

Film

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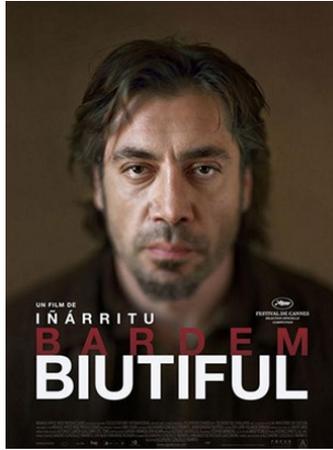
# *The Passion of Uxbal*

“**H**UMANKIND cannot bear very much reality”, wrote T.S. Eliot. It’s a thought provoked by Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Biutiful*, one of the 5 films nominated for the foreign language Oscar and whose star Javier Bardem was also nominated for Best Actor. Pain, degradation, decay and death pervade its seamy suburban Barcelona landscape, whether it is the leeches on the ceiling or the bodies washed up on the beach, the blood in the urine or the kids in their coffins.

Uxbal (Bardem), a fixer who finds black market jobs for illegal immigrants, is dying of prostate cancer. His estranged wife Marambra (Maricel Álvarez, brilliant), an alcoholic, drug-addicted bipolar prostitute, is sleeping with his sleazy brother and partner in crime Tito (Eduard Fernández) and is abusive to his small son. The long-dead father he never knew is about to be exhumed. The children Ana and Mateo live mostly with Uxbal, who loves them deeply and desperately wants to ensure their future without him.

*Biutiful* is a spiritual film with humanist elements. Uxbal has a sideline as a psychic paid by grieving relatives to converse with the spirits of their dead loved ones. This alleged power is presented without irony or question, and immediately we should be alerted to the film’s religious undertones, despite the absence of any reference to a god. Uxbal is clearly a Christ-like figure in some ways. He is certainly not perfect, but he is compassionate and tries to help the people he also exploits. This quality leads him to provide a heater for Chinese sweatshop workers who sleep on the factory floor, with tragic consequences. The incident is melodramatic and jarring, as if the director felt the poor man was not suffering enough. It is unnecessary and tips the movie over into parody.

Yet it provides us with a clue to the director’s whole conception. We



are clearly meant to realise that you cannot defy fate. In Uxbal’s case, like Jesus or Job or Jeremiah, he is ‘meant’ to suffer, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally, and he can do nothing to alleviate it. The film might be called ‘The Passion (or Sufferings or Lamentations) of Uxbal’.

On the face of it, the dice are heavily loaded against any attempt to improve conditions. Uxbal’s Barcelona is not the thriving cosmopolitan mecca of the tourist brochures. It is very much a broken world of poverty, exploitation, mental illness, dysfunctional families, sickness and death, and grieving women and children. It is impossible for one man to put it right. Moreover, Bardem is so good at doing martyrdom that your critical faculties can easily be suspended and you forget Uxbal’s failings.

For this man is a criminal, after all, earning his living by exploiting others. And, like all classical tragic heroes, he is at least partly the agent of his own misfortune. He does have some choices. True, there is nothing he can do about his illness, but it is evident that he neglected the problem until it was too late. He could have bought the factory workers a better heater, and he could have given himself up when the major tragedy occurs. Alas, he continually makes the wrong choices, and that

ultimately is his own fault. Yet the film apparently does not want us to think about the alternatives but invites us instead to wallow in his misery.

Poverty is at the heart of Uxbal’s plight, and we do see the effects of globalisation and free markets and the struggle that people, especially Chinese, African and Rumanian immigrants, have in the underbelly of Barcelona, with Gaudi’s Sagrada Família only a distant sight. But there is no sense of an injustice being portrayed here, no attempt to make us angry about their conditions. This is not social criticism but rather a biblical tale of atonement and the search for a drop of joy in an ocean of misery, underpinned by the Catholic notion that suffering is a form of grace.

The title comes from the daughter’s misspelling on a scrawled drawing, the implicating being that life’s beauties are fractured but precious. In the midst of his ugly, despairing, meaningless existence, Uxbal finds a frisson of happiness in loving and caring for his children. This is the humanist dimension and it is unfortunate that it exists alongside so much passive surrender to fate. Humanism and spirituality are not opposites but work together to create a better life for all.

*Biutiful* is brilliantly acted, impressively photographed and has a haunting score which shifts from complex orchestrations to single guitar melodies. There are also great moments of sheer cinematic poetry, including a fantastic chase through the streets around Las Ramblas, but the film is a long slog at over two hours. It is no barrel of laughs and for me doesn’t really add up to a convincing whole.

Yes, Eliot was right: humankind cannot bear very much reality, but it also wants to improve it. *Biutiful*, I’m afraid, doesn’t offer much encouragement in that direction. □