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**TITLE:** Spanish Cinema and Ecocritical Labor Migrations: Immigrants as Human Waste in *Las cartas de Alou* and *Butiful*

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article, I investigate the portrayal of illegal immigrants in Spain through their economic activity, especially how immigrants undermine the principles of European freedom of movement through their unlawful status. I contend that cinema provides an essential representation of immigration in Spain, with many films in recent years receiving critical attention. I examine two films from different periods to trace the evolution of economic and political exploitation of this source of labor. *Las cartas de Alou* (1990) is one of the first films to focus exclusively on illegal immigration in Spain, and, specifically, on Sub-Saharan immigrants. *Butiful* (2010) documents the ghostly remnants of multiple immigrant groups struggling to survive in post-crisis Spain. As a result, these films offer a critique of neoliberal political models that drive an unsustainable system where immigrants are recruited for their labor and then converted to human trash; they are used and then discarded, corporeally as well as financially. Immigration becomes not only a social and economic dilemma, but, equally, an ecological one, underscoring both the limits and the dangers of contemporary capitalism.

**KEYWORDS:** Immigration, Spain, Spanish Cinema, Ecocriticism, Economic Crisis

**RESUMEN:** En este artículo, investigo la representación de los inmigrantes ilegales en España a través de su actividad económica, sobre todo como los inmigrantes deslegitimizan los valores de la libertad de movimiento de la Unión Europea por su estatus extralegal. Afirmando que el cine proporciona una representación esencial de la inmigración en España, con la recepción crítica positiva de varias películas en los últimos años. Examiné dos películas de diferentes periodos para subrayar la evolución de la explotación económica y política de esta fuente de fuerza de trabajo. *Las cartas de Alou* (1990) es una de las primeras películas que se enfoca exclusivamente en la inmigración ilegal en España, específicamente en los inmigrantes subsaharianos. *Butiful* (2010) documenta los restos fantasmales de varios grupos de inmigrantes que luchan por sobrevivir en la España post-crisis. De esta manera, estas películas ofrecen una crítica de los modelos políticos neoliberales que empujan un sistema insostenible en el cual los inmigrantes son reclutados por su capacidad de trabajo y después son convertidos en basura humana; usados y después tirados, física y económicamente. La inmigración llega a ser un dilema social, económico y ecológico, mostrando así los límites y los peligros del capitalismo contemporáneo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** inmigración, España, cine español, ecocrítica, crisis económica

**BIOGRAPHY:** Nick Phillips, Assistant Professor of Spanish at Grinnell College, received his PhD from Indiana University in 2014. His interests span contemporary Spanish detective fiction, Spanish film and television, Spanish ecocriticism, and studies of space and everyday life. His articles include a study of urban space in Madrid in Juan José Millás' *La soledad era esto* and an examination of humor and local culture in the detective novel *El asesino de la regañá*. His current book project investigates the relationship between suburban spaces in contemporary Spanish detective fiction and their depiction and resistance to political and economic crisis following the 2008 recession.

# Spanish Cinema and Ecocritical Labor Migrations: Immigrants as Human Waste in *Las cartas de Alou* and *Biutiful*

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Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union famously enshrines into current law one of the principle “four freedoms” pursued by European integration since the 1950s: the freedom of movement for workers (European Parliament). As written, this freedom is predicated on the economic activity of the person, as those individuals with job offers or gainful employment receive the most benefits, followed by pensioners and, on a limited basis, jobseekers. Freedom of movement is therefore freedom of circulation of labor, and in contemporary Spain, this circulation—both legally as a result of European Union integration, and illegally through global migrations—has resulted in an increasingly visible and economically active immigrant class.

Of course, the phenomenon of an increasingly visible immigrant population is occurring in many countries around the globe, but for Spain, this sudden transition to a country of immigration after long decades of relative demographic isolation and emigration during the 20th century is both striking and revealing of the overarching political and economic transformations that neoliberalism and globalization have enacted. Even so, while this phenomenon has accelerated through the start of the 21st century, the 2008 economic crisis marks yet another seismic shift in Spain’s relation to both legal and illegal immigration. According to Spain’s Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, over 600,000 foreign nationals arrived in the country in 2008, on the eve of economic crisis. The largest groups

represented were Moroccans, Romanians, Colombians, and Ecuadorians. Of the groups “free” to seek jobs in Spain, the vast majority originated from the United Kingdom, mainly as retirees. During 2015, about 350,000 foreign nationals arrived, a number that has held relatively constant through the years of crisis. However, the balance between immigrants and emigrants has shifted, with Spain now once again a net emigrant country, with those leaving split between Spanish nationals and foreign nationals. Although the total number of immigrants arriving may have decreased with the arrival of the crisis, the presence of immigrants in Spain has remained a visible and, at times, polemical marker of the nation’s participation in the global economy.

Recently, cultural representations of immigration in Spain are prevalent in visual forms of media: the most obvious form being the ever-present *telediarios* and the subsequent digital iterations of news clips that circulate on the internet. Similarly, Spanish cinema also provides a fundamental representation of immigration in Spain, with many films receiving critical attention, such as *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), especially its depiction of immigrant women, and *Princesas* (2005), in examining the relationship between immigration and prostitution. In this article, my goal is to investigate the portrayal of illegal immigrants in Spain through their economic activity and how this portrayal challenges, or undermines, the principles of European freedom of movement through the immigrants’ unlawful status. I posit that

Spanish cinema depicts these immigrants as what Michelle Yates defines as “the human-as-waste [...] an inherent by-product in the course of [capitalist] reproduction” (1681). As a result, these films critique neoliberal political models that drive an increasingly unsustainable system, where immigrants in Spain are recruited for their labor and then converted to human trash; they are used and then discarded, both corporeally as well as financially. Immigration then becomes not only a social and economic dilemma, but also, equally, an ecological one, underscoring both the limits as well as the dangers of contemporary capitalism.

By linking this depiction of immigration in Spanish cinema to ecological terminology such as human waste, I posit that the films in this study do more than simply represent the negative impacts and consequences of contemporary Spain’s reliance on cheap foreign labor, as well as the deplorable treatment of immigrants. Indeed, by viewing these representations as an ecocritical investigation, I argue that these films propose ways to mitigate these issues through common goals such as working to end the exploitation of natural resources and, ultimately, the more daunting task of replacing the current, unsustainable economic system with a model that provides for an equal quality of life for all instead of the impossibility of everlasting growth and expansion. By providing a potential solution to the problem, these films, therefore, offer a critique of the overarching capitalist neoliberal system in which the promotion of freedom of movement has become fixated on the freedom of movable labor to be exploited, used up, and thrown away for maximum profit.

I have chosen to examine two films from two different periods of immigration in order to trace the evolution of economic and political exploitation of this source of labor. *Las cartas de Alou* (1990) is one of the first films to focus exclusively on illegal immigration in Spain, and, specifically, on Sub-Saharan immigrants. Twenty years later,

the Spanish-Mexican coproduction *Biutiful* (2010) documents the ghostly remnants of multiple immigrant groups struggling to survive in post-crisis Spain. Despite their temporal differences, both films devote large chunks of screen time to the visual representation of squalid living conditions and the brutal work environment of the immigrant class in Spain, which is often accompanied by malnutrition, lack of access to clean water or heat, poor medical attention, and, inevitably, death. The intensification of these representations from *Alou* to *Biutiful* parallels the economic crescendo of Spain’s rapid adoption of neoliberal policies, starting with the transition to democracy in the late 1970s, and then consolidating through the Partido Socialista Obrero Español’s electoral success through the 80s and into the 90s.<sup>1</sup>

*Las cartas de Alou* is the story of a Senegalese immigrant, Alou, who enters Spain looking for work and attempts to link up with his friend Mulai in Barcelona. As a result, Alou must work his way north, literally, as he arrives penniless and with few possessions. Along the way he learns basic Spanish, and makes new connections with other immigrants, including Sub-Saharan Africans, Moroccans, and even local Spaniards. When he finally makes it to Barcelona, he begins dating a Spanish woman, but their relationship must remain a secret due to her father’s racism. Despite working several jobs and attempting to secure legal status, he is deported, yet the film concludes with Alou once again illegally reentering the country by sea.

*Biutiful*, on the other hand, is a darker, more depressing film, even if it shares many of the same focal points on immigration as *Alou*. Set in contemporary Barcelona, the film follows the protagonist Uxbal through his everyday life routines as a middle man among a Chinese sweatshop owner, Catalan construction foremen, local police, and a mix of Chinese and Sub-Saharan illegal immigrants. These illegal immigrants are made available economically depending on need and on who is lining Uxbal’s pockets on that particular

day. Uxbal's family situation is strained—separated from his manic depressive and bipolar wife, he must raise his two young children on his own. To make matters worse, at the start of the film he is diagnosed with terminal cancer and given weeks to live. Uxbal's attempts to conclude his affairs and secure some kind of safety net for his children takes us on a journey through Barcelona's gritty underworld, where illegal immigrants hawk goods on the streets, sew clothes in sweatshops, and pour cement. The film is filled with death, marked especially by Uxbal's gradual weakening and ultimate demise.

Before moving to a formal analysis of the films, I wish to explore the evolution of ecocritical thought in Spain and beyond and its role in the films' negative portrayal of the country's economic trajectory. Ecological economics remains in its infancy in Spain. Luis Prádanos situates the expansion of ecocritical discourse with the 2008 economic crisis in Spain, where scholars and activists sought ways to break with the powerless environmental groups and causes that contributed to European Union official discourse ("Degrowth" 143). Prádanos highlights the role of protest movements such as the Indignados and 15-M in bringing ecocritical theory into the public sphere, even if these movements remain minority perspectives amid the dominant, neoliberal principles that politicians and technocrats espouse ("Degrowth" 143). However, Prádanos also underscores the transnational nature of ecocritical theory in his proposal of a "Euro-Mediterranean Socio-environmental Perspective," which emphasizes the global implications of contemporary capitalism's environmental destruction and the concomitant international response necessary for replacing this unsustainable system ("Euro-Mediterranean" 33). At the heart of Prádanos's ecocritical ideas are arguments for replacing a "logic of quantity" with a

logic of quality by encouraging a more regenerative pace in which lower consumption and a slower lifestyle are not only more sustainable, but also better for health, happiness, conviviality, social justice, communitarian participation, love, taste, and pleasure. ("Euro-Mediterranean" 37)

For Spanish proponents of ecocritical thought, the 2008 economic crisis serves as a warning of the precarious state of neoliberal capitalism. Jorge Reichmann writes that "[a] cada vez más gente, en estos años trágicos con que arranca el siglo veintiuno, nos parece que nos pierden nuestras peligrosas ilusiones sobre la tecnosfera humana" (174). Giorgos Kallis echoes this sentiment by stating that "when growth stops as is currently the case, the edifice starts trembling. Debts cannot be paid, credit runs out and unemployment sky-rockets" (875). However, it must be noted that these observations are centered on nationalized citizens experiencing the shocks of a sudden downturn, and not on immigrant communities that, as stated above, continue to arrive in impressive numbers seeking economic advantages over their home countries and regions. If the average Spanish worker is the recipient of this disillusionment following the 2008 economic collapse, then the political platforms created to address these issues—arguably with little success—have, and continue to be, inherently focused on these specific economic and social positions. Immigrants in Spain are afforded much less of a political voice, which constitutes yet another repercussion of their identity as discarded waste within the capitalist system.

For the immigrants represented in *Alou* and *Beautiful*, their participation as disposable labor in Spain's neoliberal expansion has exposed them to what Rob Nixon has famously termed "slow violence:" out of sight from the mainstream, underreported, and invisible,

this violence is allowed to propagate against specific groups as part of the logic of endless capitalist expansionism (2). However, immigrants in Spain over the last two decades can be seen as experiencing two different types of slow violence: first, the degradation and destruction of their “home” environments, and second, the (sometimes) elective decision to shift themselves spatially in search for more economic opportunities or to escape conflict and persecution. Nixon argues that neoliberal ideology “erodes national sovereignty,” and therefore complicates the potential solutions to problems such as massive, regional immigration that Spain and other Mediterranean countries in the European Union have faced for decades (46). As a result, slow violence is not nationally based, but instead lurks in the shadows of a globalized system failure. *Alou* and *Biutiful* visually depict these iterations of slow violence as a means of rendering them visible, tangible, and provocative; especially because of their spatializations vis-à-vis Spain as a neoliberal success story of European integration.

At the same time, the immigrants’ transnational identity embodied by immigrants in Spain is crucial in their depiction as discarded waste within an unsustainable economic and social system. After all, many immigrants seek out Spain and the European Union in general as potential sites of opportunity, and as *Alou* reveals at the end of the film by once again illegally entering the country, the squalor and poverty experienced as an immigrant at times represents an economic improvement over their home countries. John Bellamy Foster notes that one of the fears of an environmental-centered reform of economic systems is that it would “set limits both on the freedom of human beings to exploit the earth’s resources, and on the freedom of individuals to pursue their own immediate material gain” (52). Foster engages the “old truth” of capitalism: an increase in production will result in a decrease of poverty (49). While Foster argues for a “moral revolution” that can lead the charge in replacing the current economic system, he raises a

critical argument for many of the immigrants depicted in films such as *Alou* and *Biutiful*: the current system provides for the illusion of improvement, yet in some regions, economic growth has combated systemic poverty. With this point in mind, Richard Heinberg states that

without growth, we must seriously entertain the possibility that hundreds of millions—perhaps billions—of people will never achieve the consumer lifestyle enjoyed by people in the world’s industrialized nations. (6)

Therefore, these ecocritical movements that espouse “slow” alternatives and/or “degrowth” will not only result in drastically different lifestyles for those already living well beyond their ecological means, but also will preclude this possibility for immigrants currently struggling for a piece of that same lifestyle.

This dilemma that immigrant populations face is similar to the contradiction that Yates analyzes between human labor as the sole creator of surplus value, and human-as-waste. Yates explains that:

Thus, increases in the productivity of labor through the introduction of machinery in large-scale industry increasingly render a large and growing portion of the working population superfluous; humans relegated as the waste necessary for continued capital accumulation [...] the wasting of the lives of workers is dependent upon a certain portion of formerly active labor being made into a kind of waste excreted from the system of production and wages; hence, also from capitalist markets and exchange. (1688-89)

For Yates, this contradiction points to the unsustainability of capitalism as a whole, since accumulation will eventually be impossible if capitalism “has rendered labor superfluous, and excreted human labor from the production process” (1692). Indeed, while the current historical setting of capitalism is dominated by “increasing the productivity

of labor” in order to increase profit, the efficiency of the system necessitates a large pool of laborers who work at higher intensities and for lower wages, as they are eminently expendable (1689). Here, many scholars such as Scott Kirsch see value in the “materialist turn” of cultural geography, as recent projects have highlighted the waste products, human and inanimate, generated by capitalism (436). As Kirsch says, waste has allowed geographers to “get their hands dirty” as waste “may itself provide new ways to address connections between cultural taboos and the uneven public health and sanitation consequences of human waste systems” (436). In effect, this blending of cultural geography and ecocritical studies, coupled with the visual and spatial representations of immigrants as waste in the films under study, may provide a means by which we can visualize, as Yates suggests, “resolution in another social formation” (1692). I argue that, especially in a visual medium such as cinema, a spatial critique of the immigrant as waste is necessary in order to delineate the processes of waste formation and destruction, while also advocating for a new economic model that combats the impossible fantasy of infinite growth and consumption.

Doreen Massey, writing in *Space, Place and Gender* at the start of the 90s, defines the geography of social structure as economic relations stretched out over space, which requires a study of “the way in which capital made active use of the forms of geographical variation and inequality which were presented to it” (22). Time-space compression is one way she accounts for these inequalities, as some groups are better able to access it and even produce it, via technological advances, such as the internet or geographic advantages like the use of illegal immigrant labor (149). For Spain, this insistence on geography is critical because it underscores the spatial conditions that allowed immigration to flourish in rapid fashion following the country’s political transition. In the twelve years between Spain’s democratic transition and the release of *Las*

*cartas de Alou*, Spain integrated itself into the European community and joined NATO in an attempt to end the political and, to some extent, economic isolation of the Franco regime. Carmen de Urioste underscores how dramatic this demographic shift would be, since under dictatorship the main presence of “outsiders” was through tourism (47). With the arrival of democracy, Spain became a geographic and economic bridge between Europe and the rest of the world, thereby creating a favorable geography not only for immigrant arrivals, but also for the financial conditions necessary to support them (Urioste 49). Spain’s dual function, therefore, as both border and bridge, shows how certain groups are able to reap the economic benefits, but often in unequal ways.

In fact, what can be seen in *Las cartas de Alou* is a manufactured spatial demand for labor, as Alou and other immigrants move to Spain in search of relatively better pay. Here, then, is an example of time-space compression at work, as the spatial changes enacted by illegal border crossings represent job opportunities at lower, flexible wages. In a similar vein, Massey posits that

the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people. Differential mobility can weaken the leverage of the already weak. The time-space compression of some groups can undermine the power of others. (150)

Though there is power gained in coming to Spain and earning more than would ever be possible for Alou in Senegal, there is also the constant threat of exploitation, deportation, and even death, due to hazardous working conditions. As the film underscores, despite the dangers, high economic demand means that jobs are waiting for the laborers upon arrival—as the perilous opening sequences of the film highlight. Alou braves the passage across the sea in a typical *paterna*, with one occupant falling overboard. Despite this

inauspicious arrival, Alou is able to secure work within days along the southern coast in greenhouses and agricultural jobs. Here, the Spanish owners or managers of these farms drive through immigrant housing camps, and load up workers with little regard to the legality or the sustainability of both the laborers themselves and the jobs being offered.

During the course of the film, Alou is employed in a wide variety of sectors, from the agricultural greenhouses of Almeria to street vending in Madrid, and from fruit picking in Catalonia to a sweat shop partially managed by fellow immigrants in Barcelona. He even works for a Spaniard at a trash dump in hopes of securing immigration papers, a plan ultimately frustrated by the complexities and restrictions of unfavorable laws, which are designed to keep illegals illegal. Alou's economic odyssey—or perhaps progress, given the slightly better living and working conditions present in the sweat shop versus agricultural labor—underscores the fact that demand for immigrant labor remains inextricably linked to the spatial production of a newly deterritorialized, global, and neoliberal economy. These industries, from textiles to tourism, expose a need for inexpensive and, due to their legal status, expendable workers, who would add to corporate productivity without demanding living wages, benefits, or union participation. Simplicio Boyogueno notes that industries such as agriculture and small family-owned businesses were traditionally the domain of domestic Spanish workers; therefore, as the film depicts these immigrants displacing, to some degree, these traditional industries for the Spanish lower-classes, it suggests “una evaluación de la adecuación entre la sociedad española y el sistema capitalista, o simplemente la adaptación del país al capitalismo” (176). Indeed, the rigid employment laws of the Franco era, in some cases still on the books with democracy, facilitated this transition to illegal immigrant labor, as companies and industries pivoted towards a more neoliberal outlook in order to expand globally

without absorbing the increasingly high costs of nationalized labor.

It follows, then, that the film, in focusing on the gritty, harsh realities of economic opportunities for illegal immigrants, chooses a visual panorama of Spain that is at odds with the commercialized, touristic images of places such as Madrid and Barcelona. In fact, there are few exterior shots of emblematic locations that would be familiar to both Spaniards and outsiders alike. Isolina Ballesteros notes that, despite being filmed as if it were a documentary, the cinematography focuses on unfamiliar spatial landmarks to orient the viewer via the hidden perspective of the immigrant (232). As a result, the film presents highway overpasses, train station interiors, somewhat decrepit suburban apartment buildings, and anonymous storefronts, as its visual text of Spain's major cities. In neglecting exterior shots, such as the Ramblas, or Barcelona's modernist architecture, or the Paseo de la Castellana in Madrid, the film chooses to represent the most likely spatial paths of immigrants, who tend to live and move through lesser-known suburban areas, and work in less visible, more restricted parts of the city. This spatial segregation clearly illustrates the differences between the touristic images designed for consumption, and the darker urban underbelly where illegal labor is carried out.

The difference in geography portrayed in the film also underscores the social divide between newly arrived immigrants and the native Spanish population, which is especially evident with immigrants from both the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. As Daniela Flesler states, unlike Latin American and other European immigrants who shared certain cultural traditions with Spaniards, African and Muslim arrivals, often labeled as “Moors,” were received “with increasing concern” because “they embody one of the clearest historical markers of Spanish ‘difference’ in Europe” (104). Flesler therefore argues that the increased visibility of these groups in real-life immigration translates to more screen time due to the native

Spanish population's anxiety over how groups with such dramatic cultural differences can integrate into Spanish society. In fact, despite relatively positive depictions of Sub-Saharan African and Muslim immigrants in cinema, even the characters on screen radiate the indigenous concern of maintaining Spanish purity and historical customs (104).

For *Las cartas de Alou*, the visual representations of landmark-less spaces reinforce the otherness of the immigrant subjects. For example, one of the most horrific spaces present in the film are the tunnels in a village near Lleida where immigrants live during the harvest season. These structures resemble a sort of large sewer, and perhaps function as part of an irrigation system or underground storage facility. For immigrants in town to harvest fruit, the tunnels are a free place to sleep at night, crammed into tight, foul-smelling quarters where fights break out for the choicest spots, as Alou witnesses first hand when his Moroccan friend invites him to roll out his blanket next to him. The immigrants even use the tunnels as a worship space, demonstrating the large amount of Muslim followers who must conform to squalid conditions even while praying. Here, the depiction of these immigrants is one of human trash, discarded discreetly in this underground space. The human laborers are the unwanted byproducts of an unsustainable capitalist system, which keeps fruit prices low in supermarkets at the hidden cost of humans-as-waste.

The film also elaborates a striking parallel between the human-as-waste and the landscapes presented as sites of waste and trash. In addition to the previously mentioned tunnel scene, the film presents a blighted panorama of human intervention against nature. Early in the film, for example, the numerous plastic greenhouses offer an artificial setting for the southern coastline, while near the end of the film Alou's job at the garbage dump has him combing through discarded trash for salvageable items. As a result, the film's visual link between human waste and a contaminated natural environment reinforce the depiction

of an unsustainable system, which sacrifices both human and environmental concerns for economic progress.

The contradiction between the living conditions that these immigrants are forced to endure, and the economic benefits that the rural community receives from illegal labor at harvest time, underscores the complex social and economic dualities of immigrants in 1990s Spain. Specifically, for Alou, his time in this rural town is highly conflicted, with his obvious disgust for the tunnels: he openly complains about the smell and lack of light, while his Moroccan friend simply remarks that "es nuestro sitio" as immigrants (*Las cartas de Alou*). Alou also faces open discrimination at a local bar, where he is denied service because he is black. At the same time, Alou does befriend a group of local Spaniards who play checkers, and through these contacts, he meets Carmen, who becomes his Spanish girlfriend. Boyogueno cautions that solidarity between Spaniards and the immigrant other is always limited by "la diferencia (manifestada en el discurso y la mirada) sin la cual la estructura étnico-racial española pura no sobreviviría" (175). In fact, even if Alou's tacit inclusion in the group can be seen as a positive moment of mutual understanding between locals and immigrants, he still must put up with his tongue in cheek nickname, "Baltasar," the name commonly given to one of the three wise men of Christmas fame, who, in Spain at least, is always depicted as a black man. Despite this promising example of integration between local Spanish culture and illegal immigrants, Alou and Carmen's secret relationship is made nearly impossible by her father's open rejection of Alou as a potential boyfriend. In the end, Alou refuses to remain in this rural environment and returns to Barcelona, where he can find better living conditions and more lucrative work.

With all these challenges and hardships that Alou witnesses, it is significant that the film concludes on a positive note, with our main character stubbornly returning to Spain in yet another *paterna* after being deported.

It can be implied, then, that Alou still views Spain as a land of economic opportunity, despite all that he has suffered in terms of racism, squalid living conditions, and hard labor throughout his experience. Alou may also view his relationship with Carmen as a potential legal solution to his status, emulating his friend Mulai, who married a Spaniard. The depiction of this couple, along with their mixed-race child, represents the promise of a more integrated, multicultural future for Spain, even with the economic and racial challenges presented in the film. The film, therefore, represents these cultural and economic changes with a positive, if open-ended conclusion, perhaps reflecting a general optimism towards Spain's own trajectory into the 1990s as a country increasingly integrated with its European neighbors, while accelerating towards a more globalized future.

Two decades later, *Biutiful* offers a much gloomier depiction of immigrants as humans-as-waste at the moment the 2008 crisis reaches its peak. While immigration is a major theme of the film, it is important to note that the story is driven by a Spaniard middle-man with unique access to the unseen and unwanted realms that illegal labor inhabits. In fact, Uxbal's status as a medium allows him to move between the visible realm of official power structures—the police, for example—and the hidden world of illegal immigrants, which gives him not only his source of income, but also his unique status as narrator.<sup>2</sup>

To that end, the film backs up Uxbal's status by offering a predominance of interior scenes and only small slices of a Barcelona cityscape, which is often times unrecognizable. For example, Benjamin Fraser notes that the film's focus on interiors and on unknown exterior shots is intended to highlight the small-scale actions of immigrants and their economic status, in response to Barcelona's popularized image of a planned city that uses space and architecture as economic products designed for consumption (22-23, 25). Nevertheless, there are several moments in the

film where popular Barcelona does pop out, such as a brief chase scene down the Rambblas, or through wide shots of the city skyline, or even through a few shots of the famed beaches and Mediterranean Sea. *Biutiful* offers brief, reassuring glimpses of the city, as if to remind the viewer that we are in fact in Barcelona, while the rest of the film courses through dark sweatshops and back alleys of factories, often at night. Katarzyna Beilin notes that "viewers of *Biutiful* will remember Barcelona not as the artful, harmonious, and clean city from tourist postcards, but rather full of decaying matter" (93). These are the spaces inhabited by immigrants functioning as humans-as-waste, as Beilin rightfully links to images of "slow violence" on a global scale (94). However, it is important to note the ways these spaces have shifted since their depiction twenty years prior in *Las cartas de Alou*.

Perhaps the most notable change in *Biutiful* are the immigrant owners of various businesses who, in turn, employ illegal immigrants as their labor force. Hai, a Chinese businessman and sweatshop owner, seems to have his hand in several projects, such as a restaurant, and has immigrated to Spain with his entire family. A police raid later in the film raises doubts as to the legality of their status, but most jarring is Hai's seeming disregard for fellow immigrants, many of them also Chinese, who work in his sweatshop and sleep in the factory basement shoulder to shoulder. In fact, the economic model seen in *Alou* of Spanish business owners searching for cheap illegal labor has been completely reimagined, now that globalization is in full swing and illegal immigrants essentially work for other illegals, having cut out any attempts whatsoever at creating a business with any national identity. This borderless, international, free-range capitalism is designed to exploit what Massey has highlighted as "geographical inequality" (22-23), harnessing various groups of immigrants to keep costs low while exploiting the purchasing power of Barcelona residents and visitors. Indeed, the film shows that the clothing, pirated DVDs,

and other items produced in the sweat shops are then sold on the streets by Sub-Saharan African immigrants, who target the hordes of international tourists roaming the Ramblas and the Plaza de Catalunya, while reeling in a few locals. As goods are transferred from sweatshop to *top manta* to tourist backpacks, the only Spaniard with a hand in this process is Uxbal.

As a result, aside from brief glimpses of touristic Barcelona, *Biutiful* plays out on the suburban, immigrant-dominated streets of the urban periphery, where bars and stores have signs displaying Chinese characters.<sup>3</sup> As Fraser has shown, this multicultural, international, yet hidden image of Barcelona underscores the lasting impact that these immigrant communities now have on their city, twenty years after Alou struggled as one of just a few people of color walking the streets of Spain (25). The interconnected nature of these immigrant communities—in fact, even the obvious exploitation of one immigrant group over another—reinforces the idea that the immigrant in contemporary Spain is no longer solely focused on the creation of surplus value through human labor. Rather, as Yates espouses, capitalism's shift to “a consumer society dominated by an ideological and material investment in disposability, throwing away, and consumption,” underscores the immigrant's status as a waste product, which operates within the film via unofficial channels such as the black market as a strategy of survival (1691).

Similar to the visual depiction in *Alou*, the scenes of Barcelona in *Biutiful* suggest a connection between the human-as-waste and the contamination of the surrounding environment. Evident here are the decrepit, mold-infested interior shots of Uxbal's apartment, as well as the sub-human living conditions offered to Chinese immigrants in the factory basement. Exterior shots are dominated by concrete and rust in a city where nature and sunlight has inspired Barcelona's most legendary architecture and green spaces. In effect, the film purveys a visual condemnation of rampant capitalism's contamination of both natural

and human spaces.

Nevertheless, one major difference between the two films is *Biutiful*'s somber tone and pessimism, reflecting the economic shift that has taken place over the past twenty years. Gone is the optimism and forward thinking of the 1990s, which is replaced by the economic crisis that was gaining steam in Spain during the film's release. While Alou is able to work his way through various industries, *Biutiful* depicts a Spanish economy stuck in neutral, with immigrants being used as a last ditch effort to cut costs at a construction company. In fact, even the depiction of death is radically different between these two films, despite a similar scenario playing out in each one.

In *Alou*, the tragic death of Alou's roommate, asphyxiated by a leaky gas heater while sleeping, is portrayed as a moment of unification for an immigrant community that must come together to improve living conditions and economic opportunities. Meanwhile, a similar scene in *Biutiful* occurs, with the death of over twenty Chinese workers sleeping in the factory basement, exposed to yet another gas leak. However, this tragedy fractures the weak alliances between immigrant communities when Hai attempts to cover up their deaths by dumping their bodies offshore.

In each case, it is the protagonist's heartfelt attempt to improve the living conditions of others (the installation of gas heaters) that leads to disaster. Yet, in *Biutiful*, the gruesome scenes of the dead, mouths agape and eyes wide open, portends a different outcome for the immigrant community, who now suffer police raids, the economic collapse of the factory, and deportation. Yet, Spaniards such as Uxbal walk away unscathed, even if emotionally shaken. Instead of the melancholy funeral song that Alou sings upon discovering his dead roommate, in *Biutiful* the viewer is bombarded with images of the bodies washing ashore. As the moon rises over the Mediterranean, the camera pans across the sea and gradually begins to focus on the victims littering the famous Barcelona beaches. The

subsequent scenes show aggressive police raids against Hai and his family, and then a *telediario* reporting the images and rescue efforts. This detached and shocking visual depiction of the immigrants' discarded bodies contaminating the touristic Barcelona beaches underscores the role of the victims in *Biutiful* as humans-as-waste. It also attacks the media depiction of immigrant communities represented in 21st century Spain.

*Biutiful* is, therefore, a film marked by the massive socioeconomic shift that the 2008 recession instigates in Barcelona and across the country. Twenty years after Alou stubbornly returns to Spain in yet another illegal crossing, the economic model that attracted him in the first place has shifted towards a confluence of immigrant communities operating businesses and selling goods clandestinely, in the shadows of Barcelona's touristic architecture. Immigration has increased so much in number that *Biutiful* can depict a major Spanish city almost without the intervention of Spanish characters, thereby underscoring these groups' desire to achieve better economic conditions despite fighting their categorization as economic byproducts of an increasingly wasteful neoliberal system. It also reaffirms the ongoing spatial impacts immigrants have in populating and redeveloping peripheral neighborhoods, reconfiguring the definition of marginal spaces that often times exist interwoven with more visible landmarks and spaces designed to exploit tourism. Yet the optimism of twenty years ago has also faded with the film's constant representation of death, highlighted by Uxbal's deterioration on screen in two and a half hours. As a result, the film suggests a damaged human ecology inherent in these immigrant communities, which are faced with the impending collapse of the Spanish housing market, high unemployment, and a mass exodus of both immigrants and Spaniards alike.

From an ecocritical perspective, this acceleration of the depiction of the immigrant as waste in these two films recalls the expansion of resource exploitation and the

concomitant increase in waste production that underscores late capitalism on a global scale. Yet through their portrayal of the human-as-waste, these films also manifest a critical examination of these macroeconomic processes and suggest a potential solution to an otherwise seemingly impossible problem. As Prádanos highlights, however, the radical solutions necessary to counteract global capitalism's inevitable shocks and ultimate destruction of the environment, both human and non-human, are both "subversive" and "blasphemous" because they originate completely outside of capitalist rationality itself ("Euro-Mediterranean" 37). Indeed, adopting a "logic of quality" could serve to limit economic expansion to what the environment itself could sustain, while also providing a solid foundation for these immigrants who participate on the sidelines of an economic system that currently views them as valueless ("Euro-Mediterranean" 37). Similarly, Foster argues that

[a]n ecological approach to the economy is about having *enough*, not having more. It must have as its first priority *people*, particularly poor people, rather than production or even the environment, stressing the importance of meeting basic needs and long-term security. (49)

While this emphasis on sufficiency could help counteract immigrants' own desire to seek out more productive conditions for themselves, their families, and their children, it still remains evident that the capitalist class has no intention of trading what it views as hard-earned material gain for a pluralistic, self-sustaining system that can replace capitalism. Foster underscores this idea by acknowledging the fact that capitalism has never been allowed to have free reign over its own development—yet capitalism allows these restraints as long as the system itself is not threatened (67). Nevertheless, these cinematic depictions of the human-as-waste allow for a larger conversation to take place,

one that is increasingly invested in searching for solutions that move us beyond, or even dismantle completely, the current manifestation of capitalism. Especially today, a decade removed from the start of the 2008 economic crisis, these films call into question the unfettered expansion of capital accumulation and the unrealistic dream of continued growth and consumption. These cinematic, humanistic displays of both the nefarious byproducts of contemporary capitalism and its tenuous future will help shape a social discourse that insists on quality of life over quantity of accumulation. Especially for Spain, where the scars of 2008 remain visibly exposed, this debate must move forward.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Juan Antonio Andrade Blanco, in his exhaustive study of the ideological evolution of leftist political parties in Spain during the transition, succinctly expresses the PSOE's 1982 election victory as a notable shift towards centrist and even right-leaning economic policy:

En definitiva, el discurso de la modernización realizó los valores de la secularización, la innovación y la europeización, pero estos valores, en un contexto de acelerada desideologización y pragmatismo, cobraron una expresión más extrema, la del descreimiento, la tecnocracia y el eurocentrismo.(417)

<sup>2</sup>Kathleen Connolly examines Uxbal's role as a medium, allowing him to communicate with both the living and the dead (550). While this could be a clear nod to the horror genre, Connolly posits that the lack of a monster, and therefore this rupture with the expected notions of the genre, "provokes the audience, eliciting shock or even disgust with dreadful images of suffering, disease, and immigrant exploitation" (552).

<sup>3</sup>Interestingly, Cristina Carrasco notes that recent films that depict Barcelona are guilty of perpetuating an exotic, unrealistic image of the city, both in their representations of touristic spaces, as

well as the marginalized immigrant spaces, such as El Raval (101). She reminds us that the Raval is undergoing rapid gentrification, so that it is becoming "un espacio global y simultáneamente local que simboliza la redefinición de identidad nacional que España experimenta en la actualidad" (101). Although images of the Raval certainly populate *Biutiful*'s filmic depiction of the city, it is important to note the anonymity of these peripheral urban images, as the viewer is often times unsure exactly where the action is taking place, due to the absence of recognizable landmarks.

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