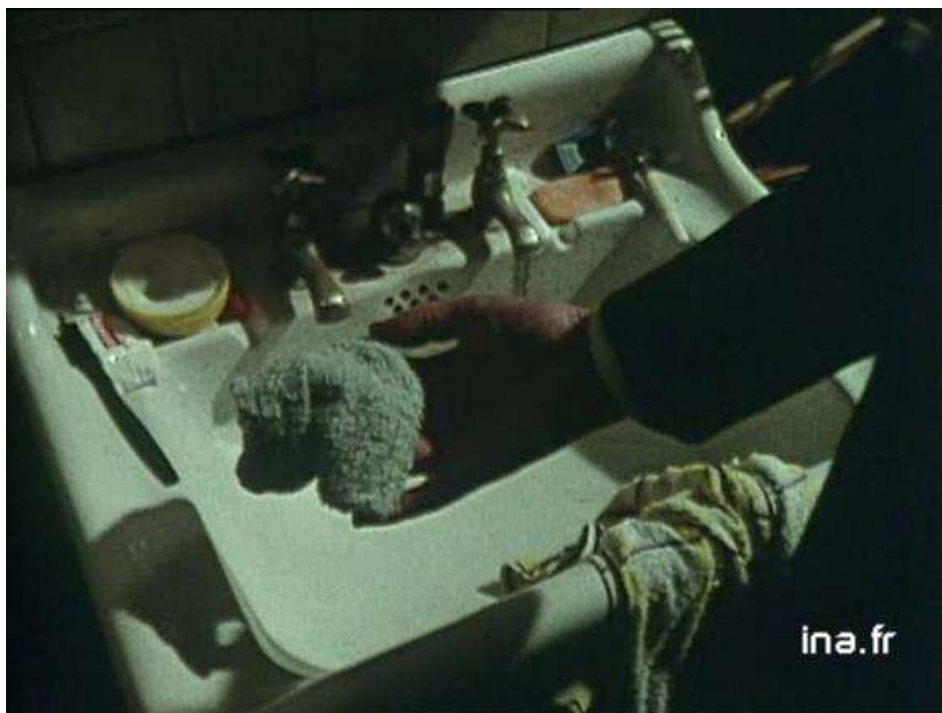
BIBLIOGRAPHIE

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio, *Bartleby ou la création*, Circé, 1995.
- ARVIN, Newton, *Herman Melville*, New York, William Sloane Associates, 1950.
- BADINTER, Elisabeth, *XY de l'identité masculine*, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 1992.
- BERNSTEIN, John, *Pacifism and Rebellion in the writings of Herman Melville*, Paris, Mouton & Co, 1964.
- BERTHOFF, Warner, *The example of Melville*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1962.
- BLOOM, Harold, *Herman Melville's Billy Bud, Benito Cereno, Bartleby the Scrivener and Other Tales*, Philadelphia, Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
- BOWEN, James K., ed, VANDERBEETS, Richard, *A critical guide to Herman Melville*, Glenview, Scott & Foresman, 1969.
- BUACHE, Freddy, *Le cinéma français des années 70*, Paris, Hatier, 1990.
- BUTLER, Judith, *Troubles dans le Genre*, Paris, éditions La découverte, 2005.
- CANADAY, Nicolas Jr., *Melville and authority*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1968.
- DURAND, Régis, *Melville- Signes et Métaphores*, Lausanne, L'âge d'homme, 1980.
- GALE, Robert L., *Plots and Characters in the Fiction and Narrative Poetry of Herman Melville*, London, MIT Press, 1972.
- HUDELET, Ariane, ed, WELLS-LASSAGNE, Shannon, *De la page blanche aux salles obscures- Adaptation et réadaptation dans le monde Anglophone*, Presse Universitaire de Rennes, 2011.
- JAWORSKI Philippe, DELTA n°6 and n°7, *H.Melville "Bartleby"*, ed.Université Paul Valéry, novembre 1978.
- JAWORSKI, Philippe, *Textes réunis : Herman Melville*, Montpellier, Université Paul Valéry, 1993.
- JAWORSKI, Phillippe, *Melville- Le Désert et l'Empire*, Presse de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure, 1986.

- MARTIN, Marcel, *Le cinéma français depuis la guerre*, Paris, Edilig, 1984.
- MAYOUX, Jean-Jacques, *Melville par lui-même*, Microcosme, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1958.
- MELVILLE, Herman, *Bartleby, a story of Wall Street*, Penguin book of the American short stories, 1853.
- MELVILLE, Herman, *Œuvre Volume I*, Préface par Philippe Jaworski, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.
- MELVILLE, Herman, *Œuvres Volume IV*, Préface par Philippe Jaworski, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.
- MULLER, James E. Jr, *Reader's guide to Herman Melville*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1962.
- MUMFORD, Lewis, *Herman Melville, a study of his life and vision*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1963.
- PERRON, Bernard, *Etudes littéraires* vol.26, 1993 :
<http://www.erudit.org/revue/etudlitt/1993/v26/n2/501042ar.pdf>
- ROLLYSON, Carl, ed, PADOCK, Lisa, *Herman Melville- A to Z*, New York, Facts on File, 2001.
- RONET, Maurice, *Bartleby*, 1976.
- SACHS, Viola, *L'imaginaire Melville- A French point of view*, Saint-Denis, Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1992.

APPENDIX

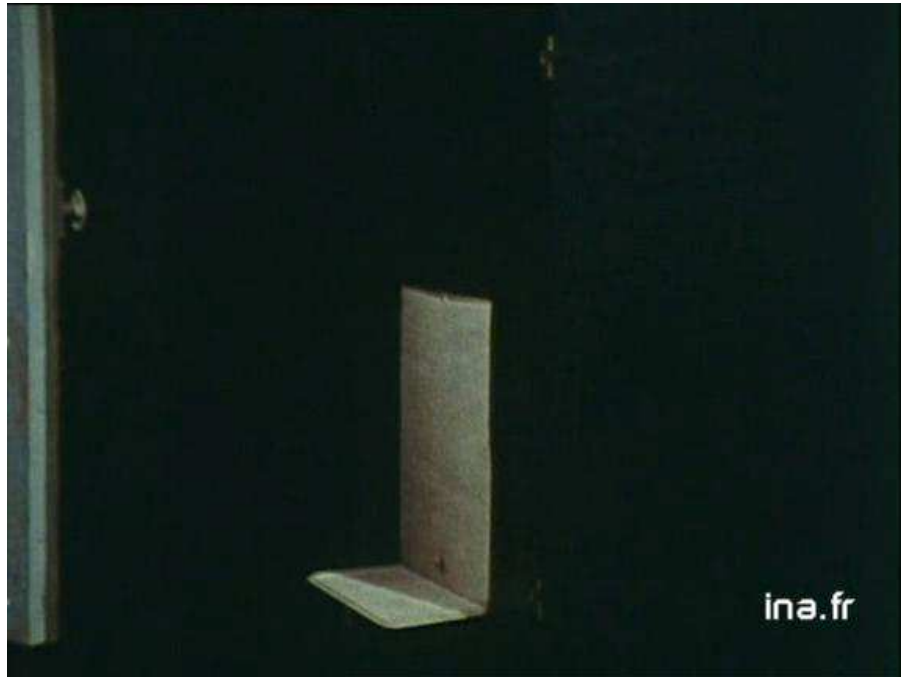
Screen capture n°1



Screen capture n°2



Screen capture n°3



Screen capture n°4



Screen capture n°5



SUM UP

This dissertation deals with the adaptation of Melville's *Bartleby* for French television by a French director: Maurice Ronet. It is the story of a man, hired as a copyist in an office where his presence has an effect on the organization of the office and the other employees. The story presents a man whose withdrawal from life is obvious and becomes a real obsession for the man who hired him. But through the story, we find out that even if the quest for meaning concerns Bartleby, the only character the reader really gets to know is the narrator. The aim of this dissertation is to discuss the main themes in Herman Melville's *Bartleby* such as the passage from order to disorder, the exploration of a mystery and the quest for meaning. This dissertation also analyses the stakes of an adaptation, the passage from a 1st to a 3rd person narrative and the way the appearance of a new eye, that of the camera, can contribute to the story and its adaptation on screen.

KEYWORDS

Herman Melville, Maurice Ronet, French cinema, adaptation, American literature.