

Biutiful: A father's tragic destiny

Kevin Martinez
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Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, written by Iñárritu, Armando Bo and Nicolás Giacobone

Biutiful is the story of a middle-aged man in Spain, Uxbal (Javier Bardem), who tries in vain to live a decent life despite the social misery and sordidness that surrounds him. Uxbal is part of a criminal underworld that “helps” immigrants in Barcelona make and sell goods. This operation includes Asian immigrants who live and toil in a sweatshop making handbags, while African immigrants sell the bags, which sometimes contain illegal drugs.

Meanwhile, Uxbal must look after his two young children, Ana (Hanaa Bouchaib) and Mateo (Guillermo Estrella), who are abused by their bipolar mother, Uxbal's former wife, Marambra (Maricel Álvarez). His brother Tito (Eduard Fernández) is also mixed up in Uxbal's illicit dealings and is sleeping with Marambra, unbeknownst to Uxbal.

As a side job, Uxbal acts as a seer for superstitious mourners and is able to communicate with their dead loved ones. When Uxbal learns that he has terminal cancer, he vows to get his life in order, but this proves to be impossible as nearly everyone around him is engaged in deceitful and destructive behavior.

Mexican filmmaker Alejandro Iñárritu (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, *Babel*) has a special preoccupation, it seems, with fate and predestination. In fact, *Biutiful* begins with a shot of Uxbal and a stranger talking in the woods. We see a dead owl on the pristine snow, a bad omen perhaps. The audience does not know who the stranger is until much later when Uxbal and Tito go to their deceased father's cemetery, which is going to be demolished by new construction. The father's corpse is exhumed and the dead man bears an uncanny resemblance to the stranger at the beginning of the film.

It would seem at this point that Uxbal's fate is sealed. There is no escaping his untimely death. As for his father, Uxbal tells his children that the older man was a refugee from Franco's regime because the dictator did not like people “who talked.” It is unclear what this means—was Uxbal's father a political dissident or a turncoat? Unfortunately, Iñárritu does not bother explaining this and the matter is almost forgotten.

The picture of modern-day Barcelona that Iñárritu presents is unflattering, to say the least. Everything looks grimy and filthy. It is a side of Spain the tourists never see. Certain elements of 21st century globalized life come into play.

As mentioned above, Chinese immigrants and their children are forced to work and live in an underground sweatshop. When Uxbal protests their squalid living conditions to his partner Hai (Taisheng Cheng) and accuses him of exploiting them, Hai retorts, “Exploiting them? Do you know what they make in China? Fifty cents a day!” The African immigrants who are forced to hawk the second-rate merchandise on the streets above lead lives just as precarious.

In one scene, the African men flee the police who attack them with extreme brutality. Uxbal tries to defend his friend and he too is beaten. Even though a former childhood acquaintance works for the police, there is nothing he can do to prevent his friend's deportation to Senegal. He decides to harbor the latter's immigrant wife (Diaryatou Daff) and baby for the time being.

Although there are more than enough social atrocities to consider in *Biutiful*, Iñárritu does not provide any lasting insight into any of them. We see Uxbal look out his bathroom window and observe a homeless man on the street, rotting away. But what can he do? He looks down and notices blood in his urine, a symptom of the impending cancer.

Even when Uxbal tries to improve the lives of others,

it only ends in disaster. He purchases some heaters for the Asian immigrants who have to get up before dawn every morning, but this well-intentioned act causes everyone in the cellar to die from carbon monoxide poisoning. In a desperate act, the factory owner dumps the bodies out to sea, but they eventually wash up back on the shore. If only he hadn't purchased the cheapest heaters, Uxbal laments.

Various images emerge, collide on screen, many of them mesmerizing. Uxbal wandering across a bridge by himself, with birds swarming in the sky, whose very movements appear pre-arranged. Uxbal walks past a television which shows beached whales in agony—not unlike the desperate, stranded immigrants, their struggle too, seems hopeless. Then there is Uxbal's haunting by the ghosts of the recently deceased. A certain magic realism, a peculiarly Latin American genre and approach, pervades *Biutiful*. The cinematography and the mise en scene do hold the spectator's attention. The images are crisp and Bardem's performance is incredible. But what is the film ultimately trying to say?

It is not enough to cram all the ills of modern capitalism into two and a half hours. Something must be made of them. Iñárritu chooses not to trace out the origins of Uxbal's predicaments, let alone offer a coherent argument about or against humanity's misfortunes. The only solution, it would seem, is some vague hope in an afterlife, of which Uxbal seems deathly afraid!

The figure of Uxbal, something of a lowlife, is portrayed with amazing conviction by actor Bardem. He wears his graying hair long, even though his weathered face betrays his energetic demeanor. He is a compassionate father and does his best to make his family happy. Certain scenes bring this out: Uxbal, Marambra, and the two children eating ice cream that will melt because of a broken refrigerator; Uxbal helping his daughter to write English (providing the misspelled title of the film) and walking his kids to school. He also cares for the workers and immigrants, even though he makes his living off their suffering.

Despite this, much of the film's melodrama feels forced; in particular, a subplot involving Hai and his gay lover (Luo Jin). And while Uxbal is a plausible anti-hero, the characters around him, his ex-wife and brother, are so dislikeable they border on simple

caricatures.

Director Iñárritu's story piles on one blow after another to "shock" (and impress?) the viewer. In reality, the effort suggests an underestimation of the audience's capacity to think and assimilate real drama. The artistic consequence of these choices is that after a 148-minute descent into hell, the viewer is not really much wiser about the world, or even terribly moved by Uxbal's plight.

This is not to say *Biutiful* is a total failure or a waste of time. Perhaps Iñárritu may someday write and direct a major work that addresses reality head-on, and lives up to his ambition and pretensions.



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