The Ultimate Border:
Mobility, Spirituality, and Death in Iñárritu's *Biutiful*

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Biutiful is the first of Alejandro González Iñárritu's films to introduce the supernatural and focus on one single protagonist, Uxbal. The film makes a political commentary by showing the slums of Barcelona, where impoverished citizens and undocumented migrants coexist. Through Uxbal's visions of ghosts, the supernatural enters the most marginalised sectors of Barcelona. While popular narratives often relate mobility to liberation and transformative experiences, *Biutiful* problematizes this understanding of displacement. This paper analyses how the film articulates borders both literally and allegorically. Through mobility and border theory I explore how socio-political conditions intertwine with the supernatural and how they determine the characters' access to spiritual experiences. This article also explores how mobility intermingles with spiritual experiences, the supernatural, and death. I rely on the 'spectral turn' to examine how ghosts in *Biutiful* serve to make a socio-political commentary. Lastly, this article explores the use of focalisation in the film to represent the supernatural through Uxbal's visions. *Biutiful* engages mobility and spirituality in a way that is symptomatic of the asymmetric power dynamics of globalisation. It represents displacement as a navigation within the social fabric of the global system in which spiritual experiences seem elusive.

Keywords: death; mobility; spirituality; border; Iberoamerican cinema

Introduction

Biutiful (2010) constitutes a turning point in the filmography of transnational director Alejandro González Iñárritu. His previous works *Amores perros* (2000), *21 Gramos* (2003), and *Babel* (2006) exhibit the violence of global capitalism by combining melodrama and social realism and by relying on collective narrative structures. In *Biutiful*, the situation of migrants in a European metropolis constitutes one of the main subplots and thus mobility becomes a crucial narrative trope. Most importantly, the film incorporates a new topic into Iñárritu's narratives: spiritual

experiences and the supernatural. Initially these might seem like a secondary subplot in the story of the protagonist, Uxbal, because the harsh reality portrayed in the film can almost eclipse its spiritual undertones.[1] Yet these experiences underlie the film's premise, which revolves around the personal transformation of a terminally ill man who can communicate with the ghosts of those who have passed away. I argue that these spiritual experiences operate as the strongest element of political critique in the film, as they are intrinsically determined by the socioeconomic reality in which they emerge. In addition, *Biutful* is the first of Iñárritu's films to focus on one single protagonist. In this film focalisation defines how these spiritual elements intertwine with socio-political structures because the narrative structure privileges the perspective of one character. Thus, the story is mainly accessible for the audience through Uxbal's point of view, which mirrors how social difference operates in his environment.

The film tells the story of Uxbal (Javier Bardem), an impoverished father who engages in under-the-table schemes and illegal businesses to provide for his two children in the slums of Barcelona. Upon discovering his terminal cancer, he tries to solve his financial problems and rebuild his marriage with his bipolar ex-wife Marambra (Maricel Álvarez) to ensure the safety of his children when he dies. Most of his low-capitalist ventures involve undocumented migrants, as he acts as the middleman between the Chinese workers who manufacture products in a sweat shop and the Senegalese street vendors who sell them downtown. Uxbal also negotiates with corrupt police officers, paying them to turn a blind eye to these activities and to leave the migrants alone, without success. Eventually, this situation results in tragedy. First, one of the Senegalese vendors close to Uxbal, Ekweme (Cheikh Ndiaye), is arrested and taken to a detention centre from where he is soon to be deported. In addition, many of the Chinese workers

[1] Significantly, of all the academic literature about *Biutiful* only one essay focuses on the spiritual elements of the film, see Sinnerbrink 2014.

die in an accident, asphyxiated by the gas heaters that Uxbal bought for them with the intention to improve their difficult living conditions. Furthermore, Marambra suffers a relapse which leads her to neglect her children and which presumably results in her eventual hospitalisation. At that point, Uxbal has become physically dependent as a result of his disease, and it is Ekweme's wife Ige (Diaryatou Daff) who, along with her baby, moves in and becomes his family's caretaker. Shortly after, Uxbal passes away knowing that his children will be safe with Ige.

Death is constantly present throughout the film and the supernatural emerges in the form of spectres. Significantly, both death and the supernatural constitute a capitalist venture like any other: Uxbal is a medium with the ability to see the ghosts of the recently deceased, which he uses for profit. At the same time, he and his brother are planning to sell their father's niche in the city's cemetery to constructors that will use the land to build a mall. Similarly, the death of the Chinese workers is first perceived as a threat to the illegal business and it is not considered a moral issue until much later. In *Biutiful*, Iñárritu intensifies his social critique of the cruellest side of global capitalism, such as the criminalization of migrants, the exploitative conditions of labour, and the commercialization of death. In this context, Uxbal's transitory situation between life and death is presented as an evocation of the circumstances of the migrants in the film, who inhabit a liminal space determined by the uprooting and legal challenges of forced physical displacement. As a result, the plot establishes a clear connection between the spiritual and socioeconomic oppression from the beginning. This article explores how mobility intermingles with the supernatural and with the spiritual experiences of dying characters in the film. More specifically, it focuses on how the power dynamics of global capitalism and migration configure such a relationship. To that end, I first analyse the use of displacement as a trope in narratives about spiritual transformation. Secondly, I discuss how it appears in *Biutiful* and how the film

articulates borders. Lastly, I explore how death, spiritual experiences, and the supernatural appear in the film and how they are exclusive to Uxbal through the use of his narrative point of view. Overall, *Biutiful* connects mobility, death, and spirituality to evoke the power dynamics present in the slums of a globalised metropolis.

Mobility, Spirituality, and Peripheral Cinemas

According to the most traditional definitions, mobility can be understood as the act of getting from one point to another. In this sense, 'mobility involves a displacement—the act of moving between locations' (Cresswell 2006, 2). This understanding of mobility often equates displacement with an exciting experience and a sense of novelty. However, in recent years, scholars have started to explore the complexities of mobilities beyond the 'stereotypical account' that mobility will likely 'place us on the road to prosperity' (Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, and Sheller 2013, 1). This 'mobilities turn' aims to use a contextual and critical approach to understand 'how changing mobilities have transformed the way we live: our practices, our relations, our senses and our desires' rather than only 'celebrating the pristine decontextualized' modern possibilities of mobility in globalisation (2013, 2). As a result, this new paradigm complicates the definition of mobility and expands it beyond explicit physical displacement. In the case of *Biutiful*, the film takes place in the same city and no journeys beyond it are depicted, yet displacement determines the entire narrative.

The optimistic understanding of mobility permeates common narrative structures in which displacement incites a transformative and positive adventure for the displaced. As Walter Moser claims, mobility is 'a general characteristic of modernity' (2008, 9) that configures popular narrative genres, such as the road movie. More specifically, physical mobility has

traditionally been a recurrent narrative device used to evoke spiritual experiences. Transformative journeys and pilgrimages take the role of a ritual that mirrors the inner transformation of the characters in the story. That is the basis of Joseph Campbell's influential monomyth (2004), an archetypal narrative formula in which the protagonist leaves his daily reality to undergo a deep psychological or spiritual transformation during the course of his travels. At the end of the hero's journey, the protagonist has reached a revelation or has gained extraordinary or even 'godly' powers (2004, 36). The monomyth often appears as a basic storytelling archetype in contemporary films. In scriptwriting terms, it resembles the character arc, the transformation of the protagonist throughout the story, even if the plot does not feature displacement in a literal sense. In fact, many popular scriptwriting manuals propose storytelling formulas based on myths, such as *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, by Christopher Vogler (1992) and *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story*, by John Yorke (2013). But some narratives show the influence of the hero's journey more literally, linking physical mobility to the spiritual transformation of the protagonist and subscribing to the notion that displacement incites an exciting and transformative experience. These stories about displacement are inherently limited by their optimistic approach: they cannot account for the harsh realities of oppressed characters like the ones in *Biutiful*.

As a result, the relationship between mobility and spirituality in popular culture reflects the asymmetric power dynamics of globalisation.[2] Contemporary articulations rely on an understanding of 'mobility as liberty or freedom' that only applies to privileged citizens that are 'allowed to move freely' such as tourists (Cresswell 2006, 15). Some recent and well-known

[2] In this context, I use the term 'globalisation' with special emphasis on how the economic processes of interconnectivity and mobility affect disempowered workers, an approach that Barrie Axford has categorized as post-Marxist (2014, 12).

examples are the internationally successful *Eat, Pray, Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010), based on Elizabeth Gilbert's 2006 novel, and the acclaimed *The Way* (Emilio Estévez, 2010). The former is a box-office hit that follows a commercial production mode, while the latter is an independent film acclaimed by middlebrow and art house audiences. However, they both comply with Campbell's monomyth and include the same narrative elements: a white American with cosmopolitan inclinations travels abroad in hopes to overcome personal challenges. None of the protagonists subscribes to a specific organized religion even though their journey leads them to experience a secular but spiritual transformation in the end. In general terms, this trope works well in popular films from the United States and Europe, in which mobility often evokes introspection and freedom (Berger 2015, 162-165). It must be noted that there is a significant corpus of European and American films that deal with mobility in much more complex ways, especially stories dealing with migration and refugees,[3] but for the purposes of this analysis I focus on narratives that link spiritual development and mobility, in which the protagonists are mainly white characters. In most of these films, mobility involves a liberation from the characters' socio-political reality, as opposed to the case of *Biutiful*, in which it is forced. Free from their mundane environment, the protagonists can experience a spiritual transformation.

Many critics consider Campbell's universalist monomyth as limited, as its generalizations erase the differences among cultures and identities (see, for instance, Northup 2006 and Ellwood 1999). Significantly, the current context and the power dynamics of global capitalism are intimately intertwined with how citizens practice mobility and spirituality, consequently affecting narratives about spiritual journeys. In *Transnational Transcendence*, Thomas J.

[3] Some examples include *The Edge of Heaven* (Faith Akin, 2007), *Code 46* (Michael Winterbottom, 2003), or *Welcome* (Philipe Lioret, 2010). For an extensive analysis of European films representing migration and refugees, see Yosefa Loshitzky's *Screening Strangers* (2010).

Csordas (2009) explores of how globalisation affects religious and spiritual practices and argues that religion and spirituality constitute an active force in the phenomenon of globalisation. In other words, global spiritual practices are not a mere reaction to global economics but rather an agent that partakes in the process of globalisation (2009, 2-10). Traditionally, the relationship between displacement and spirituality centred on organized rituals and pilgrimages of institutionalized religions. However, phenomena such as migration, unstructured rituals, and spiritual tourism, coexist in late modernity in ways that complicate such relationship. To account for such complexities, *Biutiful* offers a more sophisticated narrative approach to mobility and spirituality.

In spite of the strong influence of the monomyth, the trope of the spiritual journey does not apply to peripheral cinemas easily. Coined by Alberto Elena (1999), the term 'peripheral cinemas' becomes particularly productive to elucidate how spirituality and mobility interact in *Biutiful*, even though the film also falls under the category of both Iberoamerican and transnational films. According to Elena, peripheral cinemas emerge in the regions whose film industry historically developed outside of (or subjected to) Western Europe and North America. In her more recent article revisiting Elena's term in the contemporary context, Minerva Campos (2016) explains how the concept refers to Latin America, Asia, and Africa. She mentions the existence of other terms used to address the films from those regions, such as the inaccurate dichotomy North/South and the vague (and, I would add, ethnocentric) 'world cinema.' Above all, the notion of peripheral cinemas considers industrial practices, and thus the term addresses the power dynamics of film production explicitly, as it references the regions that are most marked by inequality in the contemporary global order. I argue that, as a result of this context, peripheral films cannot represent mobility as a direct equivalent of spiritual transformation.

Instead of being liberating, travelling in peripheral cinemas is often represented as oppressive or forced because they tend to show the other side of the 'power geometries' of mobility and represent characters that do not only move 'through geographic space, but [that are shaped] by power relations of mobility and immobility, including rights to move, to enter, to dwell, to leave' (Adey et al. 2013, 4). Such is the case of Iberoamerican cinema: films from Latin America, Portugal and Spain. In a region marked by colonialism, migration, and, more recently, by transnational practices in its audiovisual industry, dominant tropes and genres about mobility need to be reinvented, appropriated, or even subverted.

Mobility and Borders in *Biutiful*

Mobility in *Biutiful* appears as 'a set of highly meaningful social practices that make up social, cultural and political life' and that impact the everyday (Adey et al. 2013, 3). In other words, it is not only present in the form of journeys on-screen, but rather as a multifaceted phenomenon, a social combination of movement, meaning, and power (Cresswell 2006, 4). Migration is the premise of the stories of all the characters: the Senegalese vendors and the Chinese workers are undocumented and thus face scarcity and abuse to avoid deportation without success, Marambra moved to Spain from Argentina and married a Spaniard with whom she has two mestizo children, and Uxbal's father was exiled to Mexico during the Spanish Civil War.

Uxbal is paradoxically the only 'local' character of his environment, yet his life is also conditioned by borders and displacement. In his case, mobility appears allegorically in the form of the contact zone and the border, which he embodies. On the one hand, the contact zone refers to those spaces in which 'cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' such as, in this case, globalisation and migration (Pratt

1991, 34). As in Pratt's contact zones, *Biutiful* blurs the idea of communities as coherent entities with a uniform culture, a homogeneous language, and equal powers. Instead, the film presents how heterogeneous communities interact through asymmetrical power dynamics, at whose centre Uxbal lies. For example, Uxbal's children grow up in a multicultural space conditioned by social power dynamics marked by migration, gender, race, and class. They have a neutral accent that combines Marambra's and Uxbal's pronunciations, and they never speak in Catalan. When Uxbal is unavailable, their main caretakers are two migrant women: Lili (Lang Sofia Lin), one of the Chinese workers who later dies in the accident, and Ige, who has no place to go while her husband is in the deportation centre. The domestic space is thus one of the main contact zones of the film.

On the other hand, Uxbal embodies the idea of the border. Alejandro Grimson describes the border as a space where bonds, dynamics, and experiences occur – not with optimism regarding intercultural coexistence, but rather showing how 'contact is crossed over by powers, inequalities, and supremacies' (2003, 15-16). Uxbal operates as the intermediary between different communities, including the state authorities. He constitutes the border at which these groups interact, as they can only establish contact with each other *through* him. Thus, Uxbal embodies the paradox of the border: being a contact zone as well as a limit. As María del Mar Azcona explains, 'he also represents the intrinsic ambivalence of the border itself: nurturing and destructive, ripe for both transnational exchanges and ethnic violence' (2015, 3). He operates in a way analogous to the border, which simultaneously serves as a place 'of intersection and dialogue, but also as [a space] of conflict and stigmatization, of increasing inequalities' (Grimson 2003, 16). For instance, as a Spanish citizen, his marriage grants his wife the legal right to live in Spain. However, his citizenship does not give him power to convince the police officer to help

Ekweme after the arrest. Uxbal exhibits the power dynamics established between the communities that surround him.

The film also represents physical mobility and borders within the city of Barcelona. *Biutiful* shows the downside of a modern multicultural city in which borders dissolve and readjust differently.[4] With this approach, mobility appears as the urban displacement that results from gentrification and touristification. New borders appear within the city in the form of neighbourhoods and ghettos, and space becomes a scarce commodity for which the most impoverished struggle constantly (Frahm 2011, 147). Barcelona could represent any other European metropolis with similar issues. Yet it is important to consider the film not only within the context of globalisation, but more specifically as an explicit critique of the internationally praised *Modelo Barcelona* started in the 1980s. Barcelona's strong industrial sector was established since the second half of the XIX century, which led it to become a 'modern city' (Sánchez Belando, Rius Ulldemolins, and Zarlenga 2012, 37). After the end of Francoist dictatorship in 1975, which had slowed the modernization of the city, the democratic local government along with social elites of Barcelona propelled the *Modelo* in the 1980s. To that end, they supported 'socially inclusive urbanism,' local entrepreneurship, tourism, cultural institutions, and relevant events like the 1992 Summer Olympic Games (2012, 37). This process led the city to receive multiple international awards for its urban design, such as the Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1999 (Espinosa Antón 2011, 32). But more recently, the *Modelo Barcelona* has received local and international criticism. On the one hand, the global

[4] *Biutiful* is often compared to *Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona* (Woody Allen 2008). Both films take place in the same city and feature the main leading actor. They depict the two sides of globalisation: multicultural tourism for the upper classes and exploitation for the lower ones. See, for instance, Celestino Deleyto and Gemma López (2012), who argue that these films constitute a diptych of the city.

development of the city has supported the upper-middle class at the expense of the working class. On the other hand, its touristification has focused on promoting the economy of the city internationally while neglecting the needs of the local population (Sánchez Belando, Rius Ulldemolins, and Zarlenga 2012, 37). In this regard, *Biutiful* innovates by showing the unseen areas of Barcelona, by removing any easily recognizable monuments of the city, and, above all, by showing the marginalized humans that represent the cost of this gentrification and urban development.[5] It shows how the city creates borders that are porous for some, but strict for others.

Thus, borders separate not only states, but also areas within the city, where they are determined by economic access to space. On these grounds, the film reflects the most recent turn of border theory: after the generally optimistic premise of the borderless world from the nineties, more recently academics have realized that states still constitute 'the most important actors in the international system' and that 'they decide how porous and permeable borders are' (Krishnendra Meena 2016, 1). That explains why the only character in the film that can cross Barcelona's internal borders freely is Uxbal, because state borders exist even within the same urban space. As Étienne Balibar (2002) has addressed, contemporary European borders are heterogeneous and ubiquitous; instead of only existing at the physical limit of the state territory, they are also present at institutions, which means that everyday situations such as health checks or security controls operate as traces of the state border. In short, 'some borders are no longer situated at

[5] Local directors have represented the dark side of this globalising process with more accuracy and attention to the specificities of Barcelona than Iñárritu's generalizing approach. See, for instance, *En construcción* (José Luis Guerín 2001), *Fuerte Apache* (Mateu Adrover 2007), and *Raval, Raval* (Antoni Verdaguer 2006). For a detailed analysis of how these films depict the social transformation of Barcelona, see Annelisa Addolorato's article *Ciudad, muerte y transformación social. La Barcelona de ayer y hoy en tres películas del III milenio* (2010).

borders at all' (Balibar 2002, 84). That is why the Senegalese vendors are exposed to deportation when they work in downtown Barcelona, where the city police are actively persecuting them. Along these lines, European borders have a 'polysemic nature,' which is to say that they serve to differentiate between individuals of different groups that experience them differently (2002, 81-2). Uxbal experiences the porous borders of the urban space while the migrants are forced to confront the most rigid ones. With this in mind, Uxbal exists in a permanent state of 'in-betweeness,' constantly negotiating borders, but he is allowed to do so because the border grants him a 'surplus of rights' that the other characters do not have (Balibar 2002, 83). The multiple shots of him walking around Barcelona illustrate his fluidity within the system: while the undocumented workers live and work in confined spaces, have limited freedom to move, and can even be arrested outdoors, Uxbal can safely move around Barcelona or plan a trip outside the city. The only reason for Uxbal's confinement is his sickness. Thus, his freedom to move contrasts with the locked basement and with the overcrowded flats where migrants live.

Scenes with Uxbal often take place in exterior locations, while the Chinese workers and the Senegalese vendors can only be seen outdoors exceptionally and in tragic circumstances: the former, after passing away and the latter, right before being arrested. These scenes show another important element regarding mobility: its material qualities. Among other approaches, mobility studies draw from phenomenology to understand the power dynamics behind the 'active corporeal engagements of human bodies with the sensed world' (Sheller 2013, 49). That is to say that the field takes into consideration the 'different kinds of affordances between varied bodies, technologies (cars, phones, the internet, satellites), practices of movement (such as walking, biking, riding, driving or flying) and events of movement' (49-50). Viewed in this way, human mobility constitutes 'an irreducibly embodied experience' (Cresswell 2006, 4) with specific

material qualities, such as speed, temporality, or textures, all of which reveal different meanings of access and distribution of wealth (Adey et al. 2013, 8-10). In *Biutiful*, the only scene in which one of the migrants experiences significant physical movement on-screen is the moment of the police raid that makes all the Senegalese vendors run away to hide around downtown Barcelona. They are selling their products in a part of town that is otherwise inaccessible to them and that is paradoxically visited by tourists when the police start chasing them unexpectedly. This scene shows hectic and chaotic movement, depicted abruptly through short takes, jump cuts, and fast editing that highlight the violence of the scene. Some of the images are filmed in long shots with telephoto lenses, making the scene resemble documentary footage. This moment illustrates the oppressive and precarious type of mobility that the Senegalese vendors can access, which the film juxtaposes with Uxbal's walks.

[Figure 1 and figure 2]

Another scene illustrates the disparate qualities of the characters' embodied experience of mobility. On his way home from his unconventional work, Uxbal talks on the phone in distress, cancelling his family trip. The background of the shot clearly shows the highway that he is crossing, which situates his neighbourhood in the slums of Barcelona and evokes his mobility within the city. Yet, in spite of his precarious situation, this scene grants him a moment of relief in which, 'oblivious to the life around him, Uxbal suddenly stops to look at a flock of migrant birds flying away over a dark blue sky, which lifts him momentarily from his wretchedness and transports him into a brief reverie' (Azcona 2015, 3). The scene is filmed in a long shot, without editing, with hand-held camera panning from Uxbal's face to the flock of birds and back to Uxbal. The continuity of the shot combined with the peaceful non-diegetic music (*Meditación 9* by Sebastián Escofet) creates a moment of openness in his displacement. Therefore, the

representation of mobility in *Biutiful* captures the inequality of the characters ironically: because of the state borders within the city, the movement of those who have migrated to Barcelona is restricted while only the locals have freedom to circulate within and beyond the city easily.

Death, the Supernatural, and Focalisation in *Biutiful*

The disparate access to mobility of the characters parallels their relationship to spiritual experiences. In this respect, I argue that death constitutes the ultimate border in the film: similar to the state borders, the limit between the immanent world and the afterlife is porous for Uxbal but rigid for the undocumented workers. The afterlife permeates the natural reality of the film through Uxbal's experience, both through his terminally ill body and through the ghosts that he is able to see. The presence of these (spectral) bodies becomes a political statement: they denounce how global capitalism oppresses the most disempowered. The film can be read within the spectral turn of interdisciplinary scholarship in the past few years. Recent academic literature analyses conceptualizations of ghosts in general and articulations of spectral narratives in particular to elucidate how they evoke society's 'complex concerns about modernity, technology, the physical and cultural environment, and education,' among other topics (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 18). More specifically, most of the literature considers ghosts as 'conceptual metaphors' with political implications (Blanco and Pereen 2013, 19). On the one hand, spectres can serve to address the 'commemoration in personal and/or collective memory' (19) of historical injustices, such as dictatorships or genocides.[6] In this case, ghosts serve to evoke what should not be forgotten, a traumatic past that comes back to be remembered and addressed. On the other hand, spectres can also epitomize 'situations of injustice and disempowerment arising

[6] See, for instance, Zuzanna Dziuban's *The "Spectral Turn." Jewish Ghosts in the Polish Post-Holocaust Imaginaire* (2019).

in and from a present characterized by diffuse processes of globalisation', as is the case of *Biutiful*. In this respect, ghosts serve to rematerialize subjects that are 'prone to social erasure, marginalization, and precarity' (Blanco and Pereen 2013, 19) but that refuse to remain unseen.

In transhispanic narratives specifically, the use of ghosts to make political claims has a long tradition, with Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) as perhaps the most famous example. Among other meanings, spectres in this tradition appear as 'a symbolic representation of economic pressures of capitalism' (Ribas-Casayabas and Petersen 2016, 9). In *Biutiful*, the spectral becomes the vehicle to visualize the invisible, which in the context of modernity and global capitalism refers to the exploited and oppressed. According to Ribas-Casayabas and Petersen, in *Biutiful* ghosts and marginalized characters, even if they are alive, operate as 'haunting figures [that] remind the viewer that the materiality and fantasies of late capitalism are sustained by the slavery of legally and socially precarious bodies' (2016, 204). According to this definition, 'the workers' spectres address the economic and social debt that contemporary society has to undocumented workers in the gray economy' (204). Ghosts appear in the film as a reminder, as evidence of the hardships endured by the most oppressed characters. They constitute the most explicit element of social critique in the film, as they are trapped in the immanent world, unable to cross the ultimate border: death.

[Figure 3]

Dead bodies also confront global capitalism in *Biutiful*. Significantly, fhe film differentiates between Uxbal's dying body and the and corpses of the Chinese migrants. Uxbal's own disease and death shows his privilege as a Spanish citizen: he is terminally ill, but he has free access to healthcare. The narrative suggests that the reason his cancer is too advanced to be cured is due to Uxbal's reluctance to visit the doctor, as he postpones his appointment

voluntarily. Meanwhile, for the sweatshop workers death takes place as an accident unavoidably linked to their exploitative labour: because they are locked while they sleep, their living-working space becomes a gas chamber. Their dead bodies and their ghosts become an embodied testimony of the cruelties of globalisation. As a result, *Biutiful* shows how death intertwines with oppressive socioeconomic structures in a global metropolis.

Uxbal's ability to move freely also determines the portrayal of the spiritual in the film. To show his experience, *Biutiful* subtly evokes the trope of the spiritual journey, perhaps in an attempt to universalize its topic for a global audience. The film conceptualizes his terminal disease as a 'journey preparing for death' (Sinnerbrink 2014, 172) because of the character arc and the last scene, in which he meets his father in a forest where they start walking together *somewhere else*. This allegorical location away from Barcelona represents the 'threshold of the afterlife' to which they are headed together (Ribas-Casayabas and Petersen 2016, 202). Such a scene identifies the spiritual experience of passing away with travelling, with leaving the known everyday reality and being liberated from its cruelty. In addition, Uxbal's encounter with his father connects his spiritual experience to his roots. He does not remember his father, but their encounter in the beyond evokes a sense of personal and historic memory that transcends the boundaries of time and space. In contrast, the Chinese workers remain trapped even after death, disconnected from any identity or memory. After passing away, their ghosts stay in the immanent world, unable to travel to that 'somewhere else.' In fact, when their corpses are dumped in the sea, the tide takes them back to the shore, which creates a visual rhyme with the scene of the accident in which their bodies also lie on the floor of the basement. In this case, their bodies lie in an open space, but the shot evokes a sense of claustrophobia because, even after dying, these bodies are somehow trapped: they are stuck in the cruel world that provoked their

tragedy. Uxbal can cross between the world of the living and the afterlife with his abilities as a medium and eventually in his own death, but the deceased undocumented workers cannot. As a result, in *Biutiful* death represents the ultimate border, a border that is only permeable for some.

[Figure 4]

In addition, *Biutiful* normalizes the afterlife, reinforcing the connection of the supernatural and oppressive socioeconomic structures. Uxbal's ability to see the dead remains a secondary subplot, which normalizes his gift as a medium. The innovation of *Biutiful* is that, in the cruel environment in which the story unfolds, the supernatural exists and can be part of the everyday. In the most explicit instances, it becomes present through the appearance of the ghosts that Uxbal sees and through the flash-forward in which he meets his dead father, both of which are treated with the same realist style as the rest of the film. But other scenes blur the border with the afterlife more subtly. When Uxbal and his brother visit their father's grave, the camera tilts with a slow movement from an apartment building, where a few people relax in their balconies, to the graves in the cemetery. The dialectical contrast condensed in this shot illustrates how the dead and the living coexist in the same urban space, suggesting that both worlds collide on a daily basis. Later, Uxbal shares his concerns with his mentor, who is also a medium. She replies, 'la muerte no es el final, y tú lo sabes.' This line not only references the existence of an afterlife beyond their immanent reality, but it also confirms its existence. Both mediums – Uxbal and his mentor – have naturalized the coexistence of the two worlds and take it for granted.

In another scene, the film illustrates the how the afterlife enters the mundane reality by blurring the line between spirits and actual coprses. After the accident at the sweatshop, a brief sequence shows the dead bodies of the Chinese workers lying at the beach. It consists only of a long shot of the sea that gradually pans sideways, uncovering the presence of the corpses at the

shore. The scene is edited without an establishing shot, and due to this lack of contextualization, it could first be interpreted as one of Uxbal's visions. Soon it becomes apparent that the human trafficker had dumped the corpses in the sea to avoid legal retaliations but the sea tide had dragged the bodies back to the beach unexpectedly.[7] For a moment, the film seems to grant the audience the possibility (or in fact the illusion) of looking through Uxbal's eyes: the spectators witness the coexistence of ghosts and the inmanent world without the mediation of the protagonist. The realist cinematic style of the film remains throughout all these scenes, even in the most violent ones, integrating the afterlife in the everyday reality of the diegesis.

This naturalized appearance of the supernatural in Barcelona makes an innovative intervention: it suggests that the spiritual can emerge even in the lives of the most marginalized and oppressed members of society. As Sinnerbrink argues in his analysis of post-secular ethics in *Biutiful*, the film explores 'the moral-spiritual and economic-social underworld of European multiculturalism' (2014, 172) simultaneously, giving both elements the same narrative relevance. Consequently, *Biutiful* 'puts Uxbal's spiritual-religious experience as a psychic medium or "seer" on the same level as his social role as a participant in exploitative work practices. In doing so, the film thus brings together all these domains of his experience as part of the same social struggle for survival' (2014, 172). In this sense, *Biutiful* challenges understandings of spirituality in which overcoming the immanent is the main requirement, such as the aforementioned narrative trope of the spiritual journey. In these approaches, the transformative experience can only occur once the

[7] This shot echoes the tragic deaths of thousands of migrants that attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea in *pateras* (precarious boats) to reach the coasts of southern European countries like Spain, as well as famous images of Syrian refugees tragically drowned on the coasts of Greece, particularly of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi. While these images circulated years after the premiere of *Biutiful*, the similarities between the images epitomize the (lack of) difference between migrants and refugees. As Debora Shaw (2017) argues, both terms should be used in combination (migrant-refugees) to avoid the different connotations and rights that host societies assign to either group. Migrants and refugees are both victims of forced mobility and flee violent living conditions that result from global capitalism.

socio-political environment of the subject is abandoned, which makes it inaccessible for those unable to disengage from their daily reality. Instead, through its realist aesthetics, the film depicts the afterlife as tangible, rather than as a speculative or mysterious experience reserved for privileged individuals. *Biutiful* proposes that abandoning the everyday reality is not necessary to encounter the spiritual. Instead, it suggests that it can emerge within the mundane.

By integrating the supernatural into this context, *Biutiful* democratizes the possibility of spiritual experiences to a certain degree. However, I argue that the use of focalisation limits the access to the supernatural, as the audience can only perceive the spirits and access the afterlife through the focalisation of this character, with point-of-view shots that show the ghosts he sees. The character of Uxbal serves as a border again: in the same way that he mediates between ethnicities and classes, he negotiates between the mundane world and the afterlife and puts the audience in contact with a limit that cannot be crossed without his perspective. He exists in a liminal space, both geopolitically and spiritually. *Biutiful* is the first of Iñárritu's films that privileges the perspective of a single protagonist (Azcona 2015, 2). Yet, as Azcona explains, the film evokes a collective outlook to a certain extent, as it develops multiple subplots about the secondary characters in great detail. Because the narrative is not restricted to Uxbal's point of view, the multiplicities of stories depict a variety of experiences of the marginalized in a metropolis. For some critics, such an attempt to create sympathy for the oppressed characters is problematic. While most scholars and critics praise Iñárritu's ambition of offering a social critique, some consider his explicit account dehumanizing for the characters (Aráoz 2011, 21) or argue that his aim to defy racist stereotypes leads him to actually reinforce them (Begin 2015, 9). I argue that, as a realist portrayal of the horrors of the capitalist metropolis, the focus on one focalizer limits the film's productive political commentary by privileging his perspective. This

approach could be potentially more limiting given that Uxbal, despite being a marginalized person, is a Spanish citizen with rights that most of the secondary characters do not have. Yet this privileged perspective constitutes, in a socio-political sense, a realistic portrayal of oppression: hierarchies and power dynamics exist even among the marginalized victims of capitalism. Focalisation reinforces the unequal access to mobility and spiritual experiences of the characters in the film.

In this sense, Uxbal is the only character with the possibility of facing death as a transformative spiritual process. A conversation between Uxbal and his mentor exemplifies this. In response to his concerns about his children after his imminent death, she says that they will be fine because the universe takes care of them. Uxbal laughs and responds that the universe does not pay his rent. Yet eventually his children are taken care of, not by an abstract cosmic entity, but by Ige. During the terminal stages of his disease, Uxbal gives her a big sum of money to take care of the kids. Instead of running away with it and moving back to Senegal with her family, Ige stays. This scene exemplifies how in *Biutiful*, some of the nuances of migration are taken for granted, such as the feminization of family care. Anna Casas Aguilar argues that, even though *Biutiful* 'denounces the vulnerable situation of immigrants in contemporary neoliberal society,' it privileges Uxbal's experience as a father figure (2015, 1). In short, Uxbal's transformation prevails over Ige's family duties. Her decision allows Uxbal to let go of his worldly concerns and pass away in peace. Ige's choice suggests that the spiritual experience of Uxbal (a white man with Spanish citizenship) prevails over the survival of her own (undocumented Senegalese) family. Similarly, when the sweatshop workers die in the accident, the film does not accord them any representation, which suggests that they never experience a spiritual moment. Their death

occurs during an ellipsis, off-screen, while the film shows Uxbal's passing from his personal perspective.

In addition, Uxbal's perspective of the supernatural serves to appeal to a global audience and to account for an international problem. *Biutiful* combines social realism and melodrama, so even though it portrays a socio-political issue, the focalizer of the story is Uxbal. Such an approach influences how the film articulates spiritual experiences: through Uxbal's own terminal disease, through his sightings of ghosts, and through his personal transformation. According to Sinnerbrink, these three layers of the story intertwine 'to evoke a transformative ethical experience that resonates' with the interaction of spirituality and culture in the contemporary world (2014, 167). He refers to this context as 'postsecularism,' which recognizes the resurgence of secular spirituality in public spheres and which becomes especially crucial in the multicultural and multi-ethnic societies resulting from globalisation, where different faiths coexist (167), which is the case of contemporary Europe. *Biutiful* responds to this post-secular context by blending the boundaries between moral and spiritual experiences, showing Uxbal's ethical transformation. As Azcona claims, Uxbal is both a victim and an accomplice of an unfair system (2015, 11), and his character arc, his personal and spiritual evolution, ultimately allows him to pass away in peace.

Biutiful introduces focalisation to enhance the strong political critique of the film through the emotional identification with the protagonist. As Laura Podalsky (2011) has argued, Iberoamerican cinema has a long tradition of combining politics and affect to create a call for action. Robert Sinnerbrink refers to the style of *Biutiful* as 'moral melodrama,' which 'elicits forms of emotional engagement that open up a space for moral questioning and critical reflection' (2014, 169). The realist style offers a faithful portrayal of the marginalized side of

Barcelona, while the focalisation of Uxbal makes the issues at stake relatable for the general public by appealing to intense emotions. As a result, the film universalizes the issues it depicts and shows something that exists in many places around the world. In this regard, *Biutiful* exhibits an issue that transcends the specific borders of Barcelona, Spain, or even Europe, because it occurs in all the metropolises of the industrialized countries. In short, the tensions between the collective and the individual serve to illustrate the dynamics of globalisation effectively.

However, these tensions sometimes emerge as confusing or inaccurate depictions of the context of the story. Even though Uxbal is supposed to be a local, the film suggests that he might be a 'charnego,' a person who has migrated (or whose parents migrated) to Catalunya from other regions of Spain where Catalan is not spoken. In this sense, the film challenges the idea of the host/receiving society, as Uxbal also shows traces of uprooting and migration, such as never speaking Catalan nor having Catalan accent (in contrast with his brother, played by the well-known Catalan actor Eduard Fernández). Iñárritu's attempt to appeal to an international audience and to convey a universal message leads him to overlook specific references to Uxbal's environment. Such is the case with his right to access public healthcare and public education for his children, which contrasts with the lack of public infrastructures to support Lily and Ige's children. In this sense, *Biutiful* addresses the negative traits of globalisation also on a moral level, because it shows how privileged characters like Uxbal, the corrupt police officer, or even the boss of the Chinese workers benefit from their unethical businesses. Even though Uxbal is plagued with guilt for the death of the Chinese workers and for Ekweme's deportation, he never faces legal retaliations, whereas the boss of the Chinese workers, a human trafficker of Chinese origins, does. As a result, the film establishes inaccurate parallels between the harsh realities of the undocumented families and Uxbal's personal tragedy. The film accounts for their social

inequalities, but the dramatic comparison between the living conditions of the undocumented characters and Uxbal's terminal disease slightly dilutes their importance and takes them for granted.

By way of conclusion

The portrayal of displacement, death, the supernatural, and spirituality in *Biutiful* is symptomatic of a broader issue: the asymmetric power dynamics of globalisation. In modernity, mobility has ambiguous implications: it can offer the possibility of transformation or it can be linked to exploitation, as is the case in *Biutiful*. In his journey, Uxbal reaches a transformative realization, but Iñárritu's portrayal of displacement focuses more on its negative aspects: mobility in a globalised world includes instability, fragmentation of identities, and uprooting. In this context, death as a transformative experience is a privilege that only some individuals have in global capitalism. *Biutiful* introduces death, the supernatural, and spiritual experiences to Iñárritu's politically engaged filmography, and these elements are intertwined with mobility, as the characters experience them differently based on their socioeconomic status. As a result, *Biutiful* presents an ambiguous relationship between displacement, spiritual experiences, the supernatural, and death. They appear as part of a complex web of interconnected elements that affect each other: they are intrinsically conditioned by the socioeconomic circumstances of the characters, who cannot simply run away from their environment.

Similarly, borders appear in the film as heterogeneous and ubiquitous boundaries: for Uxbal, they are porous and negotiable, while for undocumented migrants they are restrictive and cruel. These borders operate literally, as state borders, but also allegorically, as death. They condition the characters' access to mobility as well as to spiritual experiences. *Biutiful* presents

the hopeful idea that the supernatural is integrated within the cruel reality of a global metropolis and that it does not only exist outside of the oppressive system. In fact, socioeconomic factors and spiritual experiences are interwoven in the film. However, *Biutiful* also presents the complexities of accessing the supernatural within the harsh social conditions of the characters' everyday reality: only some, like Uxbal, can easily access it. Only through his visions can the beyond penetrate the cruel reality of the slums of Barcelona. Thus, this experience remains inaccessible for most of the oppressed characters in the film. As a terminally diseased man, Uxbal experiences an inner journey, one that does not involve physical displacement but rather ethical and spiritual transformation. In fact, death is referred to as a border or a journey with lines such as 'le ayudé en su camino.' Once Uxbal experiences his personal transformation by helping the other oppressed characters, he is able to cross the last border. Uxbal is portrayed as being stuck in his reality until his spiritual transformation allows him to let go of his life, while the other characters in the film are denied such a hopeful experience. He lives between life and death, in a liminal state of transition that the film evocatively but inaccurately compares to the ineffable space in which undocumented immigrants exist on a daily basis. The film uses the process of dying as a powerful but inaccurate metaphor of uprooting, of the spaces in between that globalisation and mobility create. As a result, focalisation serves to mark social difference. It makes spirituality limited and presents death as the last border that only some characters can cross. Therefore, death is not a democratizing event in *Biutiful*, because only Uxbal experiences its transformative potential.

Lastly, this article presents itself as an invitation to further examination of articulations of mobility, the supernatural, and spiritual experiences in Iberoamerican cinema. Different accounts of displacement in Iberoamerican cinema tend to link it with oppression and forced mobility, and

not with freedom or transformative experiences for the characters (see, for instance, Berger 2016). It would be interesting to investigate if the relationship between spirituality and displacement in a larger corpus of Iberoamerican films is constrained by the power dynamics of globalisation, as it is in *Biutiful*. Ultimately, the sophisticated relationship between displacement, spirituality, and death in this film suggests that only when people's basic living conditions are met can they witness how the supernatural enters their reality.

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