



Beautiful Javier Bardem
and *Biutiful* director
Alejandro González Iñárritu

Life Sucks, And Then You Die

Biutiful's path too dusty and cluttered

BIUTIFUL: Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. Written by Alejandro González Iñárritu, Armando Bo and Nicolás Jacobone. Cinematography, Rodrigo Prieto. Editor, Stephen Mirrione. Music, Gustavo Santaolalla. Starring Javier Bardem. Focus Features, 2010. R. 148 minutes.

Trying to explain what happens in *Biutiful* is kind of like trying to explain the plot of an action film in which everything happens at once: You know, when the bad guy's plan comes to fruition; the girl nearly drowns; the car breaks down; something explodes; planets collide; idiotic pilots fail to get out of the way of universe-destroying red matter — but wait, there's more!

For Uxbal (Javier Bardem), however, the crises are slightly more realistic. He's ill; his wife is a manic, selfish creature who comes in and out of his and their children's lives; his brother is some sort of layabout and some sort of business partner; Uxbal's job, as an outside-the-law facilitator who finds work for immigrants, is stressful and taxing at the best of times. And then there's the strange small matter of dealing with the corpse of a father Uxbal never knew.

Also, Uxbal can talk to dead people. Sort of. This sounds more dramatic than it is, in the film, and one of director and co-writer Alejandro González Iñárritu's better choices is to play down this strange talent, to wrap it in as a reminder of the impossibility of tying up life's loose ends.

González Iñárritu has made a career of sprawling stories that weave together seemingly disparate lives. His debut feature, *Amores Perros*, was arguably the most effective (and affecting) of the bunch, though I'm fond of *Babel* (and not just for Rinko Kikuchi's striking performance as a mute, aching teenager). *Biutiful* has one central character, which might make it seem more centered, but a cast of lightly sketched outlines rotates around Uxbal, spreading *Biutiful*'s story and emotional weight too thin.

Bardem's grounded, delicate performance nearly balances the overstuffed rest of the film, but I still found myself thinking, unexpectedly, of Bilbo Baggins, tired and worn, explaining

that he felt "sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread." Such is González Iñárritu's story, which spreads itself thin trying to tie Uxbal's story to the stresses and failures of the global economy. Senegalese immigrants sell wares on the street; the cops claim they're selling dope as well. Chinese immigrants sew purses for too little money and are locked in at night, sleeping on the sweatshop floor. Corrupt cops only turn a blind eye for so long.

González Iñárritu's focus skips and stammers; he pauses for a bit on the sweatshop workers' overseers, whose relationship never fully gels; he turns to Uxbal's family, where his children are sweet and his wife is a caricature: overwrought, unstable, selfish, untrustworthy. She's no more a full character than is the warm, gentle Ige (Diaryatou Daff), who Uxbal helps when her husband is deported.

If you can focus fully on Uxbal, and on the struggle embodied in Bardem's posture, his lank hair and his drawn smile, you'll find a smaller film lost in *Biutiful*'s maze of threads. It's hard to see, hidden behind nebulous reminders that the world is messed up and unfair and good people do bad things sometimes. The morality of the film is neither simple nor complex; it's undeveloped, like all the characters who are not Uxbal.

Biutiful's dedication is to González Iñárritu's father, which makes sense, in a frustrating way: This crowded, distant mess plays out like a sentimental life lesson: Be better, be kind, mean well, forgive yourself for your worst failures and your children will love you despite them. González Iñárritu's frequent cinematographer, Rodrigo Prieto, pries into the corners of damp apartments and dank alleys, filthy sweatshops and crowded funeral parlors, filling the screen with grit and longing and uncertainty, but we've seen all that before from this filmmaker, and to smarter ends. Rather than eliciting an emotional or thoughtful response, *Biutiful* calls up a feeling of obligation, as if we *should* feel moved, or shocked, or heartbroken about it. Maybe we should just watch *Amores Perros* again instead.

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