

Precarious Bodies, Precarious Lives: Framing Disability in Alejandro González Iñárritu's Cinema

Victoria Garrett^{a*}

^a*College of Charleston. Corresponding Author- Email: garrettv1@cofc.edu*

Alejandro González Iñárritu is a salient example of contemporary Latin American directors who portray sick or disabled bodies as a visual and affective shorthand for different forms of violence. This article explores the relationship between his signature intersecting plots that join seemingly disconnected social spheres in a shared precariousness and his portrayal of illness, injury, and disability to suggest the violence and inequality that underpin these connections. I argue that González Iñárritu's films frequently represent injured and disabled bodies to expose invisible connections that make social injustice possible as evidence of his using film as a political or ethical intervention that might erode the way contemporary global capitalism reproduces coloniality in everyday life. At the same time, his films illustrate the pitfalls of utilizing disabled bodies to realize this critique, thus shedding light on the ethical dimensions of this tendency to link disability with a critique of violence.

Keywords: precariousness; globalization; disability in film; ethics of representation; Alejandro González Iñárritu

Introduction

A wave of recent films by Latin American directors portray sick or disabled bodies as a visual and affective shorthands for different forms of violence. To name just one salient example, Walter Salles's *Diarios de motocicleta* (The Motorcycle Diaries) (2004) juxtaposes a wealthy German man who has a tumour in the Argentine Pampas with an extended segment set in an Amazonian Peruvian leper colony to illustrate the protagonists' process of awakening to structures of social inequality outside of the privileges of the Argentine upper class. Among the most prominent directors who consistently employ this approach is Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu. His debut *Amores perros* (Love's a Bitch) (2000), in particular, provides a clear example of concerns that continue to appear in his subsequent films, namely portraying illness, injury, and disability to make visible hidden connections between seemingly disconnected parts of globalized society to expose a global privileged class's reliance on police brutality, exploited labor, colonial and neocolonial

violence, and the broken lives of local and global subalterns to sustain its way of life. With some formal variations, González Iñárritu's first four films- *Amores perros*, *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006), and *Biutiful* (2010)- use intersecting plots connected by accidents to join characters from different socio-economic classes and ethnic groups in a shared humanity based on injury, violence, or suffering. These connections level a visual critique of social injustice: within the inequality of neoliberal societies (*Amores perros*, *21 Grams*), and in highly unequal global encounters produced through tourism and economic migration (*Babel*, *Biutiful*). Two recent films which have earned vast critical recognition, *Birdman* (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015), depart from the intersecting narratives and heavy tones that characterize his earlier work, but vulnerable bodies remain central to exposing characters' shared precariousness.

In this paper, I will argue that González Iñárritu's films frequently represent injured and disabled bodies to expose invisible connections that make social injustice possible as evidence of his using film as a political or ethical intervention that might erode the way contemporary global capitalism reproduces coloniality in everyday life. At the same time, his films illustrate the pitfalls of utilizing disabled bodies to realize this critique, thus shedding light on the ethical dimensions of this tendency to link disability with a critique of violence. My reading of these films reveals that they consistently rely on troubling metaphors of healing in which proposed solutions for social problems imply the erasure of disabled people. In order to determine what kind of ethical interventions these films make through their representations of disabled bodies, this article draws on the fields of decolonial and disability studies, engaging them to consider the tensions between imagining- and thus making possible- a world free of both environments that produce and/or exclude people with disabilities, and desires for able-bodied normativity. First, I outline the concepts of coloniality (of being, of knowledge), precarious life, and precarious bodies as they relate to cinematic representation, before moving on to a discussion of disability studies in postcolonial contexts. Using a theoretical framework that draws on the intersections of these two fields, I then move to a close reading of *Amores perros*'s representation and framing of violence, injury, and disability. I argue that although the film's affective register potentially produces desires for an escape from neoliberal's violence and social precarity, the character of el Chivo posits the impossibility of finding any such outside. Moreover, the film's deployment of disability and healing reinforce ableism, or the notion that healthy, able bodies are more valuable or desirable than non-normative bodies. I follow my analysis of *Amores perros* with brief comparisons to select subsequent films to suggest that their similarly problematic uses of disability, expose a representational tendency incongruous with their visual and affective critiques of neoliberalism. By considering the conflicting desires, responses, and interpretations that cinema's affective power can produce¹, my analyses show that González Iñárritu's use of disability consistently sustains ableism even while attempting to create a world that might be "otherwise."

Coloniality and precarious bodies

In order to conceptualize the expressions of violence evoked in the films, I turn to insights drawn from decolonial studies regarding the coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being in contemporary society. My use of the term ‘coloniality’ in this article draws primarily from Mignolo’s (2009, 2011) developments based on Quijano’s theorization of the coloniality of power, through which racial categories were created and given precedence in order to justify domination. Mignolo (2009) emphasizes the role of what he calls the ‘coloniality of knowledge’ in perpetuating the ‘coloniality of being’: the production and abuse of legally bare and economically dispensable lives. Decolonial thinking and options, in turn, comprise:

...a relentless analytic effort to understand, in order to overcome, the logic of coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity, the structure of management and control that emerged out of the transformation of the economy in the Atlantic, and the jump in knowledge that took place both in the internal history of Europe and in between Europe and its colonies (Mignolo 2011: 10).

Without negating the importance of race in any analysis of power, I echo scholars who call for a nuanced attention to the intersections of race with other identity categories. While Lugones (2007) rightly brings gender to the foreground of the decolonial project, important work by scholars such as Barker and Murray (2010), Erevelles (2011), Quayson (2007), Grech and Soldatic (2015) have also called for greater attention to the often overlooked category of disability to respond to the way coloniality is experienced in different ways². In this regard, the colonial roots of the calculus of the worth of different bodies must be considered.

One of the premises of the coloniality of knowledge, is that certain lives- those worth living on the inside of liberal society- are more worthy of protection than others, and that this way of valuing lives differently is partly responsible for varied expressions of violence³. As Quijano (2007), Mignolo (2009), and Erevelles (2011) have argued, the coloniality of power depends upon the production and utilization of disposable and dispensable bodies, of bodies that matter less than others. Altering this disparity by making lives matter equally, is key to attenuating the injustices of global capitalist society and to decoloniality. I am keenly aware of the pitfalls of sensationalizing violence and using the real misfortunes of the global South as a commodity to appeal to a first-world gaze in which Latin Americans may be always-already barbaric, as one could certainly characterize the films *Amores perros* and *Babel*. But my view of cultural production as an intervention into the real world, also offers the hope for shifting such a gaze and changing ways of framing and valuing lives⁴.

Butler’s (2004, 2009) writings on torture after 9/11, provide important insights for

understanding how culture can make an intervention into Latin American contexts of violence that would make lives matter equally, thus leading to a non-violent ethos. She argues that cultural frameworks for seeing and hearing others can serve to maximize precarity- failing social and economic networks of support and differential exposure to injury, violence, and death (2009:25)- for some populations whose lives are not regarded as worthy of protection, but they can also produce an ethics grounded in the recognition of a shared human condition of precarity such that all are equally deserving of protection (2009:28-9). Approaching violence, inequality, and social injustice from this perspective, brings to the forefront the body, whether in its performative capabilities or its vulnerability, frailty, and injurability. Cinematic acts of visually framing bodies are, I maintain, crucial interventions into the way viewers see and value certain lives. This is precisely what González Iñárritu's films achieve through their intersecting narratives in which car crashes or other accidents bring together privileged, elite characters with subalterns to equalize the social classes temporarily and thus bring together disparate social spheres, highlighting their shared corporal vulnerability. But as I address in the following section, their representations of disabled bodies require other considerations that the field of disability studies brings to our attention.

Framing disability in postcolonial contexts

At the same time that I recognize a decolonial function of González Iñárritu's representations of disabled bodies, it is important to consider how those representations impact real people with bodies similar to those portrayed. In other words, does a representation of an injured individual impact the material and symbolic conditions of real-life injured people? Pioneering disability studies scholars such as Garland-Thomson (1996), Mitchell and Snyder (2001), and Lennard Davis (2002) have criticized metaphors that link disability and social problems on the grounds that such metaphors stigmatize real disabled people and often evoke a desire for healing that implies the disappearance of disabled people. Postcolonial scholarship, however, has revised the 'wholesale dismissal of metaphor as damaging, ableist or stigmatizing' because such a dismissal fails to account for the specific conditions in which disability occurs in global contexts (Barker and Murray, 2010:234). Indeed, Barker and Murray (2010:230) argue that because:

...the *acquisition* of disability may be tied into wider patterns of dispossession—the loss of family, home, land, community, [or] employment...what individuals in such circumstances experience as loss should not be rendered an invalid response by arguments that fail to recognize the wider contexts and material environments in which disablement occurs. (emphasis in original)

They invite us to rethink the notion of 'disabling environments' because of the frequency of different forms of destruction in postcolonial contexts (2010:232). Disabled experience, they

suggest, may even be the norm, thus ‘drastically altering the categorical and exclusionary implications of ‘normalcy’ and ‘non- normativity’ (2010:229). Likewise, Erevelles (2011:12-18) forcefully argues for recognizing the way transnational capitalism reproduces the social and economic exploitation that produces and exacerbates disability, and Quayson (2007:3) argues that disability must be seen through the wider lens of social structures and international formations. For example, in critiquing a posthumanist celebration of the disabled subject through an analysis of disability and blackness in the Atlantic slave trade, Erevelles poses the sobering question: ‘how does one celebrate in the face of so much violated and wounded flesh?’ (2011:42).

It is with these approaches to disability in mind that I frame my analysis of the cinema of González Iñárritu. Representations of disabled bodies in contexts of physical violence, such as Mexico City riddled with insecurity or the exploitation and repression of immigrants in Barcelona, certainly have the potential to produce greater recognition and respect for precarious lives. Moreover, attention to the diversity of ways of being in the world, could delink from notions tied to modernity such as progress, upward mobility, competition, and other colonial legacies that are directly critiqued in these films, which would overlap with a decolonial perspective and coalesce with the decolonial goal of overcoming such persistent colonial legacies as sexism, racism, and classism⁵. Nevertheless, the following analyses attempt to demonstrate that González Iñárritu’s use of disability to imagine so-called ‘disabling environments’ does not, in fact, avoid the stigmatization that so often accompanies disability metaphors. Instead, the films’ injured and differently-abled bodies consistently reinforce problematic desires for healing and normalcy that undermine a more ethical approach to precariousness, positing the desire for health as a universal condition that transcends any particularist treatment of class, nation, gender, or ethnicity in connection with the conditions that produce disability⁶.

Rehabilitating the neoliberal open prison?

*Amores perros*⁷ features disability prominently to visualize the injurability and precarity that cut across social classes in the socially-polarized dystopia of Mexico City under neoliberalism, set in the film’s present of 2000. The film intersects three seemingly disconnected plotlines that each occupy the central focus of one vignette: Octavio and Susana, Daniel and Valeria, and el Chivo (the goat) and Maru. While the film’s family-centric narrative certainly fits within the ideological framework of neoliberalism (Sánchez Prado, 2006:173), a number of scholars emphasize its visual critique of the violence and social injustice of the neoliberal experiment in Latin America (Poblete, 2014: 231) and its interruption of neoliberal temporality (Smith, 2010:275), particularly through the car crash and the connections revealed among the three vignettes. Here, I examine the film’s deployment of health and healing in the final vignette as potential decolonial alternatives to

the neoliberal dystopia portrayed throughout.

The 1960s revolutionary-turned-hit man el Chivo is a crucial figure for interpreting the film's reading of the present, and the centrality of disability to its critique. His back-story- the only character to have one- serves to haunt the present with memory of past State repression and to comment on the historical turn to neoliberalism. A former political prisoner, he was once imprisoned for allegedly bombing a shopping mall, an act that may be interpreted as terrorism or symbolically as dissent against the inevitable triumph of neoliberalism. As Reber (2010:283) has noted, '[p]recisely because we glean from el Chivo's back-story that he once embodied the vitality of revolutionary 1960s-era hope, we comprehend el Chivo's current mien of living death as the embodiment of global-era revolutionary defeat and the apparent loss of his former ideals'.

Here, Draper's (2013) study of contemporary afterlives of Southern Cone prisons is instructive. She exposes a direct link between former prisons associated with state repression and what she terms the 'open prison' of neoliberalism that was made possible by said prisons. This 'open prison' is embodied by the shopping mall, which is emblematic of the highly surveilled freedom promised through the formula that implies that 'more consumerism equals more freedom and more democracy' (2013:18). Draper articulates ways in which the creative and critical practices of literature and film, fictionally engage this 'open prison' to problematize the association between democracy and freedom, questioning its restrictive geography in order to posit new forms of opening. These openings rely on both rethinking parts of the past that remained outside of the dominant architectonic of neoliberal freedom and displacing angles of vision to transform ways of approaching and signifying this otherwise invisible outside. Following Draper's lead, I find it important to recognize how cultural production highlights the zones where neoliberalism's freedom never arrived, and invites us to rethink the possibility of escape from the 'open prison' such as the neoliberal dystopia portrayed in *Amores perros*.

El Chivo's character does just this. His grisly, unkempt appearance seemingly marks him as distinct from the mainstream characters, and while the latter are linked through their injured conditions⁸, el Chivo lurks on the fringes of society and has only fleeting contact with others through voyeurism and violence. His genuinely affectionate family of dogs stands in stark contrast with the other families tattered by economic strain and competition. It evokes the left's collective project, a conspicuously absent but desired other-possible world, free from the competitive and exploitative desires of coloniality. The contrast between the blood-thirsty, wage-earning fighting dogs and his own pack of dogs is dramatically emphasized when, after el Chivo rescues Octavio's wounded dog Cofi from the car crash and nurses him back to health, Cofi does what he is trained to do: not recognizing any difference between the dogs in the fighting ring and his adoptive canine 'family', he proudly kills all the other dogs. Thus, in perhaps the most powerfully emotive moment of the film, el Chivo's loving family is

destroyed when the competitive neoliberal agent enters his space. This moment affectively emphasizes the contrast between el Chivo and neoliberalism, but it also underscores his centrality to it: the reality behind capitalism's fantasies of mobility is an immobile assassin at society's center. Cofi allows el Chivo to recognize that his own work as assassin, places him at the center of neoliberalism's fratricidal culture.

For the viewer, el Chivo's association with the revolutionary left, which takes the form of his canine community in the film's present, his rejection of greed, and his living in a "natural" state, places him in apparent opposition to the neoliberal world order, whose fringes he inhabits. He appears almost as a Derridian specter of the leftist project of the past, haunting the neoliberal present with his near phantasmal anti-capitalist existence on the margins of society (Derrida, 1994). His haunting would demand justice for the violent repression that broke the left in order to make way for the violent neoliberal structural adjustments that turned all market subjects into bare life. But, as we have seen, this potential hauntological reading falls apart when we discover that el Chivo is central to the murderous workings of neoliberalism- that there is no escape or zone of freedom apart from its open prison.

Significantly, el Chivo's moral failings are linked to a form of disability not immediately apparent. In his conversation with the policeman, we discover that his vision is 'blurry', but that he chooses not to wear his old glasses, stating that, 'If God wants me to see blurry, then I'll see blurry'. But what could be a radical denunciation of technology as a symbol of normativity actually stems from cynicism, with his impaired vision serving as a metaphor for capitalism's murderous immorality. Like the other characters' injuries that produces bodily and emotional loss, el Chivo's disability underscores that regardless of which socio-economic class one occupies, all are vulnerable to uncontrollable forces driven by a market that demands a perfect, able body even as incalculable events such as betrayals, acts of violence, or accidents render this ableist fantasy impossible (Poblete, 2004:217)⁹.

Disability studies has forcefully criticized the desire for healing implicit in such representations of disability as tragedy, because it promotes the disappearance of disability, thus devaluing disabled people. The film is certainly open to this problematic reading because of the way it frames Octavio's and Valeria's injuries as personal tragedies. Moreover, the long-standing tradition of associating disabled or radically different bodies with 'social ills' to be healed or eradicated- but never valued- opens these characters to readings in which their bodies would reflect their moral decay. Similarly, their injuries may be interpreted as acts of poetic justice, punishments for their materialism and betrayals¹⁰. In either case, their bodies mark them as agents of degeneration that must be normalized or eliminated.

El Chivo's anomalous body, ultimately, does not break with the problematic tradition of representing visual impairment as a symptom of immorality. The film ends with a rehabilitation of el Chivo's body and his return to his former identity as Martín, a

transformation that links normativity with moral reasoning. He renounces violence and returns to his prosthesis, leaving behind his disabled body: in addition to shaving, cutting his hair and nails, and putting on Gustavo's suit, he puts his glasses back on, thus cementing the film's problematic metaphorical link between normal sight and moral insight. Within the film's logic, the morally blind man disappears to make way for the father who has regained proper perspective of his family's importance¹¹.

Likewise, I argue that even though he resolves to stop acting as a hit man for powerful businessmen, neither abandoning his identity as social outcast nor his rehabilitation, forge a path toward 'healing' neoliberalism. Rather, his return to the family constitutes the final step in his failure to create another world: renouncing his ostensibly revolutionary ideals, he prioritizes his individual drama at the expense of a collective social project, blames himself, and enters into the fantasy of the middle class family by eliminating his markers of difference and using cash to reach out to his daughter. As Kraniauskas (2006:18) argues, 'su giro ético-como la película misma- se apoya...en la monetarización: es una capitalización' (its ethical turn- like the movie itself- relies on... monetarization: it is a capitalization). And yet, the film's ending is open: after promising to return to Maru when he finds the courage to look her in the eye, Martín and Cofi walk across a barren wasteland on the outskirts of the city. This ending, suggests that he recognizes the insufficiency of his initial gesture and that he will seek a more complete solution that might avoid the pitfalls of his prior attempts. Thus, while the film's narrative resolution underscores the tragic impossibility of imagining an escape from neoliberalism's open prison, it can evoke desire for just such an alternative.

Desiring health in a pre-corpse club

The remainder of this article examines the representation of disabled bodies in select films by González Iñárritu to expose the common pattern at work in his treatment of physical and social precariousness in a range of contexts. Set in the United States southwest, intersecting plotlines in *21 Grams* connect characters from different social classes through a deadly car accident. Like *Amores perros*, the different social classes represented, serve to underscore neoliberalism's characteristic inequality that transcends national and cultural borders¹². As in Mexico City, these juxtaposed narratives expose the US middle-class family, with its aspirations to prosperity and wellness, to be unsustainable, destructive fantasies that structure the characters' lives¹³. Critics have noted how the film's structure and themes expose and subvert such colonial legacies as neoliberalism's logic of exchange (McGowan, 2011), Eurocentric identities and their privilege (Winter and Nestler, 2011), and the assumption of linear causality (Azcona Montoliú, 2009). And while Chun's (2004) review of the film identifies the parallel between characters at odds with their bodies and the fractured narrative structure through which disparate social classes are equalized in their suffering, existing scholarship does not satisfactorily account for the film's deployment of the body or the

relationship between disability and the film's critique of violence.

The negative legacy of the colonality of knowledge is best illustrated in this film by the working-class character Jack, and in the tensions that arise between his adherence to fantasies of freedom and his actual precariousness. He is a former prisoner who has 'redeemed' himself from his life as a car thief by serving out his prison sentence, and by converting to evangelical Christianity. Yet, Jack loses his job at the beginning of the film because of his visible tattoos- material remnants of a criminal past that continue to haunt his present. Jack's downward change of fortune exposes the illusory nature of the gospel of prosperity upon which he currently bases his and his family's life. Moreover, when he runs a stop sign and lethally crashes into a man and his two daughters, his life further deteriorates: although there is no evidence that the police will find Jack or that he will be charged and convicted of a crime, his guilt leads him to turn himself in. Jack returns to prison, a move that hinders his ability to lead a normative, family-centered life and thus exposes the illusory nature of both freedom and redemption.

Jack is not the only character whose life is conceptualized as imprisonment. His confinement parallels the way disability is deployed in the film as an imprisonment for the characters whose narratives intersect with his. Most notably, Jack's life becomes enmeshed with Paul's, the transplant recipient of the heart of Michael, the man who Jack killed in the crash. Paul, a mathematician with a failing heart, imagines his current state of awaiting heart failure as a macabre and confining 'pre-corpse club'. His negative view of his health, resonates affectively with a sequence of shots of Christina (Michael's widow) using hard drugs and Paul's ex-wife Mary (whom we later learn is infertile)- a sequence that culminates in a highly symbolic shot of an empty, sterile swimming pool (Chun, 2004:23, Cameron, 2006:74). These sterile, addicted, and sick bodies are presented as tragic imprisonments for the characters that limit them from realizing or sustaining conventional lives and families. For them, there must be a 'culprit', as Paul says of his heart, or as Christina later says of the accident that renders her emotionally 'paralyzed' and an 'amputee'. In the film's visual and discursive economy of the body, disability, illness and even guilt in the case of Jack, are all used metaphorically to evoke pathos and affect (Stewart, 2007:56-7), as they constitute an injustice committed against the characters. Similarly to *Amores perros*, this English-language follow-up's treatment of the body, follows the fraught pattern of representing disability to increase sympathy toward characters at the expense of any positive associations with disabled identities.

The visual and affective framing of the characters' shared condition of precariousness, posits that under neoliberalism, fantasies of privilege, freedom, ability, and family, only conceal a widespread experience of confinement that bridges people of diverse social classes. At the same time, the film's negative way of framing their association as a 'pre-corpse club', perpetuates the logic of ableism by associating freedom with health. The viewer's ostensible

desire for an absence of such disabling environments as the precarious society depicted here—a potentially positive critique of the violence of neoliberalism’s unsustainable contradictions—relies in this film on escape through death. This escape is suggested but blocked twice: first when Paul fails to commit suicide, and later when he fails to murder Jack (at the behest of Christina as revenge for her family’s death). Finally, Paul, who said he would rather die outside the hospital than remain there hooked to machines when his transplant failed, liberates himself by choosing the moment of his death and shooting himself, leaving Jack free to reconcile with his family, and Christina (who discovers she is pregnant), to start a new family. The film’s dénouement, then, suggests a restoration of Jack’s and Christina’s families through the death of the terminally ill character, who effectively serves as, what Mitchell and Snyder (2001) call a ‘narrative prosthesis’, or rather a narrative ‘quick fix’ through a sudden death. Although Paul’s agency is affirmed when he chooses the moment of his death, the film simultaneously erases the terminally ill character. In its place, it restores the desire for healing and wholeness through the news that Christina is pregnant, thus creating a positive association with her anticipated future healing when she will ostensibly get clean for the sake of her pregnancy.

Producing disability in a globalized world

Characters with disabilities feature prominently in González Iñárritu’s subsequent films with intersecting plotlines, *Babel* and *Biutiful*, both of which engage critically with globalization and take up themes from his first films, such as contrasting imaginaries of freedom and open prisons, tensions between freedom and stagnation, and associating freedom with health, and stagnation with disability. At the same time that they include negative associations with disability, their treatments of the body also serve a positive purpose with regard to the films’ ethical interventions. They both evoke a seemingly universal shared precariousness of the body to connect characters from different social classes and ethnicities, the recognition of which, Butler (2004) suggests, is crucial for an ethics of nonviolence.

In the interest of space, I focus here on *Biutiful*, set in cosmopolitan Barcelona and where the economic and social survival of a Spanish family headed by Uxbal, depends on the labor and care provided by various Senegalese and Chinese immigrants¹⁴. The single father Uxbal is presented tragically as a body quickly giving way to prostate cancer, which threatens to destroy his family upon his impending death. His cancer functions as a narrative device that produces sympathetic identification with a mercenary, who, though benevolent, essentially exploits the migrants in order to survive his own precarious conditions: he desperately needs an ample supply of cash to provide for his children in his upcoming absence. Additionally, Uxbal’s narrative shatters the individualist fantasy of capitalism by exposing the reality of interdependency: just as the undocumented migrants depend on him for protection and patronage, he and his children rely first on their Chinese babysitter Liwei, and later on Ige,

the wife of a jailed Senegalese man, for care. That the immigrants' socio-economic position within Spanish society is tied to their ethnic background, makes visible the persistence of coloniality in present-day global networks. Uxbal comes to terms with his death and passes peacefully because he has established connections with others to construct an alternative family. But this interdependent relationship is asymmetrical: his children's survival relies on the exploitation of Ige's economic dependency, and suggests (though it does not confirm) the destruction of her own family (Garrett and Chauca, 2016:211-12).

Similarly to *Amores perros*, *Biutiful* also evokes a repressive past- in this case Francoism- and links it with the present's open prison of a consumerist society lacking historic memory or any related commitment to social justice. The present's illusion of freedom and progress is symbolized through the architecture of a shopping mall and other construction projects being carried out in the film, which would serve the needs of a global wealthy class. This film exposes what these projects typically conceal: the exploitation and repression of global subalterns in an unregulated market dependent upon modern-day slavery¹⁵. The migrants suffer- they die, are jailed, or are deported- economically-motivated accidents of neglect and violent repression, which underscores the precariousness caused by their position in a global division of labor that reproduces colonial systems of exploitation. What unites these precarious lives with the family of Spanish nationals is the absence of a social safety net that could sustain the children in the looming absence of their parents. Uxbal's children's future is uncertain because of his terminal prostate cancer and the fact that their mother Marambra likely lives with bipolar disorder, which hinders her from providing consistent emotional or economical support for them. And while one character contends that the universe will provide for these soon-to-be virtual orphans, Uxbal's pressing concerns suggest knowledge of a contrary reality- that the parents' disabilities signify a tragic inability to protect their children from a cruel, indifferent world lacking life-sustaining conditions. Thus, the film affectively connects the disposable bodies of undocumented Senegalese and Chinese immigrants with the pathologized bodies of Uxbal and Marambra to underscore their shared vulnerability to unfettered capitalism's destructive nature in the absence of life-sustaining conditions.

Much like *Amores perros*'s el Chivo, Marambra presents an opportunity to reflect on *Biutiful*'s treatment of both bodily difference and healing. The film presents her as oscillating between manic states in which she drinks, dances, and parties, and depressive states in which she neglects or mistreats her son Mateo. Through her interactions with Uxbal, the viewer learns that their relationship is characterized by her persistent desire but sustained inability to participate in conventional middle-class family life. When viewed alongside Uxbal's unconventional visions of ghosts, her unconventional perceptions and experiences with her surroundings that stem from her bipolarism could point toward a critique of what Garland-Thomson (1996:8-9) terms the 'normate', or the one who possesses the cultural capital to represent oneself with the authority of a definitive human being. But within the logic of this film's plot, Marambra's mental illness does not serve to recognize and legitimize diverse

ways of experiencing the world; rather, given that her attempts to fulfill a familial fantasy repeatedly push her to dangerous extremes, it reflects the destructive nature of capitalism's fantasies that are incompatible with its precarious social conditions (Garrett and Chauca, 2016:208-11). As noted above, the film's narrative and visual representations position her diverse mental states as transgressions of her maternal responsibilities and impediments to fulfilling the family fantasy. After taking her daughter Ana on a trip and leaving her son Mateo at home alone as a wildly disproportionate punishment for some alleged offense (which the viewer does not see but only learns of when Uxbal hears Mateo's and Marambra's divergent accounts), Marambra submits to some sort of rehabilitation- normalization- at a mental health clinic. She enters the clinic with the expectation of being able to return, healed, to her role as mother. Thus, the film sustains both the fantasy of the family that it effectively critiques as producing her imbalance, and the ableism that demands the ever-elusive, ultimately inexistent, normativity. As with *el Chivo* in *Amores perros*, while this film's particular representation of bipolarity critiques capitalism's destructive reaches within the open prison of the characters' daily lives, her attempt at normalization ultimately reinforces its impossible ableist demands.

Embracing disability?

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on the 2015 English-language film *Birdman*, for which González Iñárritu and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki earned a myriad of awards in the United States and abroad, further confirming the importance of Mexican filmmakers on the international scene (Tierney, 2018). This linear narrative focused on just one protagonist (Riggan Thomson), has a much more playful treatment of mental illness than *Beautiful*. Riggan is haunted by his past commercial successes as the film superhero 'Birdman' and tormented by his purported artistic failure. The narrative centers on his schizophrenia, which is presented through false clues of magical realism. While the opening scene, in which Riggan is shown levitating, suggests that the viewer is entering a version of reality where magic is a common part of everyday life, she soon discovers that this is, rather, a literal depiction of Riggan's unique view of his reality caused by mental illness. He is apparently a highly-functioning schizophrenic who hears- and increasingly obeys- the voice of the character Birdman, an alter-ego that steadily pushes Riggan toward suicide. His apparent super-powers are later revealed as a symptom of the incompatibility of his desires for artistic transcendence with spectacle culture. The other characters, actors in his Broadway production, are also presented as victims of the pressures of fame, the culture of spectacle, and social media. Their demands lead directly to Riggan's daughter's drug addiction, as well as to the insecurities and impotence of various co-stars. Each character desperately attempts to transcend his or her existential insignificance through fame or limit experiences, but their desires destroy them emotionally, leaving them empty and alone.

At the end of the film, Riggan takes two dramatic actions to attempt to escape this trap, first shooting himself in the nose on the play's opening night (another failed suicide attempt), and then jumping out of his hospital window. Ironically, it is when he gives in to Birdman's suicidal directives that he is both freed (through death) and reconciled with his daughter Sam, while also achieving the desired transcendence through radical art. Like González Iñárritu's previous films, and as Middents (2017) argues in his video essay comparing *Birdman* to Julio Cortázar's novel *Rayuela*, the ending remains open to contradictory interpretations. Throughout the film, the characters' vulnerable bodies are certainly employed as symptoms of the destructive nature of what Sam describes as 'an entire world out there where people fight to be relevant every single day'. At the same time, it is her character- along with the film's experimentation with form- that create the film's ambiguity, as Middents (2017) maintains:

Riggan is seen going out onto the balcony of his hospital room, but we do not see him fall – and, instead, his daughter Sam (Emma Stone) first looks down in horror, then slowly looks up into the clouds with joyful wonder. Towards the end of a film that has refused to use the most basic element of cinematic grammar [the cut], it finally cuts to black and the credits begin — but even then, we hear Sam offer up an incredulous laugh. Can we believe these characters have literally risen above in the air, that they have reached the Cortazarian “heaven”? Do they jump– or do we believe the unbelievable, that they can stay in a limbo transfixed by fiction?

While Middents does not discuss the implications of Sam's laughter for Riggan's schizophrenia, I argue that it has the disruptive potential to unsettle the film's previous treatment of disability, thus leaving open a more generous reading of Riggan's escape through death. It lends a light tone to the weighty theme of suicide, and refuses to close off the affective potential for desiring a world otherwise. As the film loops back to the suggestion that Birdman's actor really can fly, it restores the possibility of reading the film through the codes of magical realism. Envisioning the conditions of possibility for desiring and embracing different ways of being in the world, may require a bit of magical thinking, but is this not, after all, art's greatest power? The last shot, which focuses on Sam's wondrous gaze turned toward the sky, potentially evokes a desire to see the world through her eyes (a desire expressed previously by Edward Norton's character)- wherein a perceived weakness constitutes power¹⁶.

Conclusions

I find the cinema of Alejandro González Iñárritu a crucial example of the conflicts and tensions that arise from using disability or injured bodies in ostensibly progressive critiques of global capitalism and the nefarious effects of neoliberalism in everyday life across diverse

social realms. Narrative resolutions that erase the characters who do not adhere to the normate, ultimately function as narrative prostheses, even after providing an important opportunity to critique the precariousness of contemporary life that produces or exacerbates disability. The filmic narratives discussed here evoke powerful desires for an escape from neoliberalism's open prison and its violent insecurity that produces fractured bodies and lives. Although disability is portrayed as so widespread that it ceases to be seen as an exception to some able-bodied norm, it is treated as a tragedy to be avoided because of the way it keeps the characters outside of the upward fantasy of progress. Rather than combating the demand for the normate, these portrayals likely reinforce desires for ability in order to uphold fantasies of mobility, progress, and freedom. Nevertheless, such desires are always unsatisfactory: they arise after sustained attempts to present humanity as connected through the shared precariousness of the body as a way of making bodies-and lives- matter equally, rather than assuming that some lives are more worthy of protection than others. The question remains whether such contradictory effects of representing bodies in this way can serve a decolonial project. What is certain is that these contradictory strains within González Iñárritu's films illustrate the convergences and divergences between the decolonial and disability studies projects. In other words, it is quite possible, and in fact common, to continue utilizing ableist ideologies in order to attempt a critique of the coloniality of knowledge. More careful attention to the way that bodies are utilized, might open up a path for projects that would avoid this trap and thus bolster an otherwise powerfully ethical cinematic project.

Notes

¹ For an excellent reflection on affect in Latin American cultural studies, see del Sarto (2012). For an overview of affect specifically in Latin American cinema studies, see Venkatesh and Caña Jiménez (2016). Attention to a film's affective register allows the critic to consider sensorial dimensions and the desires they may produce, which are not always accounted for when focusing solely on representation or formal aspects.

² See, for example, the way the concept of intersectionality laid out by Crenshaw (1991), is taken up in Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009:61).

³ Although the important Black Lives Matter movement has recently brought this issue out of academic debates and catapulted it into mainstream cultural discourse in the United States, the disparity between which lives are considered worthy of life-sustaining conditions, has long been central to theories of postcolonialism, coloniality, and biopolitics (see particularly Medovoi, 2007; and Heron, 2008).

⁴ My view of the ethical potential of texts (including literature, essay, theater, and film) to intervene in reality by shaping cultural frames is informed by the works of Taylor (1997), Rivera Garza (2015; especially 'Seguir escribiendo'), and more recently Draper (2013).

⁵ Mignolo (2007:43) posits that ‘the rhetoric of modernity (salvation, newness, progress, development) went hand in hand with the logic of coloniality’. Hence, such formal disruptions of modernity may be considered as decolonial gestures. González Iñárritu’s signature visual strategies include arresting the supposed forward motion of progress, contrasting immobility and stasis with signs of upward mobility, and halting local and global bodies from freely circulating through tragic accidents.

⁶ While it is beyond the scope of this article to demonstrate this assertion, these examples are exemplary of a significant trend in Latin American cinema that merits further attention.

⁷ For a detailed history of its production, distribution, marketing campaign, and reception, see Smith (2003).

⁸ Octavio and Valeria both become disabled in the crash, and for each, the change of bodily ability is directly linked to a violent change of financial and emotional fortune. Neoliberalism’s fantasy of upward mobility contrasts starkly with their tragic dénouements, which make visible and visceral the insecurity of neoliberal life and evoke the conspicuous absence of any collective social project or social safety net. The images of their injured bodies are thus a sobering reminder of the shared human condition of extreme precarity in a violent, insecure world.

⁹ For discussions of Valeria’s body and (de-)modernity, see Herlinghaus (2009) and Sánchez (2010). For a poignant analysis of the fantasy of mobility, collisions, and the characters’ final outcome of stasis, see Beckman’s (2008) study of photography and cinema in the film. Her gendered reading of misogyny and the female body in visual images is especially insightful.

¹⁰ See, for example, Sánchez-Prado (2006), who criticizes the film’s conservative defense of the family by punishing those guilty of its betrayal.

¹¹ Reber (2010:292) has analyzed this sequence in detail, concluding that ‘[t]he revolutionary does not give up his ideals; he redirects them into a project of love [which] has the potential to cure the rest of the world sick with neoliberalism around him through the restoration of generational striations to the social fabric, striations linked by filial love and no longer fatally divided by blood money’. But she fails to address the contradiction between how the film presents el Chivo’s past and how he articulates it in his message to Maru, nor does she problematize the violence implied in the film’s metaphoric use of sickness and healing.

¹² For a detailed comparison of *Amores perros* and *21 Grams*, which situates them in a dialogue between Mexican and American Independent Cinema, see Tierney (2009).

¹³ In his analysis of melodrama in *21 Grams*, Stewart (2007:57) notes that ‘the film uses the dinner table to spoil a fantasy of familialism...in a long line of volatile encounters between bourgeois codes and troubled narcissistic authority’.

¹⁴ The protagonist’s family is assumed to be of Spanish, possibly Basque, origin, thus evoking a traditional Spain that contrasts to the relative newcomers from Africa and China. Ethnic and national differences are directly tied to differentiated positions within the international division of labor condensed here in one cosmopolitan location.

¹⁵ See Fraser's (2012:29) insightful study of urban space in the film. He highlights its 'emphasis on the human relationships behind the shimmering myth of the Barcelona model-human relationships that, of course, through labour, have made that very myth possible'.

¹⁶ Sam suggests this when she creates her father's social media accounts and informs him that the 350,000 views of him parading down the street in nothing but his briefs constitutes power.

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