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A *Biutiful* Worldview: Alternatives to a Society Pervaded by Capitalist Values

El tratamiento humano de la naturaleza y de los cuerpos femeninos y masculinos retratado en Biutiful *es una clara y poderosa denunciación de cómo la depredación y explotación, valores promovidos por el capitalismo, han llegado a permear todos los aspectos de las relaciones humanas en la cultura occidental. La visión de Iñárritu no solo se limita a una crítica del capitalismo como sistema económico, sino que retrata cómo estos valores afectan nuestra calidad de vida. Lejos de ser una visión exclusivamente pesimista,* Biutiful *propone una conexión espiritual que favorece la colaboración entre los humanos, así como entre la naturaleza y los humanos*

Palabras clave: *capitalismo, explotación, colaboración, ecofeminismo, inmigración*

Iñárritu's depiction of the human treatment of nature, as well as female and male bodies, is a clear and powerful denunciation of how predatory and exploitative values promoted by capitalism have come to pervade all aspects of human relationships in Western culture. Iñárritu goes beyond a critique of capitalism as an economic system and portrays the effects of these values on our quality of life. The film is not exclusively pessimistic but instead suggests that we are not condemned to an enslaving predatory chain. Through subtle artistic elements and the worldview shared by Ige and Bea, Biutiful *proposes a spiritual interconnectedness that favors collaborative relationships not just among humans, but also with nature*

Keywords: *capitalism, exploitation, collaboration, ecofeminism, immigration*

"Do you see a paddle court or a conference room?" a recent Spanish advertisement for a business school asks. This question juxtaposes two opposing concepts for one space: business and leisure. The advertisement forces the listener to visualize an image that could be interpreted as either a paddle court or a conference room, which leads you to imagine trying to play paddle in a conference room as well as trying to conduct business on a paddle court. Although the second option is the only feasible one, the

question, posed as a dichotomy, rejects a combination of business and leisure and forces us to choose. If one sees only a paddle court for leisure, then the possibility to use the space for business is lost. The question attempts to frame this option as the loss of a significant opportunity, one that we cannot afford.

The advertisement is not unique, but instead reflects the cultural logic of capitalism in our contemporary society in which everything – space, humans, and nature – is exploited. It shows how the values promoted by capitalism pervade all aspects of our lives, including leisure. Capitalism is no longer strictly an economic model but also a cultural one. The importation of capitalist values to non-business sectors is often referred to as "the business model." At our universities, we now view students as clients and talk more about recruitment and retention of students than about course objectives and learning outcomes. The idea that students are our clients and our classes the commodity they buy is highlighted by how at one university in the State University of New York system students register for classes by adding them to their shopping carts. When those of us who raise our voices to question the ever more pervasive presence of the business model in our society, we are told, as Tito (Eduard Fernández) tells his brother Uxbal (Javier Bardem) in *Biutiful* (2010), "esta mierda no hay quien la pare" (00:19:56).

Nevertheless, what is lost if we choose the conference room option as our response to the business advertisement's question? This type of question is asked all too infrequently in our society. You lose a paddle court, but more than that, you lose a place of leisure that encourages relaxation and enjoyment. You lose the ability to see human relationships with everything else (nature, education, sports, other humans) in any manner other than predatory.

This is precisely the question that Alejandro González Iñárritu explores in *Biutiful*. This film, which is set in contemporary Barcelona, portrays Uxbal struggling to provide for his family and working as a go-between who bribes the corrupt cop Zanc (Rubén Ochandiano) and negotiates business deals on behalf of the Chinese factory owner Hai (Taisheng Cheng). The film questions the exploitative and predatory values promoted by capitalism by presenting images of how they affect our relationships with humans and nature. Iñárritu portrays the cultural effects of these values as an endless predatory chain that no one controls and from which no one escapes. We are all victims and predators, and our prey can even be ourselves. Not even those at the top appear to be in control; they are also trapped by a chain that forces them to abuse others to survive. In this essay, I analyze several visually moving examples of exploitation, including that of nature and

humans (both male and female bodies), and the relationship between nature and humans alluded to in the film to highlight Iñárritu's powerful denunciation of the negative cultural values promoted by capitalism.

The main concern expressed by Martin Heidegger in "The Question Concerning Technology" is that humans will end up succumbing to what he calls *Gestell* – that materialization of rationality that "enframes" the way we conceive of all things in terms of "standing-reserve" (*Bestand*), as commodities or resources readily available for consumption. Heidegger contrasts the windmill to coal to explain his ideas. The windmill uses the wind's energy but does not store it, whereas coal is harvested to serve as surplus energy that stands ready to be used. In modern thought, the predominant "revealing" of beings is "a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored" (14). The reference to "energy" is metaphorical and should be understood more like value, precisely the surplus value of all objects treated as commodities. For Heidegger, when man sees beings exclusively as "standing-reserve" and finds himself "in the midst of objectlessness ... the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve" (27). I think Iñárritu expresses the same concern in *Biutiful,* where we see not just the victimization of humans but also an inescapable predatory chain. The film portrays our entrapment as commodities in this chain, which is due to the "enframing" of modern rationality.

Carolyn Merchant's study of the effect of the Scientific Revolution and capitalism on nature and women offers another angle from which to consider the theme of exploitation. She analyzes sociological, political, and economic factors that affected the ecosystem, such as Europe's transition "from peasant control of natural resources for the purpose of subsistence to capitalist control for the purpose of profit" (Merchant 43). Philosophical and scientific ideas also influenced how we came to view nature and humans. "The new mechanical philosophy of the mid-seventeenth century achieved a reunification of the cosmos, society, and the self in terms of a new metaphor – the machine" (192). Her analysis of how Western civilization came to see nature as dead and passive material facilitates an understanding of how we began to sanction the commodification of nature for economic benefit. According to Merchant, Francis Bacon transformed existing tendencies into a total program, encouraging dominion over nature for human benefit and using violent metaphors of torture to describe the means necessary to achieve this control. This new mechanical interpretation – supported by the discovery of the circulation of blood –

points to how humans, far from being exempt from this metaphor, are an integral part of it. In our society pervaded by capitalist values, the human body is treated, as poignantly portrayed in *Biutiful*, as one more natural resource exploitable for economic benefit. However, the film makes clear that this form of human existence is avoidable by offering the spectator an alternative to capitalism and the predaceous relationships that various characters have naturalized. Through subtle artistic elements and the requirement to seek forgiveness to avoid the entrapment of one's soul in this world, *Biutiful* proposes a spiritual interconnectedness that favors collaborative relationships not just among humans, but also with nature.

Many critics, such as Kathleen Honora Connolly, have taken Iñárritu's film career, which includes *Amores perros* (2000), *21 grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2006), as a strong indication of the director's "keen political and social engagement" (545). Benjamin Fraser's analysis of Iñárritu's fourth feature-length film offers a specific example of this engagement. Fraser points out that *Biutiful* denounces the urban inequalities suffered by the marginalized and immigrant characters by highlighting the separation between the image of Barcelona as a model city and the "'real' Barcelona." Elements common to Iñárritu's films, such as the "transnational lens" that explores the themes he addresses, however, have also been criticized. According to Paul Begin, "[w]hile this 'global cinema' lens has the benefit of putting spectators in contact with the less visible, even unsightly components of immigration and irregular economies, *Biutiful*, perhaps unwittingly, also reifies stereotyping as well as neoliberal fears of immigration" (1). *Biutiful* repeats some themes from Iñárritu's previous films, including human interconnectedness and collaboration, but with its unique variation. The events that unite a Japanese hunter, Moroccan farmers, and American tourists in *Babel* may suggest overall an unlucky series of chances and create a small-world feeling. However, the character interaction, similar to that in *Biutiful*, highlights the need for human interconnectedness and collaboration to improve our lives. A few examples include the old Moroccan woman, who cares for Susan (Cate Blanchet) like Ige (Diaryatou Daff) cares for Uxbal, and Richard (Brad Pitt), whose efforts to save the life of his wife lead him to implore the collaboration of the rest of the tourists repeatedly. The human interconnectedness in *Biutiful*, however, varies from Iñárritu's previous treatment of this theme, which here takes on spiritual overtones due to Uxbal's role as a medium. Some topics addressed in *Biutiful* are also present in Iñárritu's more recent films. *Birdman* (2014) portrays humans as commodities and points to the market forces that push us to choose economic stability over dignified employment, but the situation of the actor Riggan (Michael Keaton), who grapples with

the pressure to accept another unfulfilling blockbuster superhero role, pales in comparison to that of the characters in *Biutiful*.

IMMIGRATION, NATIONALISM AND CULTURAL VALUES

Perhaps Iñárritu's film that portrays Uxbal's attempt to survive in a world in which he is mistreated and, in turn, must prey on Chinese and African immigrants has never been as appropriate as now. In the past few years, Europe and the United States have erupted in controversies related to immigration that cannot be separated from neoliberal values and the nationalist rhetoric used by certain politicians to inflame anti-immigration sentiments. Recent examples in the United States include Trump's criminalization of Mexicans as drug traffickers and rapists and reference to African countries, El Salvador and Haiti as "shithole" countries. Various Trump administration policies, such as "Stay in Mexico" and the "zero tolerance" policy that forced the separation of 1,995 children from their parents, can be compared to the equally xenophobic policies of Mateo Salvini, who while serving as the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of the Interior closed Italian ports to all nongovernmental organization (NGO) vessels carrying rescued immigrants. His stance on immigration is applauded by nearly 60% of Italians (McKenna) and appears to be part of his strategy as leader of the ultranationalist Lega Nord party as he prepares for the 2023 elections (Giuffrida). From 2014 to mid-2018, Italy received about 640,000 migrants, according to Salvini, but 2018 is the year when Spain surpassed Italy and became the principal port of entry for migrants traveling to the EU (Squires, "España puede registrar"). The arrival of the *Aquarius* to Spain on June 16, 2018, after being refused entry by Italy and Malta, marked a highly visible moment of this new tendency.[1] It also marked an increase in the use of immigration as a rallying point for rival political parties of current President Pedro Sanchez. The Partido Popular's leader, Pablo Casado, declared that Spain cannot give legal status to everyone and claimed that a million migrants are waiting on the coast of Libya and "50 millones de africanos [están] recabando dinero para venir a España" ("Pablo Casado"). The topic of immigration also explains, in large part, the success of Santiago Abascal's Vox, an ultra-right-wing party founded in 2013 that won 10 percent of the vote in the 2019 general elections and in March 2022 formed its first coalition government in Castilla y León.

Casado's claim about 50 million Africans and Abascal's proposal that Morocco pay for a border wall imitate Trump's rhetoric and exemplify how American and European politicians use immigrants as scapegoats. They encourage their voters to blame immigrants for their economic hardships.[2] More outcry and extremist anti-immigration rhetoric has come from the

Spanish right after the 630 immigrants disembarked from the *Aquarius* than from the six "extraordinary processes" that legalized 600,000 immigrants between 1991 and 2001 or from the 2005 "normalization process" that offered legal status to almost a million immigrants ("600.000 extranjeros"). The significant economic hardships Spaniards have endured since the housing bubble burst in 2008 explains this disproportionate reaction. The unemployment rate, to give just one example, which had been about 8.6 percent (2005-2007), rose steadily until it peaked at 26.9 percent in 2013 ("Encuesta de Población Activa").

These examples are not isolated but, instead, show a growing trend. At the same time that capitalism is becoming more extreme (the concentration of capital in fewer hands, the growing dominance of multinationals), nationalism is also on the rise. In several other European countries, including Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Denmark, and Germany, nationalist parties have risen to power or they are the main opposition ("Europe and Nationalism").[3] How does capitalism relate to nationalism and these parties' anti-immigration stance? Conservative neoliberal parties promote policies that favor large corporations and the wealthy and hurt the middle and lower classes. However, they attract these voters by promoting a nationalistic message that makes the socially and economically disenfranchised feel part of something larger than themselves: a (national) project, an endeavor that needs to be achieved, such as Trump's "Make America Great Again" and Abascal's "Hacer España Grande Otra Vez" campaign slogans.[4]

Nationalism creates an emotional attachment or bond to a concept (nationhood) and constructs a united identity, but it also promotes an "us" versus "them" worldview, which in *Biutiful* is most emphatically expressed when Zanc articulates the fear of Chinese control, referring to them as sons of bitches and saying there are so many of them that they will end up with the ham and Spaniards will be eating rice. This worldview creates a common enemy, the immigrant, who is seen as the worst type, the one who "invades" us, as characterized by Trump, Salvini and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.[5] Immigrants are portrayed as an attack on the recipient nation's cultural identity (including race and religion), economy, and security. As such, they are often criminalized. From this perspective, neoliberal politicians can frame the situation, positioning themselves as the ones who protect the lower classes. Immigrants become the scapegoats who are blamed for the lack of jobs and diminished public resources, a useful strategy to divert blame away from the neoliberal policies that decrease public funding for health care, education, etc., and encourage economic policies that have led companies to move jobs overseas.

Iñárritu's critique of immigration fears and racial prejudices, as well as his negative portrayal of capitalism and the values it promotes, facilitates the identification of the connection between neoliberalism and nationalism perhaps as a way to vaccinate us against the use of anti-immigration rhetoric for political gains. Tito, who like Zanc endorses the "us" versus "them" worldview, is the only character who is portrayed solely in a negative light, effectively distancing the viewer not only from Tito's predatory tactics, but also his xenophobic attitude. Iñárritu makes no attempt to justify his abuse of others (due to personal economic needs). When Tito bails his brother out of jail after he is arrested for trying to protect the Senegalese immigrant Ekweme (Cheikh Ndiaye) from a police raid, he asks Uxbal, "Así que, te peleaste por un negro, ¿no?" in a mocking tone (00:47:10), suggesting that he views Uxbal's action as ridiculous or beneath him. María del Mar Azcona considers this scene one example of how Uxbal's "emotional involvement with the immigrants he exploits is usually met with both scorn and disbelief by other characters" (9). Another allusion to the cultural barrier the Chinese and African immigrants face in Spain is Ige's statement to her husband Ekweme that they do not belong there (Deveny 127; Begin 8-9). Begin goes a step further and proposes that the film "confirms pre-existing anxieties about undocumented immigration from Africa, namely, that the inability to assimilate inevitably leads to illegal activity which in turn leads to social confusion and drains taxpayer funds" (9).

Although I agree with Begin that *Biutiful* could potentially reinforce fears about Chinese immigrants dominating the Spanish economy and "reify" stereotypes about rapacious Chinese business practices, I believe that Iñárritu goes to considerable length to suggest that Uxbal, the sweatshop owner Hai, and his business partner and lover Liwei (Jin Luo) as well as several other secondary characters are on nearly equal footing and find themselves enmeshed in a predatory chain. *Biutiful* portrays the exploitation of others by Uxbal, Hai, and Zanc as an unavoidable consequence of providing for a family. Several characters, such as Uxbal and Liwei, have convinced themselves that they are helping those they abuse. When Hai accepts Liwei's proposal that they should focus on construction, Liwei, referring to the Chinese workers, comments that "we'll help them" (00:46:18).[6] Other scenes also allude to the Chinese businessmen's desire to improve living conditions for their workers. Hai voices his approval of Uxbal's request for money to buy heaters by stating that "the warehouse will be warmer. I don't want anyone else to be cold in the basement" (00:46:26). When tragedy strikes, however, they fail to see how others are caught in the same chain of predaceous relationships. They blame the actions of others

while considering their own as justifiable. Uxbal confesses to Bea (Ana Wagener) that he bought the cheaper heaters (that caused the death of the Chinese factory workers) because he needed the money, but he reproaches Hai and Liwei for their decision not to take the two workers who initially survived to the hospital and he tries to save Lili (Lang Sofia Lin). Liwei, on the other hand, blames Uxbal, calling him a murderer, and Hai defends their decision not to seek medical help for the survivors because it would expose them, depriving them of the economic resources they need.

Various artistic elements in the film also communicate Iñárritu's denunciation of the abusive relationships created under capitalism. One significant image that points to *Biutiful*'s critique of capitalism is the giant shark graffiti made out of 100-euro bills. Italian graffiti artist Blu created the shark in the Carmel neighborhood of Barcelona as part of the festival *The Influencers 2009*.[7] With its mouth open and its teeth bared, it appears to be devouring an extremely faded "PCC" (Partido Comunista de Cataluña) graffiti. The shark portrays capitalism as the ultimate ruthless predator. It enjoys the hunt and feels no pity for its prey. The relationship Blu created between his work and the previous communist graffiti most likely alludes to the fall of communism and the rise of capitalism. After Blu finished his work and before *Biutiful* was filmed, another image was added to the wall just blow the shark's mouth: a man pushing a shopping cart packed full of what seems to be scrap metal and other miscellaneous objects. The image is extraordinarily symbolic and can be interpreted on multiple levels. The hunched-over position of the man alludes to the hard physical labor he performs, pushing a heavy cart, walking from one public trash bin to the next, and searching for scrap metal and other objects that can be resold. The man represents society's outcasts, those who cannot get or keep a regular job and must perform the dehumanizing hard work of searching in trash bins as a means of subsistence. Finally, our consumer-based, capitalist economy is symbolized by the shopping cart and the excessive waste this lifestyle creates by the scrap metal and other items that have been thrown away. These two images appear at about the chronological heart of the film (approximately halfway through); however, Iñárritu goes beyond a critique of capitalism as an economic system and portrays the effects of the values promoted by capitalism that have pervaded all aspects of human relationships, leading to the exploitation of nature as well as male and female bodies.

THE FEMALE BODY

Tito's comment to Uxbal that *no one can stop this shit* (referring to the land where their father's niche is located being sold and turned into a shopping

mall) highlights his conviction that there is no alternative to capitalism and rapacious relationships with nature and humans. His worldview creates a predator who feels no remorse regardless of whether his victims are undocumented Chinese workers or members of his own family. Tito sees everything in terms of surplus value, regardless of whether that value is his sexual gratification or economic benefit. The danger of *Gestell*, as Heidegger explains, is it "not only conceals a former way of revealing, bringing-forth, but it conceals revealing itself" (27). We risk losing "a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth" (28). Nothing has any sacred or sentimental value; all beings are seen only as "standing-reserve." Tito's treatment of his father and his sister-in-law are the most telling examples of his worldview through which he sees nothing as sacred, as exempt from commodification. Perhaps even more concerning is Heidegger's idea that "enframing" conceals revealing, which suggests that we are wearing glasses that shape our view of the world, how it is revealed to us, but we are not even aware of the glasses. This transparent view can lead us to think, like Tito, that when we see things as "standing-reserve," as a commodity to be exploited, we are just seeing them as they are.

The lack of sentiment that Tito shows concerning the sale of his father's niche, referring only to the "pasta" that the company is going to pay, helps construct this character's worldview. His treatment of his father again emphasizes his fixation on money and a predatory worldview when he tries to convince Uxbal that, instead of buying a second urn, it is better to put their father's ashes with those of their mother, highlighting that "así nos ahorramos una pasta" (00:47:50). Tito's treatment of his father helps identify his relationship with Maramba (Maricel Álvarez), Uxbal's bipolar wife, as predaceous, though in this case, it is sexual, not economic. Iñárritu facilitates this interpretation through a contiguous relationship (Maramba's presence in the scene where the brothers converse about the niche) and the scene's conclusion: When Maramba announces that she is leaving, Tito tries to force her to stay in bed and continue their sexual encounter. Maramba resists physically and verbally before resorting to violence, a slap. Instead of taking into consideration Maramba's fragile state, her bouts of depression exacerbated by her current separation from Uxbal, Tito preys on her emotional needs. During this scene, Maramba dances on his bed, almost naked and somewhat drunk, seeking the one thing that eludes her: happiness. The film reiterates Tito's tendency to prey on Maramba in a later scene that portrays Uxbal rescuing a drunk, naked, and extremely depressed Maramba from his brother's bed.

The different reactions of the two brothers to the same situation highlight the film's message regarding our agency to choose between

exploitation and collaboration. This difference is observed in several scenes in the movie, including Uxbal's reaction to Maramba's quest for happiness and, as Connolly points out, his efforts to negotiate a better contract for the Chinese workers when Tito wants only a quick profit from the construction deal (556). When Maramba tells Uxbal, "Yo sé que te molesta verme contenta. Solo contigo tengo problemas siendo yo misma, sintiéndome bien," he responds by asking her if he should remind her what happened the last time she sought to achieve this goal (00:34:16). Uxbal's question points to the many times Maramba has abruptly crashed as well as the many times he has helped her battle depression.[8] The film certainly does not insinuate that all we have to do to be happy is to collaborate. Uxbal's attempts to help Maramba have failed, as evidenced by their separation.

Nevertheless, the brothers' different reactions underscore our agency to help or prey on others. Tito shows no remorse or guilt for betraying his brother or taking advantage of Maramba. When confronted by Uxbal, who knows Maramba has seen Tito recently because she is aware of the sale of their father's niche, Tito denies having seen her. His denial is symbolically a refusal to admit to his abusive behavior, to recognize it, and, ultimately, to take responsibility for it.

In the nightclub scene, the hypersexualization of the exotic dancers makes an overt reference to the exploitation of the female body. Breasts replace certain body parts, including the buttocks and heads, of the dancers. The scene begins with an extreme close-up of an object that initially appears to be a woman's breasts. Only when the camera zooms out does it become apparent that the object in question is a woman's buttocks that have prosthetic nipples to make sensual areas of the female body even more erotic. An enlarged breast covers not only the faces of several dancers but their entire heads, symbolizing the negation of their individuality and the total objectification of the female, who becomes a commodity offered for male consumption. The parallel *Biutiful* creates between the hypersexualization of the dancers and Liwei's comment that he could obtain sexual favors from Chinese desperate to work in his factory highlights the need to allow one's sexual commodification to make even the most modest progress up the predatory chain. The erotic dancers' situation is similar to that of the Chinese and African immigrants to the extent that none are being physically forced to perform their jobs. However, their dehumanizing treatment suggests that their employment options do not offer much choice, which ultimately portrays capitalism as a form of slavery without chains.[9]

The nightclub scene reinforces Tito's portrayal as a predator. He appears to be a regular, addressing the staff by name and offering advice to Uxbal regarding the prostitutes. Another aspect of this scene that

underscores the dehumanization of the dancers and prostitutes is how Tito points out the girl he is talking about by referring to her clothing, not her name. He does not see her as an individual but as an object to be consumed. His reference to anal sex with her and that she is a "guarra" shows not only his lack of respect for women but also that he thinks she practices her profession because she enjoys it, not due to financial need. This view helps him deny his exploitation of women, but Uxbal's reaction to his brother's advice – "Es una niña" – reinforces the idea that the relationship is abusive by suggesting that the prostitute is a minor (01:46:00).

THE MALE BODY

In its depiction of human exploitation, *Biutiful* addresses not only the female body but also the male body. Both the female and male characters are portrayed as prisoners of the rapacious relationships promoted by capitalist values; however, the men are trapped in the predatory chain not only by their financial need but also by the pressure they face to conform to social expectations of males. Although many male and female characters are victimized in *Biutiful*, I am particularly interested in analyzing how certain characters are exploited as males or as females. The exotic dancers are victims of predatory relationships because they are females, which is underscored by their hypersexualization, and Uxbal and Hai are victimized as males due to the social pressures to conform to certain expectations of males as husbands and fathers.

Perhaps no scene seeks to underscore Uxbal's suffering and exploited condition as dramatically as his first medical appointment. Uxbal endures a painful anal exam, cries out when a nurse tries to find a vein and pricks him with a needle several times, and finally takes the syringe and draws his own blood. The scene uses several close-ups to communicate successfully Uxbal's ability to endure suffering, including the scene's opening when the protagonist grimaces and grunts in pain during the anal exam. Other close-ups focus the spectator's attention on Uxbal's arm and the syringe and emphasize the unpleasant but necessary act. The long take, which leaves no doubt about his ability to tolerate pain as we see him insert the needle and extract his blood into the syringe, contributes to the realism of the film and seeks to underscore the crude reality of human suffering. The process of extracting Uxbal's blood recalls the violent manner in which Bacon describes, according to Merchant, forcing secrets from the "womb of nature." Bacon uses violent metaphors influenced by the witch trials of his times to propose the use of torture and interrogation to extract these secrets and turn nature into a resource for human benefit (Merchant 168). This scene seeks to illustrate powerfully that we have come to view the human

body in the same way that we began to view nature during the Scientific Revolution, as an exploitable resource.

This scene, however, appears to be a less than perfect way to allude to Uxbal's victimization. The exam and blood test are for his benefit; the state (the public health care system) is not abusing him but providing a service (despite allusions to the medical professionals' incompetency and distant nature). Perhaps the scene attempts to connect with the theme of exploitation by suggesting, as Casas proposes, that Uxbal's precarious existence is linked to the lack of protection by the state as manifested by his need to draw his own blood (186). Whatever the scene's shortcomings might be, it effectively frames how we read his delay in seeking medical attention and his relationship with his children. It allows us to draw a connection between the literal reference to Uxbal draining his own blood (for a medical test) and his willingness to do so metaphorically, to exploit his own body and postpone medical help in order to work and provide for his children. Symbolically, without a doubt, the blood represents his own life, his energy, that – as we soon learn – has begun to slip away as his body is ravaged by cancer, an illness that is very metaphorically fitting to *Biutiful* because it preys on a host, killing it. That the doctor asks Uxbal during the first appointment why he has delayed seeking medical attention emphasizes the importance of answering this question. Uxbal's decision to delay is also highlighted during the follow-up visit when he obtains his diagnosis. The doctor explains that because so much time has passed, the cancer has spread from the prostate to the bones and liver. Instead of taking care of himself and seeing a doctor when he first noticed pain, or at the very least when the pain became persistent, he seeks medical attention only when it is unbearable and becomes an impediment to working and caring for his children. The film depicts Uxbal as overwhelmed by his circumstances and with little time to worry about himself. The dinner scene in which Uxbal loses his patience with his son Mateo (Guillermo Estrella) and sends him to bed shows that he struggles with the daily tasks involved in being the primary caregiver and provider for his two young children.

Another male character who is exploited is Hai. Some critics have focused on the negative aspects of his depiction as a cutthroat and morally corrupt businessman. Nevertheless, several scenes also portray him as a victim, suffering at the hands of those who take a cut of his profit like Uxbal, Tito, and Zanc. Unlike Uxbal and Zanc, though, Hai is homosexual and only married to conform to traditional social pressures. He gives the fruits of his labor to support his wife and family but obtains no enjoyment from the conjugal bond. He seeks pleasure in his affair with Liwei, but the portrayal of their first sexual encounter in the factory bathroom suggests the difficulty

of finding much enjoyment in these ephemeral moments. The blue-gray lens used to shoot much of the film imbues the bathroom with a sordid and depressing tone that is echoed by the filthy sinks and the ragged cloth Hai uses to dry his hands. Hai's dejected emotional state, which is communicated by his downcast eyes as he asks Liwei why he followed him to Spain, points to his unhappy life despite his efforts to move up the socio-economic ladder. This portrayal is particularly significant as it proposes that no one caught in the predatory chain is enjoying a life of comfort or happiness.

The depiction of male exploitation is of particular importance in *Biutiful* because the victimization of females, though graphic and more evident to viewers, fails to create a predatory chain. (Tito preys on Maramba and the exotic dancers, but they do not mistreat anyone.) The chain is crucial because it establishes Iñárritu's interpretation of capitalism's influence on culture. No single individual is blamed as the *causa prima*, but rather the film depicts the characters as victims and predators attempting to survive in a world that has adopted capitalist values. The depiction of Uxbal's and Hai's entrapment in the predatory chain points not only to their economic needs but also to the pressure they feel to fulfill society's expectations of males and, in particular, fathers. The effort by Uxbal and Hai to convince themselves and others that they are helping those they exploit suggests that they find their work so disagreeable that their dehumanizing treatment of others breaks with their positive image of themselves, a construction most likely linked to their willingness to endure exploitation to meet society's expectations of males as fathers who provide for their families.

NATURE

In addition to the predatory relationships humans have with both male and female bodies, *Biutiful* portrays the human mistreatment of nature to suggest how the values promoted by capitalism have invaded all aspects of neoliberal societies. To address the question of how Western culture came to sanction the commodification of nature for economic benefit, Merchant analyzes the effects of capitalism, the Scientific Revolution, and the mechanical metaphor (that views nature "as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external" forces) on women and ecology (193). These effects include the increased utilization of the ecosystem and the reduction of active female engagement in social and economic roles during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Merchant proposes that "the new economic and scientific order ... would be of lasting significance for both nature and women, for at its ideological core were the concepts of passivity and control in the spheres of production and reproduction" (149). At the same time that

women were transformed from an active economic resource for their families to a passive psychic resource for their husbands under early capitalism, the female symbols that interpret the world were also changing. "The female world soul, with its lower component, *Natura*, and the nurturing female earth had begun to lose plausibility in a world increasingly influenced by mining technology essential to commercial capitalism" (155). Merchant attributes to Bacon the transformation of existing tendencies into a total program that encourages the dominion over nature for human benefit. A new ethic that sanctioned exploiting nature would be the result of Bacon's ideas that advocate "reducing female nature to a resource for economic production" (165). Merchant again relates the Scientific Revolution to early capitalism by proposing that Bacon's concept of scientific progress sanctions the nascent rift between the master craftsman and his employees and by questioning if the "public good" brought about by this progress is felt at the lower end of the social spectrum. She also proposes that "as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the direction taken by commercial capitalism" (193). As the Scientific Revolution's interpretation of nature as a machine became the dominant metaphor, the values of power and control associated with it would mandate, according to Merchant, the death of nature.

A world of dead, inert matter is not the one imagined by Iñárritu in *Biutiful* but one of spiritual interconnectedness that unites humans, animals, and nature. Several scenes draw a parallel between animals and humans, and nature appears to be imbued with life as suggested by Bea's comment that the universe (not Uxbal) takes care of his children, Uxbal's belief that stones will protect his children when he is dead, and the sea's rejection of the dead Chinese workers. The film denounces humans' predatory treatment of nature in numerous scenes and offers subtle images that show alternatives to avoid this type of relationship.

The scene in which Uxbal, Maramba, and their children eat melted ice cream points to the various ways that humans prey on natural resources. With the refrigerator open, Maramba complains about the terrible smell and considers throwing out fish that have thawed and refrozen many times. The wet kitchen floor suggests the likelihood that all of the food in her refrigerator will perish soon because "la luz va y viene cuando le da la gana" (01:01:26). Maramba's explanation alludes to the human demand for energy and the Barcelona grid's inability to meet it. This insufficiency causes her to throw away food leading, in turn, to more environmental abuse, particularly that of the sea, as highlighted by the reference to the fish that will go to waste. Although Maramba's comment almost gets lost in what seems to be

the ramblings of an unstable woman, our attention is refocused on the insatiable and ever-increasing demand for energy and the impossibility to meet it when she again laments the power outages as they sit down to eat the melted ice cream.

Other scenes in the film that allude to the abuse of natural resources include the one in which Maramba uses the steam from the hot shower water to avoid ironing. Her trick to avoid this much-hated task, however, leads to the gratuitous exploitation of natural resources: energy (to heat the water) and water (since no one is in the shower). The Earth is commodified repeatedly in the film. When Uxbal and Tito talk on the phone, we learn that the cemetery where their father is buried is being demolished to allow for the land's (re)exploitation as a shopping mall. Tito repeatedly tells his brother that the construction company is paying "good money." The construction site scene, which juxtaposes shots of Chinese and African immigrants working with images of Uxbal and Tito negotiating a contract on behalf of Hai and Liwei, is another example that makes clear that the Earth is utilized for economic profit. Begin points to the Chinese businessmen's treatment of ecology and humans as "expendable" resources as one important factor contributing to how the film situates them "at the root of contemporary social degradation" (11). David Dalton emphasizes the damage and even pain inflicted on the Earth in his description of this scene: "Una toma de ángulo picado de una retroescavadora rascando la tierra ... atestigua las heridas que se le han tenido que hacer al paisaje para construir esta ciudad moderna" (106).

When the sea returns the bodies of the dead Chinese workers to land, it is as if nature is telling us it cannot (or will not) take any more abuse. It will not bury, hide, and take responsibility for what we discard as refuse. The Chinese laborers are exploited, not as a natural resource but as a human resource. When they are no longer useful, they are discarded as refuse into the sea. Hai and Liwei hope that the bodies disappear so they can avoid responsibility for their rapacious business practices, including locking the workers in the factory cellar at night. Uxbal, who is directly responsible for their deaths because he bought the cheap heaters that malfunctioned, also attempts to avoid responsibility. Many scenes place a significant emphasis on his role in the Chinese workers' exploitation and death and the subsequent anguish and guilt that torments him. Uxbal's anguish begins when he sees the dead and dying workers, and he fails to save Lili. His decision to return her body to the factory cellar, where the other dead are lying, highlights his fear of being caught and refusal to take responsibility for his actions. The need to accept and come to terms with his role in their death is not so much legal as moral and spiritual. According to Robert

Sinnerbrink, *Biutiful* "allows a 'metaphysical' notion of justice to take the place of police and the courts" (179).

Similarly, for Connolly, "the film speaks to the principle of living a just life," which requires Uxbal to take responsibility and seek forgiveness (554). Uxbal's need to take responsibility is linked to the trauma these deaths cause him, a trauma that Iñárritu represents visually through the ghosts that begin to appear on the ceiling of the cellar. Uxbal is tormented by their presence, an indication that he is not taking responsibility and cannot come to terms with the trauma until he does so. Bea tells him he must ask for forgiveness because, without it, they will not be able to cross over.

Although the film focuses on Uxbal's sense of guilt and his efforts to take responsibility for the Chinese workers' deaths, Dalton proposes that "[e]l intento de Liwei de borrar las vidas de sus trabajadores representa un intento de contaminar a la misma naturaleza con sus actos viles" and that "la naturaleza misma se rebela, y el mar escupe a las víctimas" in an attempt to defend "su relación con los extranjeros que viven en la periferia" (107). Dalton proposes that in two instances, takes are juxtaposed to draw a parallel between the predaceous treatment of the Earth and the Chinese laborers and that their shared circumstances create a relationship that would lead the sea to defend them. One of these instances juxtaposes "tomas de los trabajadores con contrapicados de la chimenea de la fábrica mientras eructa humo" (106). The other is the scene mentioned previously in which we see the excavator digging up the earth and then the Chinese and African immigrants working at the construction site. I interpret these scenes as an allusion to the undocumented workers as the first level in a chain of exploitation that is intrinsic to capitalism. The undocumented workers directly exploit the Earth; Hai and Liwei prey on the workers; and Uxbal, Tito, and Zanc take a cut of Hai and Liwei's profits. The portrayal of these characters as victims and predators depicts each level as equally guilty of abuse. In this case, the sea's rejection is not an attempt to "condenar a los negociantes explotadores" Hai and Liwei but to condemn the capitalist values that have led to the abuse of nature and humans (107). To argue that the sea's rejection of the dead attempts to condemn only the Chinese businessmen, obviates the significant attention given in the film to Uxbal's sense of guilt for his role in their mistreatment as well as his direct responsibility for their deaths.

EXPLOITATION OR COLLABORATION

The structure of the relationships between humans and nature, as well as among the human characters in *Biutiful,* suggests a natural food chain in which all members of the chain prey on immediate inferiors. On the bottom

level is nature that is portrayed as a direct victim of the Chinese workers. Their physical labor in the factory is visually connected to the environmental contamination caused by the energy needed to run these factories. *Biutiful* juxtaposes shots of the smoke-bellowing chimneys of the Sant Adrià del Besòs power plant to images related to the Chinese immigrants (a Chinese globe lantern, the discovery of the dead Chinese workers, the raid on Hai's home after their bodies wash ashore).[10] Their role in the exploitation of nature is also emphasized in the construction site scene through the visual narrative that depicts them working and the dialogue: Mendoza (Karra Elejalde) complains about their lack of training and physical wellness. Next in the pecking order are Hai and Liwei, and at the top of the chain are those who feed on the Chinese businessmen: Uxbal, Tito, and Zanc.

Despite their dominant position, Iñárritu's portrayal of Zanc and Uxbal suggests that even those at the top are not enjoying a life of luxury and leisure but trying to get by. Zanc, for example, defends himself against Uxbal's reproaches regarding the police raid by saying that there is not enough bribe money to pay off everyone. He asks Uxbal what he is to live on. His tone and attitude when he responds to his own question, indicate that he does not consider his low-paying police job and Uxbal's bribes enough. He reminds Uxbal that he also has a family to feed. Uxbal's own precarious existence is communicated by his lower-class neighborhood, the state of his apartment (the peeling paint, the water-damaged ceiling), his worries about providing for his children, and his tendency to store money in a sock. His lack of education, which contributes to his inability to escape his marginalized existence, is alluded to in the scene in which his daughter Ana (Hanaa Bouchaib) asks him how to spell the word "beautiful" in English and he tells her to spell it phonetically. His stressful existence peaks in the scene when he lashes out at Liwei, demanding his money, which comes just after Bea has made him face the reality that he is dying. As for Hai, who has the most mouths to feed, his existence seems modest (as depicted in the crowded family gathering around a meal table) and unhappy (as explained above in the analysis of the bathroom scene). One final example that emphasizes the precarious economic existence and the stress that all these characters face is when Liwei – after discovering the death of the workers – cries and proclaims to Hai that they are ruined.

Iñárritu's decision to portray even those at the top as trapped in a predatory chain that requires them to exploit others for their own survival is particularly important for various reasons. First, we cannot point to any individual as the guilty party. If one existed, it would diminish any responsibility for those lower on the chain. At the same time, the lack of a guilty party means that no one is controlling the strings from the top and

that our society has come to function like a machine that no one controls. As long as capitalist values continue to govern how humans relate to each other and nature, the predatory chain is unavoidable. As long as we continue to conceive of our relationship to both humans and nature in terms of what Heidegger calls *Gestell*, and therefore commodify everything to the point of reducing people and nature to objects waiting to be consumed, we cannot see them in any other way. Heidegger and Iñárritu, however, do not end on a negative note. The German philosopher reminds us that technology is not the only meaning we have known for *techne*. We have known others like the *poiesis* of fine arts, a revealing that does not challenge and, thus, does not lead to us to see an object only in terms of its surplus-value (Heidegger 34). *Gestell* is the materialization of thought in modernity, but rationality does not have to be focused on instrumentality; other forms of revealing an object's being, of seeing the world, are possible.

Despite certain negativity that this portrayal of human relationships may imply, the film is not exclusively a pessimistic depiction of human existence. Certain scenes remind us that we are not condemned to an enslaving predatory chain but often have options to collaborate instead of exploit. The relationship between Ige and Uxbal provides a strong example that even when economic pressures exists, one can still avoid exploitation. Uxbal needs someone to care for his children, and Ige, who is facing eviction, needs a home and money for herself and her son. In his final days, Uxbal entrusts his savings to Ige and asks her to take care of his children after he is gone. The last time we see her, she is in a train station and appears to be struggling with the decision of whether to return to Senegal or stay with Uxbal's children. Although Casas proposes that the film's ending is open and that Ige's voice and shadow could hint that Uxbal has another hallucination, both Casas and Connolly favor the interpretation that Ige returns to Uxbal's apartment (184; 558, respectively). According to Connolly, Ige's decision underscores the falsity of Zanc's advice to Uxbal that he should not trust a hungry man and much less a man whose children are hungry (558). Zanc's stance proposes preying on the oppressed other and suggestively warns that any attempt to help him would lead to the hungry man biting the hand that feeds him. His worldview, similar to the one espoused by Tito, appears to be that rapacious behavior is unavoidable, and he prefers to have the upper hand, as manifested by his allusion to the Chinese ending up with the ham and the Spaniards eating rice if they are not careful.

I also believe that the film suggests that Ige stays with Ana and Mateo, though not just because of her shadow and voice but because she represents, together with Bea, a worldview opposed to that of Tito and Zanc. Both women appear to favor a collaborative human interconnectedness that eschews money and emphasizes human responsibility through the

need to ask for forgiveness. Bea tells Uxbal that they received their gift (to communicate with the dead) without cost, and they should share it with others. When Uxbal returns to her apartment after the accident with the heaters, she tells him that he must go to the Chinese immigrants and ask for forgiveness. Ige's interactions with Uxbal also show the importance she places on human agency and the need to seek forgiveness as well as her aversion to money as an object linked to exploitation. When Uxbal visits her after Ekweme's arrest, she assumes he has come to ask for forgiveness. She is angered and disgusted when she sees Uxbal take money from his wallet. "¿Dinero? No me traigas esta mierda. Mejor pídeles perdón a todos ellos también," she says, referring to all the African immigrants affected by the raid and deportation (01:06:04). That she again rejects Uxbal's money when he initially offers it in his final days but eventually accepts it in exchange for caring for Uxbal's children underscores that she does not see human relationships in terms of exploitation but collaboration, and she will probably respond to Uxbal's multiple acts of solidarity with her own act of solidarity.

Those who have exited this world where capitalist values dominate gain a much closer and collaborative relationship with nature and humans. When Uxbal dies, his father (Nasser Saleh) greets him in a pristinely white, snow-covered forest. To the extent that his father appears to be his guide, who will help him enter the afterworld, we see the interconnectedness between humans, one that serves as the flip side of the role of the mediums, such as Bea and Uxbal, who help the dead from the world of the living. His father's close relationship to nature is manifested by his knowledge of the history of the land and his ability to imitate the sound of the wind and sea. He also understands the fears and the needs of owls as revealed by the anecdote he tells Uxbal about how they spit up a hairball just before dying, which alludes to the need to prepare for death by processing the unresolved. For the owl, the hairball is an undigested substance in its stomach that must be dealt with before the animal's body can be at peace (Connolly 554). To the extent that it serves as a metaphor for the guilty sentiment that has ruptured the harmony between humans, it shows the father's profound understanding of human interconnectedness. It proposes that individuals must resolve these feelings by taking responsibility for their actions before they can fully be at peace and cross over. Those who have mistreated others, such as the boy who stole his father's watch, and those who have been victimized, including the dead Chinese workers, cannot pass over until atonement for the predatory relationships has been made in the world of the living. In the afterworld, Uxbal also shows his close relationship to nature and eagerness to be respectful. When his father warns him that his ponytail will make the owls nervous, Uxbal removes it.

One final example of Iñárritu's efforts to highlight our agency to choose between exploitation and collaboration is a dialogue-free montage immediately following the shot of the shark graffiti that focuses the spectator's attention on several images: Uxbal walks past televisions showing footage of beached whales, decides what heaters to buy, and vomits in front of a graffiti of a person holding a sign that says "Come fruta." The montage creates a relationship between humans, animals, and nature.[11] The beached whales and a sick Uxbal evoke the suffering and death of animals and humans. The idea that both are caused by environmental contamination and man's predatory relationship with nature is suggested by what unites these two images: several short takes show Uxbal choosing the cheaper but more environmentally damaging butane gas heaters instead of the options that are more expensive and energy-efficient (as alluded to by the signs indicating "new technology"). The graffiti on the wall Uxbal uses to support himself as he vomits seems to be a nod to the vegetarian lifestyle. It is a fitting end to the montage and reminds the viewer that humans have the option to choose more symbiotic relationships not only with each other but also with nature. By choosing to eat fruit, one avoids the exploitation, slaughter, and suffering of animals as well as the environmental drain (energy, water, and food resources) involved in raising livestock.

In conclusion, Iñárritu's depiction of the treatment of female and male bodies and nature is a clear and convincing denunciation of how predatory and exploitative values promoted by capitalism have come to pervade Western culture. His film points to the quality of life we have when these values permeate all aspects of human relationships. There is no pleasure, no leisure, and no paddle court, only an endless rapacious chain that no one and nothing escapes. We are all victims and predators. *Biutiful* reinforces this idea by depicting even those characters at the top of the chain as struggling to achieve even a modest existence, much like Uxbal, who is literally and metaphorically forced to drain his blood. Zanc, Uxbal, and Hai are all victims trapped by their need to provide for a family. To the extent that *Biutiful* does not portray any character as free from the predatory chain, it is impossible to pinpoint anyone as the guilty party who is responsible for the suffering of everyone below. This representation suggests that our capitalist society functions like a machine that no one controls. The film makes clear that as long as we continue to interpret all relationships from a predatory mindset, human resources will be offered as a hypersexualized commodity devoid of all subjectivity or tossed like refuse into the sea when they have lost their utility. At the same time, it reminds us, by contrasting the worldview that Bea and Ige represent with that of Tito and Zanc, that we are free to choose our metaphor for seeing the world. *Biutiful* offers us a new

metaphor, one that is quite different from the metaphor of nature as a machine. It is a spiritual worldview that connects us to other humans (living and dead) and nature. Our agency to choose between collaboration and exploitation, as well as a clear preference for the former, is highlighted by Bea and Ige, both of whom urge Uxbal to apologize to those he has wronged. Although he fails to obtain the forgiveness of the Chinese workers, he seems to have learned his lesson when he seeks forgiveness from Maramba, who has hit rock bottom after their fight and ended up again in Tito's bed. The final scene ends the film on a positive note and shows Uxbal's reward. He can cross over and reunite with his father in an afterworld where those who abandon the capitalist values of the living exhibit a closer and more collaborative relationship with humans and nature. That Uxbal's son Mateo tells the same story about owls as his father Mateo, perhaps points to an optimistic view that the future generation will move away from the business model and again adopt a more interconnected and collaborative worldview.

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NOTES

1 A Benetton advertisement that uses photos of the *Aquarius* and the rescued migrants is a reminder of the pervasive influence of capitalist values. Even the misery of those who risked death in the Mediterranean becomes a commodity that is exploited and sold.

2 Conservative right-wing politicians are not the only ones who blame immigrants instead of recognizing that economic inequality is what leads disenfranchised voters to support more extreme politicians. Between 1976 and 2010, the wealthiest one percent in the U.S. went from taking home nine percent of income to almost twenty-four percent (Kristof). This dramatic shift over three and a half decades shows that neoliberal policies adopted by both Republican and Democratic parties have widened the inequality gap. Despite this fact, Hillary Clinton has "suggested immigration was inflaming voters and contributed to the election of Donald Trump" and proposed that EU leaders combat the growing threat from right-wing populists by sending a stronger message "showing they are 'not going to be able to continue to provide refuge and support'" to immigrants (Wintour).

3 Hungary's nationalist Fidesz party won a landslide victory in the 2022 election, giving Viktor Orban a fourth term as Prime Minister. Just days before the first round election in France, the Ifop-Fiducial poll shows Emmanuel Macron

edging Marine Le Pen 53.5%-46.5% in the second round, a stark contrast to Macron's 66.1% to 33.9% victory over Le Pen in 2017 (Cohen).

4 Mario Pianta proposes that part of the Lega's success among "working class and poorer Italians" is because it "has strengthened its right-wing ideological roots, providing identities and a worldview for its voters." According to Pianta, the Lega is not a newcomer to the political scene, but "has already governed for nine years in Berlusconi governments supporting all neoliberal policies that have favoured finance, business and the European integration they now criticise."

5 During the campaign for the 2016 Brexit referendum, Nigel Farage made immigration the defining issue, and it "fed into wider questions of national and cultural identity, which suited Leave's message – particularly to lower-income voters" ("Eight Reasons Leave Won").

6 Liwei also clearly rejects the idea that he abuses the factory workers when he refers to his ability to obtain sexual favors from them if he wanted.

7 Blu's shark appears on a wall where the streets Santuari, Calderón de la Barca, and Gran Vista converge. In the 1970s, the wall became host to several political parties' graffiti. The shark covered a PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) graffiti.

8 Anna Casas Aguilar points out how Maramba, portrayed as a violent mother and adulterous wife, "afianza la construcción de la imagen de Uxbal como padre responsable y protector" (182).

9 Iñárritu's depiction of these employment "choices" as a denunciation of the predatory values promoted by capitalism recalls the political debate that has transpired since the Partido Popular passed the 2012 Labor Reform that eased restrictions on laying off employees and allowed more temporary contracts. Those in the opposition promoted the idea that eating from the trash is not better than not eating as an analogy to communicate that a precarious work contract is not better than unemployment. In a debate between Pablo Iglesias and Albert Rivera before the 2015 general elections, Iglesias voiced his desire to "acabar con que el 90% de los contratos sean temporales," and Rivera referred to the working poor: "Tenemos a un 30% de gente trabajando y pobre. Los nuevos pobres son los trabajadores pobres" (Terrasa).

10 Celestino Deleyto and Gemma López suggest that *Biutiful* makes the connection between the power plant and "the nearby Poligono Sur of Badalona, a huge industrial estate, occupied for the most part nowadays by Chinese-owned wholesale businesses that provide merchandise for clothes outlets, market sellers and other players in today's alternative economy" (171).

11 Fraser identifies two examples of parallels that the film creates between humans and animals: the first being the washed-up bodies of the dead Chinese

that recall the beached whales and the second, the appearance of both moths and the souls of the dead on ceilings (28).

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