

Bodily Vulnerability, the Human Rights of Immigrants, and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Biutiful*

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ABSTRACT

Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Biutiful* (2010) follows the final months in the life of its protagonist Uxbal as he dies from prostate cancer. Uxbal is a middleman who brokers the labor of unauthorized immigrants, yet as he confronts his mortality he also contends with the human rights abuses that have enabled his livelihood. This essay explores how Uxbal's bodily disintegration and vulnerability foster

his growing respect for human rights. As it argues, *Biutiful* unfolds an "embodied human rights imaginary" that serves to challenge the dual expectations of human dignity and bodily integrity that inform liberal articulations of human rights. Moreover, such an embodied conception of the human is incarnated in the film's cinematographic form, style, and aesthetic.

Despite their immense promise, human rights discourses and norms remain fraught with paradox. Virtually since their inception, critics have decried the many contradictions that trouble human rights and the mechanisms of their internationalization. Although some of these

paradoxes ensue from legal and other practical challenges of rights enforcement, the philosophical architecture of human rights norms and the definition of the human that organizes them are also composed of structural tensions and inconsistencies. This essay examines one such ambivalence that haunts liberal accounts of human rights—namely, an ambivalence about the realities of embodiment. While human rights standards first and foremost aim to protect the body from forms of injury, the expectation of bodily integrity, as I will show, can in fact work to ideologically sanction human rights abuses and other failures of social justice. If human rights carry one set of popular meanings, it is that their protections will safeguard the human person from abuse, torture, pain, suffering, and other corporeal deprivation. Yet this premium on bodily integrity smuggles in an array of biases and other exclusions, which have historically authorized, and still authorize today, the denial of human rights to different populations along the lines of gender, race, class, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, and species membership.

This essay explores this deep irony of human rights through a reading of Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2010 film *Biutiful*. *Biutiful* follows the final months in the life of its protagonist Uxbal (Javier Bardem), as he dies from prostate cancer. In a storyline set in present-day Barcelona, Uxbal earns his income as a middleman who brokers the labor of illegal immigrants, and the film exposes those activities to be fueled by a series of neoliberal fantasies that both sustain contemporary immigration policy and legalize its refusal of human rights to undocumented migrant populations. As Uxbal confronts his own mortality, however, he undergoes a moral awakening about the human rights abuses on which his own livelihood and—while himself impoverished—relative prosperity depends. As I will show, moreover, Uxbal's enhanced awareness of human rights is directly fostered by his own experience of bodily disintegration and vulnerability. That embodied self-consciousness is one that González Iñárritu furthermore incarnates within *Biutiful*'s cinematography, with its deeply visceral, sensorily charged aesthetic. Taken together, the film's style, tone, and

storyline thus cultivate what I will describe as an “embodied human rights imaginary”—an imagination of human rights that carries distinct implications for expanding their protections and remedying many of their historical failures.

It goes without saying that any legal declaration or other statement of human rights contains within it a particular definition of the fully human. The basic design of a human rights covenant or decree is to enumerate a series of specific entitlements and guarantees; however, such catalogues enshrine certain qualities and prerogatives as vital to human flourishing, while omitting or demoting others. From one angle, critics have therefore widely debated whether human rights norms should be critiqued as culturally relative or, even worse, Eurocentric, although such debates are never uncomplicated or straightforward. But beyond the question of their sociocultural or historical particularity, liberal human rights instruments, along with the philosophical traditions that spawned them, presume a highly specific yet contradictory conception of human embodiment and of the individual’s relationship to its corporeality. This inconsistent account of embodiment represents the central paradox of human rights that this essay contends with. In general, human rights norms treat the body as an entity whose anarchic desires must be mastered or disciplined by liberal reason. While, rhetorically speaking, human rights are designed to protect the body from pain and injury, their norms do so in terms that equate bodily suffering with dehumanization. The liberal premium on bodily integrity, in other words, carries with it the inverse presumption that to be reduced to or confined within the body is to be less than fully human—in particular given that the body’s captivity is seen to deprive the individual of speech and reasoned self-assertion, the core indicia of the human.¹ The resultant reluctance about embodiment that inflects human rights norms reproduces the very logic that over history has

1. Such an equation, for instance, informs Elaine Scarry’s seminal *The Body in Pain* (1985) and pervades theorizations of the human. For a recent example, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language* (2010).

permitted the sociopolitical oppression of a wide range of populations understood to be hostage to the body's appetites and needs and therefore exiled from rational self-possession.²

To examine this bias against embodiment from a different vantage, we might say that human rights norms have tended to marshal a narrow, normative, and exclusionary vision of the dignified human subject. Although legal statements of human rights codify a wide range of values, “dignity” is commonly explained as the core ideological constant that pervades all of those disparate entitlements and protections, reconciling their internal conflicts and variances. Central to the meaning of human dignity is the notion of bodily integrity, and partner to the dual constructs of dignity and bodily integrity are a collection of what I will for shorthand term “liberal” expectations about the human—in particular, that legal personhood depends upon a reasoning, autonomous, sovereign, integrated, self-determining subject. Within such a liberal conceptual framework, human rights standards can come to operate less as safeguards and more as benchmarks that must be attained before a subject is deserving of rights, thus suggesting one way in which their norms are not only compulsory but also can legitimize existing hierarchies of oppression. Moreover, these ideas about the self-possession of the liberal individual are cognate to views about nation-state sovereignty. Much as the rights-bearing subject must claim both a rationally ordered identity and bodily integrity, parallel assumptions drive contemporary theorizations of the nation-state. Not only is the national community typically imagined as unified and coherent, but state sovereignty is also reified by the border and territorial enclosure. In turn, the ways in which the notion of individual bodily integrity disavows human vulnerability, brokenness, and mortality finds analogous expression in dominant definitions of state sovereignty, which similarly infer a closed, defensive, organic, homogenous national community. Such

2. For a more extensive discussion of this tension, see Anker (2012).

formulations of political community can directly serve to justify the ostracism or expulsion of people deemed outsiders—much as the rights-bearing individual must rationally subdue those bodily energies seen as anarchic, ungovernable, or threats to liberal reason. So we see here a symmetry between, first, how liberalism explains the individual and state alike in terms of sovereign self-determination and, second, how that principle naturalizes an exclusionary logic that can warrant key exceptions to the universal protections of human rights.

González Iñárritu's *Beautiful* poignantly exemplifies many of the foregoing paradoxes of human rights. At the beginning of the film, Uxbal is in key ways a prototypical liberal subject. His initial denial of the physical symptoms of his spreading cancer is what makes his untimely death unavoidable, rendering it a direct byproduct of his refusal to acknowledge his own contingency and weakness. With an alcoholic, bipolar wife, he is effectively a single father and therefore must behave as though self-reliant. Much of the film's footage observes him in supervisory roles, either cooking, feeding, and caring for his children or attempting to provide financially for their futures. Throughout, Uxbal also fixates on the terms and nature of his legacy, relative to both his own and his father's paternal bequests. His illness coincides with the excavation of his father's long dead but embalmed body when the cemetery that houses it will be leveled to create the space for a new highway, in a transaction from which Uxbal and his brother expect substantial remuneration. In particular two dream sequences that open and close the film, replaying one another almost exactly, dramatize his imagined interactions with his father, as they encounter one another in a dark wood and his father mysteriously cautions Uxbal that "Owls shoot a hairball when they die." Such a line is reminiscent of González Iñárritu's analogous preoccupation with the precise physiological evidence of death in his 2003 *21 Grams*, the title of which is an allusion to the exact weight that leaves the body upon death and purportedly confirms the existence of the soul.

Relatedly, Uxbal yearns to devise his father's inheritance to his children, a yearning channeled through a ring that is depicted

twice—also in the opening and closing scenes—and bestowed on his daughter. Uxbal and his daughter Ana fetishistically meditate over the properties of this classical token of sovereignty, as Ana’s observation that “It’s bonita” is followed by the anxiety that it might not be “real.” These parallel sequences both conclude as Uxbal bequeaths the ring to Ana with the incantatory words, “It’s yours now, mi amor.” Notably, the final of these two nearly identical scenes ushers Uxbal into actual death, with their bookending of the rest of the diegesis imposing circularity on the film’s storyline while also suggesting that the entire plot might be one extended hallucination as Uxbal loses consciousness. In any case, the debate between Ana and Uxbal about the “realness” or materiality of Uxbal’s bequest to his children crystallizes broader desires and uncertainties about not only his own sovereign legacy but also, as I will argue, European national jurisdiction and dominion in the face of accelerating globalization.

Uxbal’s professional activities in particular render him an apt figure for the symmetrically constituted neoliberal subject and nation-state alike. Uxbal makes a living dealing in immigrant labor, and the film focuses on his interactions with two different groups: Chinese laborers housed by their kingpins in a large, unheated, unventilated, unmarked warehouse and Senegalese street merchants. Initially, he facilitates trade between these different nationals by delivering the Senegalese fake Gucci handbags and other pirated goods made in a sweatshop by the Chinese, and when the former are deported after a raid, he finds replacement labor for the Chinese at a construction site. Yet Uxbal’s relationship to these groups becomes newly charged when, toward the film’s denouement, he negligently kills the Chinese en masse. Uxbal purchases kerosene heaters, attempting to improve their living conditions, but that gesture backfires as the heaters instead suffocate the laborers while they sleep in an enclosed space. The warehouse that both domiciles and kills them itself offers a metaphor for the claustrophobic, potentially lethal terms to which the unauthorized migrant must consent to gain entrance into the European community. And no doubt, this thread of *Biutiful*’s plot captures actual shifts in

European migration and its economic dynamics in recent years. Indeed, some estimate that human trafficking has become more profitable than selling contraband in drugs or arms, suggesting how violations of immigrant rights can directly enrich European fiscal prosperity (Dauvergne 71).

Uxbal, however, believes himself to be helping these two groups — a self-deception that mirrors the paternalistic myths sustaining the neoliberal global economy. When the policeman Uxbal has been bribing to shield the Senegalese from legal crackdown breaks his agreement and permits their deportation, he explains to Uxbal: “there’s not enough money for everyone.” This rejoinder compels their characters to debate the circuits of corruption in which they jointly partake. Uxbal insists: “I don’t exploit them... I’m helping them to get work.” Whereas the law officer defends himself: “I can’t keep playing United Nations. I have a daughter to feed.” Here, his friend’s more realistic take on the illicit exchanges that enable European prosperity disabuses Uxbal of the fantasies of beneficence that sanction his own reliance on the immigration black market. By indicting Uxbal’s feint of benevolence for its blindness to the human rights violations it directly authors, the friend also exposes Uxbal’s façade of autonomous self-reliance as a sham. Uxbal’s character as such begs to be read as a figure for the corresponding fictions of the self-determining, rights-bearing liberal subject and he is a representation of the neoliberal state—the fiscal welfare of which directly hinges on yet submerges the immigrant labor it preys upon. From a different perspective, Uxbal’s ruse of charity covers over structures of disenfranchisement and violence that are condoned by the cognate constructs of individual bodily integrity and the territorial enclosure of the sovereign nation. Much as a defensive immigration policy relies on insidious stereotypes about the irrational, underdeveloped status of unauthorized migrants to justify excluding them, *Beautiful* simultaneously sheds light on the predatory, manipulative transactions that in fact incorporate those populations and their labor into the national body politic, although that labor remains undocumented and omitted from formal economic measures.

Beyond how Uxbal and his family are directly nourished by illegal immigrant labor, it is ironically Uxbal himself, the European national, whose constitutional health and fortitude is ailing. *Beautiful* accordingly inverts the usual metaphors through which alien populations are imagined as diseased, corrupt, deficient, and otherwise threats to the welfare and resilience of the national body. Anti-immigrant sentiment has historically mobilized derogatory prejudices that cast foreigners as not only morally derelict but also physically contagious and lacking—or as beholden to insufficiently integrated or disciplined bodies. In turn, we can here observe how the ideal of bodily integrity can license the denial of human rights and other protections to certain populations, marking some categories of lives as sub-standard or insufficiently developed. *Beautiful*, however, reverses these common equations to instead portray the European social body in a state of unmaking, its welfare sustained by immigrant lives even while it enters a condition of progressive dysfunction and decay. Paradoxically, then, immigrant labor, historically denigrated as unfit, is what prolongs European health and guarantees its insecure future, just as Uxbal’s illegal brokering of such labor finances his intended bequest to his children.

To such ends are the features of Uxbal’s particular malady especially revealing. Uxbal suffers from cancer of the prostate, a gland that plays a central role in male sexual response and reproductive functioning. Even the etymology of the word “prostate” is here instructive, being derived from the Greek term for “protector,” “guardian,” or “one who stands before.” This symbolism, too, presents Uxbal as a figure for sovereignty in the classical sense, with that term’s coeval associations of familial belonging or paternity, individual self-determination, and nation-state jurisdiction. Uxbal’s sickness signifies a collapse of the biological processes of reproduction, impairing his ability to either actualize his masculinity or perpetuate his inheritance. To turn again to the film’s allegorical dimensions, *Beautiful* registers European sovereignty under siege, with Uxbal’s prostate cancer denoting the pending failure of the European state and its ability to metabolize change. Uxbal also experiences growing

incontinence, and numerous scenes in the film show him publically soiling himself, which produces profound embarrassment. Likewise, the storyline is interspersed with shots of Uxbal relieving himself, with bloody urine splattering the toilet bowl. Here again, his condition encodes a breakdown in the excretory system of the body politic, which is overly excited and therefore unable to properly regulate or control itself—in *Beautiful* due to an overly aggressive immigration policy, the defensive mechanisms of which belie fiscal reality.

Yet while *Beautiful's* subtle but scathing political commentary is astute, I would like to suggest that its foremost relevance to a theory of human rights emerges on the level of not only its subject matter but also its tone and aesthetics, which enact an embodied human rights imaginary. While Uxbal's demise and the progression of his symptoms anchor the film's narrative, an unusual number of other dead or dying bodies populate the film, and its diegesis enacts visceral encounters with them. One of Uxbal's sham professions is to act as a medium between the recently bereaved and their deceased loved ones, and an opening episode captures him communing with the corpses of the three dead boys, attempting to channel their final wishes to pass on to their parents. Relatedly, the plot thread that involves the excavation of his father's corpse requires Uxbal and his brother Tito to identify it at the morgue before its cremation. And while Tito leaves the room gagging, presumably from the stench, Uxbal approaches the embalmed body, enthralled with it, and ventures to touch it, with the camera lingering over his hand as it hovers over the graphically decayed face. Paired with the suggestion of the corpse's putrid smell, this scene not only immerses the camera's vision within but also activates other affective sensorium as it stages a confrontation with the flesh in a state of wasting and degeneration.

Even more, Uxbal's negligent responsibility for the murder of the undocumented Chinese workers induces a type of epiphany on his part. Although that reckoning is not construed as overtly political, it is nonetheless implied to unsettle certain fantasies that Uxbal maintains about himself. After Uxbal arrives at the warehouse and is accused

of the deaths, the camera pans that enclosed space, lingering over individual corpses, vomit, gestures of desperation, and suggestions of final intimacies. The diegesis protracts its exposure to these dead bodies, rendering the scene excruciatingly painful. Moreover, Uxbal's grief is so profound that he absconds with the dead body of Li, a woman he employed to babysit his children. Uxbal initially carries her corpse into his car presumably to flee with it, though he returns in futility, with an ensuing shot of him tenderly caressing Li's dead body in a type of pieta. In this way, González Iñárritu's cinematography here, too, incites a visceral engagement with these bodies in death, as the camera pans the large room to mimic Uxbal's experiential vertigo, and images like vomit prompt the corporeal response of disgust. The acoustic qualities of this scene further incarnate the viewing experience. The background noise first fades out as Uxbal rages in regret, again replicating his sense of disequilibrium, and thereafter garbled voices and a rushing noise sonically overtake the natural sounds of the warehouse, as the storyline apparently lapses into one of Uxbal's hallucinations.

But what is striking here is not so much Uxbal's remorse or enhanced moral responsibility, especially insofar as those sentiments might translate into a clear-cut politics. Rather, *Biutiful's* many dead and dying bodies—including Uxbal's own—foster a highly specific appreciation for human rights. Beyond the film's storyline, the aesthetic features of González Iñárritu's cinematography stage a series of encounters with the flesh in all of its exposure and vulnerability. And that absorption with the sensory and affective texture of those ailing, decomposing bodies triggers a particular kind of human rights awareness, both in Uxbal and in the audience. In this way, *Biutiful* unfolds an embodied account of the human that both overwrites and reveals the folly of the dual myths of human dignity and bodily integrity that, as I have argued, lend ideological coherence to liberal definitions of human rights. By demanding that its viewers viscerally undergo the many physical dimensions of dying and death, *Biutiful* rebukes the expectations of reasoned autonomy and sovereign self-possession that sustain liberal human rights norms. In their place, it offers up a

portrait of the human grounded in precarity, brokenness, and bodily unmaking, and it further gestures toward the ethical-political merit of such an embodied understanding of the human. Notably, it does so not by sensationalizing or encouraging a voyeuristic fascination with that suffering, so as to profit from human misery or manipulate its audience, a strategy NGOs are frequently criticized for employing. Rather, *Beautiful* calls attention to the profound vulnerability that is constitutive of all human experience.

Let me further analyze the slow progression of Uxbal's corporeal unmaking in order to elucidate how *Beautiful* incarnates its conception of the human and thereby generates a more robust account of human rights. From the outset, the film refuses the audience emotional distance, instead concentrating on the throes of Uxbal's suffering. Its storyline begins as he visits the doctor to report his different symptoms. The camera first observes Uxbal's face as he undergoes what is presumed to be a rectal exam and then follows a nurse's extended effort to draw blood. The camera zooms in on the needle, with a female nurse initially trying to find a vein while Uxbal dramatically flinches. Subsequently, Uxbal himself takes the syringe, quickly locates one, and punctures his skin (in a seeming allusion to a past heroine habit), with a close-up of blood filling the vial as Uxbal clenches and unclenches the muscles in his forearm. Needless to say, this intense focus on the needle penetrating his skin will make even the most resolute of viewers squeamish. Similarly elongated attention to other signs of Uxbal's spreading cancer consumes much of the diegesis, whether outward manifestations of pain on his face or more extreme symptoms such as vomit, and those reminders in effect punctuate and organize the other plot developments. Many episodes find him at the hospital as he submits to chemotherapy or other treatments, for instance in one clip showing Uxbal entering an MRI as its loud hum drowns out all other sound.

As I have already noted, numerous scenes also involve him either accidentally soiling or relieving himself, with bloody urine splashing about in an unclean toilet bowl. Notably, the latter such shots are filmed from overhead with a high-level camera angle, simulating Uxbal's

own vertigo and prompting a response in the viewer akin to nausea. The affective sensorium that González Iñárritu's cinematography harnesses, as such, activates a corporeal engagement that mirrors Uxbal's progressive agony, aesthetically incarnating his suffering. To such ends, I should further note that much of *Biutiful* is shot with grainy film stock and dark background lighting, and that muted tone often requires the viewer to struggle to perceive the outlines of human shapes, subordinating vision to other sensory stimuli. Relatedly, many of the final segments that depict Uxbal on the verge of death are entirely devoid of dialogue and extra-diegetic sound. In effect, González Iñárritu's cinematographic style demotes the importance of sight to animate auditory and other visceral registers of involvement instead.

The vision of the human that *Biutiful* portrays is, as a consequence, not the abstract, reasoning individual of much social contract, rational choice, or discourse-based democratic political theory. Similarly, the human body that it depicts is not the artificially purified one implied by the twinned constructs of bodily integrity and human dignity. Here, the film's title with its subversion of standard spelling is further significant. Much as it phonetically captures the word "beautiful"'s sounds while refusing to abide by standard spelling, it denotes a conception of human beauty that resists artificial, sanitized conceptions of the human form. The film depicts the flesh in all of its messiness, disorder, and precarity, and it enlists the viewer's participation on a corporeal level. In so doing, it implicitly attests to the worth of such an embodied portrait of the human.

Biutiful's focus on Uxbal's bodily disintegration, in turn, signals far more than a macabre fascination with human suffering and death. In addition, *Biutiful*'s embodied account of the human contributes to a distinct conception of social justice that works to correct a number of the neoliberal assumptions that have helped to authorize many contemporary failures of human rights. At this point, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology will prove instructive. For Merleau-Ponty, art and aesthetic experience are unrivaled in their abilities to actuate embodied perception, much as I have been arguing about *Biutiful*.

In particular, art induces the self's different sensory faculties to collaborate, reversing liberalism's usual privileging of mind and exemplifying how embodied perception can foster community and selfhood alike (see "Eye and Mind" 1993). Within such an understanding of the human, the body offers vital contributions to both selfhood and interpersonal engagement, reversing the conventional stigma that treats the body's appetencies as chaotic forces requiring mastery by liberal reason. For Merleau-Ponty, the body's faculties of involvement productively interpenetrate one another and collude to structure human experience in ways that model the self's relationship to the surrounding lifeworld. Much as the senses intertwine, so, too, is the individual subject embedded within and materially dependent on other lives. A phenomenology of embodied perception thus culminates not with the sovereign, autonomous subject of liberal individualistic rights but rather with an image of interpersonal solidarity grounded in shared vulnerability and brokenness.³

Two additional aspects of Merleau-Ponty's thought are helpful for analyzing *Biutiful*. First, while Merleau-Ponty celebrates embodied perception as a route to co-belonging, he does not naively romanticize the human condition or cleanse it of contradiction. To the contrary, corporeal experience remains a source of profound paradox—of the kind that *Biutiful* wrestles with. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty describes the phenomenological method itself in terms of paradoxes that analogously animate embodied perception. He construes the goals of phenomenological inquiry as "thoroughly to test the paradoxes it indicates; continually to re-verify the discordant functioning of human intersubjectivity; to try to think through to the very end the same phenomena which science lays siege to, only restoring to them their original transcendence and strangeness" (*Sense and Non-Sense* 97). Second, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology carries distinct implications for theorizing political community, even while overt political questions

3. Merleau-Ponty's important works include *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), *Nature: Course Notes from the College de France* (2003) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968).

were often peripheral to his thought. As I have maintained, one corollary of the premium on bodily integrity is that the nation-state is defined in cognate terms. Whereas within the liberal tradition the individual subject entitled to rights must possess a fully integrated, rationally ordered, and autonomous body, nation-state sovereignty casts political community as closed, insular, and governed by the politics of the territorial enclosure or border. Yet for Merleau-Ponty, the embodied subject is not atomistic or isolated but rather ensnared within the surrounding world and therefore constitutively intertwined with other beings. By extension, then, his philosophy suggests how we might reconfigure political community to instead think about its jurisdictional limits as open, dynamic, and permeable. No doubt, such a formulation of national community as fluid and porous would provide a basis for critiquing the exclusionary immigration policies that trouble Uxbal in *Beautiful* and are shown to authorize a spate of human rights abuses. The kind of explanatory framework suggested by Merleau-Ponty's thought would not only overturn the conventional stigmatization of immigrant populations as captive to unwell or unfit bodies but also explode conservative figurations of the nation-state as unified, homogenous, and familial—instead envisioning the nation as absorbent, inclusive, and accommodating. In sum, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology suggests how “taking embodiment seriously” might provide a theoretical metric for remedying many contemporary human rights violations and the biases that subtend them.

To conclude, Uxbal's encounters with dying bodies, including his own, overridingly depict embodiment as a source of torment. That said, certain sequences in the film simultaneously present corporeal perception as a font of profound interpersonal connection. Perhaps not surprisingly, Uxbal's interactions with his children above all lead him to experience his embodiment, in all of its vulnerability, as generative of solidarity and hence meaning. For instance, the corresponding sequences that follow his two donations of his own father's ring to his daughter depict their hands and limbs interlacing, with that imagery reifying their affinity. Yet perhaps most revealing is the sequence in

which Uxbal's daughter Ana first learns of his pending death. As they embrace, the sounds of a racing heartbeat overtake the background noise, and that heartbeat both indexes and heightens the emotional intensity of this exchange, with its sonic amplification inducing a corporeal response in the viewer. Such scenes recruit all of the body's many faculties of perception, inciting vision and hearing to collaborate with the physical sensation of touch and causing those sensory registers to interpenetrate.

In such ways does *Beautiful* incarnate its own aesthetic to craft an embodied account of the human and, by extension, of human rights. González Iñárritu's cinematography harnesses not only auditory and visual registers of the viewer's engagement but also smell, touch, and other affective sensorium. In so doing, the film implicitly demonstrates the value of these modalities of participation that liberalism has traditionally denigrated, showing how they nurture a particular awareness of human vulnerability as well as of the larger community that embeds the individual. The recognitions fostered within *Beautiful* thereby stage a rebuke to the myths of sovereignty, autonomy, dignity, and bodily integrity that typically sustain liberal definitions of the human and of human rights. As a consequence, it is not accidental that Uxbal's own bodily disintegration as he faces death is partner to his moral awakening concerning the human rights abuses that have enabled his very lifestyle, with those dual recognitions together unfolding an embodied human rights imaginary.

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