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Border, Space and the Body in the Films *Biutiful* and *Victoria*

The border is a rich and extensively problematized notion. It is, at the same time, both linear and non-linear, visible and invisible, a place and a metaphor. From Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La frontera*, (1987) to more recent studies such as Schimanski and Wolfe's *Border aesthetics* (2019), the concept of the border has been subject to fruitful theoretical discussion and has served as a tool to explore different artistic manifestations. In this text I adopt a wide and flexible approach to the notion of the border, an approach that, rather than setting limits, will open the door to our study of two films, *Biutiful* (2010) directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and *Victoria* (2015) directed by Sebastian Schipper. These two films share a connection to the Spanish-speaking world and both, though quite differently, represent migration. *Biutiful* tells the story of Uxbal, an ex-husband, father and former drug addict who lives in Barcelona and is dying of cancer. Uxbal, who lives with his two children, earns his living as the contact between clandestine Chinese manufacturers and Senegalese migrants, who sell black market goods illegally on the streets. *Victoria*, on the other hand, follows the encounter between Victoria, a young Spanish woman living in Berlin, and four young men: Sonne, Boxer, Blinker and Fuss. The film starts with a chance late-night encounter where the characters get to know each other, but quickly evolves into an adrenaline rush when Victoria is unexpectedly dragged into robbing a bank and ends up fleeing from a shooting police patrol. At the end of the film Victoria watches Sonne die, takes the bag with the money they have just stolen and leaves the hotel where they were hiding, walking away from the camera that has been following her throughout the film in one non-stop long take.

This chapter will carry out a comparative analysis of these two films. Taken together, these films are very different in their use of genre, time, photography and script. They are different too in their portrayal of migration. Whereas *Biutiful*, typically, focuses on Uxbal and portrays the migrant experience through its contact with this Spanish protagonist, *Victoria* puts

the migrant Victoria herself, at the center of its action. The type of migration the two films represent is also different, *Biutiful* conveying a non-European and *Victoria* a European migrant experience. Despite their differences, *Biutiful* and *Victoria* share some common traits that will form the basis for the following discussion and which have served as the criteria for our choice of material. Both depict the migrant experience. Both deploy subterranean and urban space, limbo and the body as key components and generators of meaning. Finally, both have a complexity that invites reflection, and largely avoids the victimizing and stereotypical one-sided images of the Other.

The main aim of this chapter will be to study the role of the body and space, more specifically subterranean and limbic spaces, as carriers of metaphorical meanings linked to the notion of the border and migration in the two films. Methodologically, the analysis will rely on concepts related to subterranean space, to limbo, to border aesthetics and to metaphor. In this text I will combine these tools and generate an analysis that derives from the areas where they inevitably and fruitfully merge and entwine. As we will see, both the body and limbo can be seen as both a space and a border. The metaphorical meanings attached to these terms will help us attain a better understanding of the portrayal of migration in these films.

Urban Spaces: the Subterranean, Limbo and the Border

The surface of the earth can be seen as a border between two spheres: the underground and the aboveground. In her study *Rethinking Urban Space in Contemporary British Writing*, Holly Prescott draws attention to a variety of studies on urban subterranean space in literature. Of special interest to this study is David Pike's mention of the rich metaphorical meanings accumulated through time and unescapably associated to any represented underground spaces. As Pike puts it, a 'primary set of associations persist from the medieval and early modern imagination of the underground' (2005: 5), 'an unimaginably rich, albeit inchoate and

intoxicating, brew of other times, places and modes of being in the worlds' (2005: 197). In a similar way, Rachel Falconer refers to 'this mixed inheritance of views about infernal journeys from Dante, Greek and Roman myth, Judeo-Christian theology, Freud's theory of the unconscious and Marx's theory of economic base and superstructure' (2007:3). The underground is thus unavoidably attached to a series of meanings that originate in the long tradition of depictions of the subterranean and its connection, for example to death, suffering, a quest or the primitive.

A series of dualities can be found in connection to subterranean space. One of them is Pike's reflection that underground spaces have been integrated into urban life, through the construction, for instance, of underground transportation, while at the same time functioning as a place for the 'unfit' (2005: 7), for 'the trash heap of the world above, the place to which everyone, everything and every place posing a problem or no longer useful is relegated' (2005: 5). Prescott, in her analysis of Tobias Hill's *Underground*, connects Pike's idea to the notion of the migrant:

Hill presents a subterranean London which yokes together both the capitalist-driven city-space with the strange, unsettling and uncontainable underground spaces home to those who have fallen into a life outside of the aboveground society ... Casimir realizes that London's Underground is not only a source of labour and livelihood for himself, but also for countless other immigrants like himself.

(Prescott 2011: 168)

This association of the migrant to the underground, then, can be seen, not as a passing reference or as specific to the films analyzed here, but as a much more inherent phenomenon that connects the subterranean to the unwanted, the outcast and the exiled as a means of hiding away and thus blocking visibility and contact.

Another duality relevant to this study is the one that connects subterranean spaces to the material as well as the fantastic. We have seen how the subterranean can be seen as integrated into the urban capitalistic system and in that sense it serves a series of specific functions linked to production and materiality, such as warehouses and storage, the transport of goods or persons, and the removal or dumping of non-productive assets such as the dead or the subversive. On the other hand, several theorists point out that there is a strong connection between the subterranean and the fantastic or supernatural (Fitting 2004: 7; Pike 2005: 11; Falconer 2007: 89). This will be specially relevant to our analysis of *Beautiful* where, in a cellar where a number of migrants died, their ghosts appear floating on the ceiling.

Rachel Falconer, in her study of *descent narratives*, uses the term ‘katabatic imagination’ (2007: 2), from the Greek *katabasis* (‘going down’), to refer to the long tradition of narratives about heroes’ descent to the underworld that includes, for instance, Orpheus, Homer’s Odysseus or Virgil’s Aeneas (2007: 2). As Graham Holderness points out, these classical descent narratives ‘are either for the purpose of seeking information, or with the intention of delivering one of the dead from bondage in the underworld’ (Holderness 2007: 279). Of special interest to this study is Falconer’s observations on the transformative effect of descent on the hero, and the internal process that descent narratives imply, a process of ‘destruction and rebirth of the self through an encounter with the absolute Other’ (2007: 1). The underground is thus intrinsically attached to the notion of descent and to the construction of the self through the journey into it. The idea of travel and transformation by moving from one context to another adds another dimension to the concept or border conveyed in these films.

A close neighbor to the notion of the underground is limbo, which comes from the Latin *limbus*, meaning border or edge. In Early Christianity, limbo was a place at the edge of Hell that contained innocent souls excluded from heaven (Planells 1986: 600). Limbo is thus connected to the idea of the subterranean, as well as the border, and has long been used to

represent a place for waiting and a place whose main characteristic is that of being on hold or suspended (Mora 2014: 10). In that sense, limbo conveys some of the central features of the migrant experience and the study of waiting in border studies¹. Another aspect of limbo that will be relevant to this study is its connection to the dead, the ghostly, and life after death. Mora writes that limbo functions as a ‘narrative *space-time*, a place that needn’t be understood in a biblical way, but rather in a fantastic or, if you prefer, experimental way’ (Mora 2014: 11, my translation). Both the subterranean and limbo thus share this connection to the fantastic and its potential as a carrier of rich metaphoric meaning. Pike writes that the underground ‘is a spatial metaphor as well as a material space of difference’ (2005: 16) and Mora describes how limbo can be used as a ‘political metaphor for displaced migrants’ (Mora 2014: 9, my translation). Visual metaphors, as relevant as they are to filmic studies, are not the only way to interpret the films analysed here. This article will also use metaphor in a wider, more inclusive, and also less film-specific, way, following the cognitive theory of metaphor articulated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Joseph Grady’s notions of ‘correlation’ and ‘resemblance’ (1999) will also be used as a basis for this approach to metaphor.

As to corporality, this article understands the body as a space involved in a series of phenomena associated with migration. As Alba Marcé García writes in her study about *Biutiful*, the subaltern body is ‘a space that serves as a reflection of the systemic inequalities of the global economy present in Barcelona’s urban landscape’ (2018: 85, my translation).

Cellars and discos: the multifarious underground

In the film *Biutiful* there is a varied and constant representation of the migrant. Some of the main characters are Chinese migrants, both empowered, such as Hai, the Chinese boss at the clandestine bag factory, and deprived, such as the girl Li who works for Hai during the day but at night is locked up in a cellar under the factory, sleeping on a mattress on the bare floor,

together with the other Chinese workers. The other migrant group represented in *Biutiful* is Senegalese, whose members, on the shopping streets of Barcelona, sell the products illegally manufactured by the Chinese. The link between these two groups is Uxbal. Though seemingly native, Uxbal has several personal links to migration. His father fled Spain and died in Mexico before he was born. Uxbal does not speak Catalan so it seems likely that he was born outside Catalonia and later migrated there from some other part of Spain and was a *charnegos* as they are colloquially called in Catalonia (del Mar Azcona 2015: 8; DiFrancesco 2015: 32)². His name, Uxbal, though it sounds Basque, was invented by the director, who was inspired by the name of a street in Mexico called Uxmal (DiFrancesco 2015: 36). As del Mar Azcona puts it, 'Emigration, both within Spain and from Spain to Mexico, is part of Uxbal's background, which brings his story close to those of the immigrants he comes across in the film even if he is now on the 'other side' of the migratory movements' (2015: 8).

Biutiful's depiction of the exploitation, misery and exclusion attached to migrant experience is mirrored in its use of space. There is a setting in the film that sticks out in this respect and that is the cellar where the Chinese workers sleep. This space serves as a revealer and a container of the human price paid to maintain the existing economic system. The door of the cellar is a border between wealth and deprivation and at the same time serves as a link between different worlds. As Prescott writes, the underworld 'at the same time mirrors yet is also 'other' than the aboveground city' (2011: 145). The fake bags produced in the factory, located in some industrial area on the outskirts of Barcelona, are cheap copies, easily damaged and not allowed in the city center. They can be seen as reflections of the clandestine workers, themselves also illegal and vulnerable. In a sense, however, these copies are a distorted reflection of the legitimate economic activity which takes place aboveground, a tension which is highlighted in the film when the Senegalese are shown selling the fake bags against the

background of the luxury boutiques in one of Barcelona's main shopping streets just some minutes before being hit by a brutal police raid.

Uxbal has a dual role in this exploitation system: though aware of the enslavement of the workers, he takes his share of the profits. At the same time, seeing the poverty around him he tries to help by installing gas heaters in the cellar for the winter. His decision to buy the cheapest heaters ends up killing the workers, their dead bodies later found scattered on the floor of the cellar, asphyxiated by a gas leak. When Uxbal, who has the ability to see and communicate with the dead, descends into the cellar, he can hear the high-pitched hum blending with the sound of anguished, unintelligible voices. Looking up at the ceiling we see, together with Uxbal, the ghosts of the workers in painful, petrified postures, looking down on him. The workers unfold into two spheres, becoming both visible and invisible, real and fantastic, quiet and loud, dead and living. The cellar in this scene works as a metaphor for hell and its various meanings. In a sense, this subterranean space has been a kind of a living hell, a place for enslavement and deprivation. It stands both as a material hell and a fantastic hell, a place for suffering and exclusion both in life and death. It is revealing for our study of the subterranean that, after his shocked and painful discovery of the cellar accident, Uxbal leaves the factory and, for the first and only time in the film, finds himself on a high, outdoor, urban location - a bridge - as if, through vertical ascent he could try and flee the horror he has just witnessed.

Uxbal's abilities to communicate with the dead and help them on their way is shown in an earlier scene where Uxbal, in his role as a medium, is called to a funeral wake. He enters a church and descends some stairs into a room where the bodies of three children are laid out. Uxbal sits there alone, listening to the voice of one of the children, who then appears as a ghost sitting on a chair in the background. As Kathleen Honora Connolly points out, Uxbal transgresses dualities 'in his various roles as a medium and intermediary, shuffling between spheres and crossing the borders between those living in the shadows, and those in the light'

(2015: 550). In this sense, border crossing processes in the film take place in different spheres; they are linked to the migration of bodies and also of souls.

Despite the cellar, the funeral wake and some short scenes in the subway, *Biutiful* is mostly set aboveground. That said, many of these scenes have a cave-like feeling. This could be linked to Pike's notion of the 'new underground' which refers to a place that is 'covered, windowless, or otherwise able to give the impression of being subterranean no matter where it may actually be located' (2005: 3). Pike enumerates a series of examples such as the factory, the prison cell or the bunker. Some of the locations in *Biutiful* have this 'impression of being subterranean', such as the shacks where the Senegalese dwell, the morgue where Uxbal sees the exhumated body of his father, the Chinese factory or the church. The choice of color in these scenes is often quite monochrome, with yellowish or brownish dirty walls. Uxbal's home is in this sense a hybrid. In many scenes, his flat appears dark at night and, instead of windows, we can see the reflections from his mirrors, so that this multiplication of the interior replaces the outside world and creates an underworld atmosphere. At other times his home is profusely illuminated by sunlight coming from different windows. This functions as a marker of the room's aboveground position and at the same time serves as a visual metaphor for joy and hope. A clear example of this is the arrival of the ex-wife Marambra at Uxbal's home. The scene where she eats and chatters happily with her children is set in Uxbal's otherwise gloomy dining room, but now it is daylight and the sun illuminates the scene through two windows, one at the back of the scene and one on the side. In a previous night time scene, this same room appears with gloomy tones and without Marambra, a character who, though mentally unstable, characterizes a search for happiness. Another female character bringing light to Uxbal is Ige, the Senegalese woman he welcomes into his home and who ends up taking care of him when he is near to death. In several occasions towards the end of the film, she comes into his dark bedroom and opens the window blinds to let in some light in and wake him up. The whole

movie can be seen as a movement towards death, and at the same time towards rebirth or life after death. This is depicted in the first and last scenes of the film that show Uxbal, once he has died, meeting his father, also dead, in a foggy forest. I will come back to this scene when dealing with limbo.

Another character that undergoes a rebirth of the self is Victoria, the main character in Schipper's *Victoria*. The film starts in a subterranean disco, where the protagonist dances alone in a kind of trance. The disco appears as a place of freedom, joy and leisure but soon this border between underground and aboveground comes to serve as a barrier that blocks the entrance of the four male protagonists to the film: Sonne, Boxer, Blinker and Fuss. Just as Victoria approaches the stairs on her way out of the disco, we see how these four young men are denied entrance to the club by some security guards. The stairs of this cellar thus serve as a kind of border that separates the two groups. The young men are not allowed in, ostensibly because they could not pay the cover charge but later on the words of the bouncer - 'Det laden ist nichts für euch' (1:31:40) – suggest there might be other reasons behind their refusal. This scene thus deploys a contrary phenomenon to the one displayed in *Beautiful*, where the 'trash', as represented by these young men, and which Pike associates with the subterranean, is here kept out of it.

These four young men speak perfect German and yet their look, their names and the words of the security guards create a border around them and raise doubts about their origins. Victoria's remark - 'You don't seem German at all' (0:33:27) - is telling. Aware of this, once out of the disco Sonne tells Victoria: 'We are real Berlin guys ... real Berlin is on the streets' (0:10:57). These words have a double meaning. On the one hand, Sonne is asserting his identity as Berlin-born, while on the other hand, he is confirming his adscription to Berlin's exterior sphere, the street or the outdoors, and claiming legitimacy and authenticity for it, as opposed to the indoor sphere of the office, shop or government that is so often associated with

consumption, bureaucracy and power. He does not, however, say that he is German, later on seemingly scorning German conventions when, in a lift with Victoria, he jokes about German people not talking in lifts. The film creates a confusion that blurs the concept of the migrant and the Other. Even if the geographic displacement makes Victoria the main migrant in this film, the four young men, also excluded and aware of their difference, represent a type of otherness that transcends nationality and is associated with unclear socio-economic factors.

Victoria has two key subterranean locations and their functions are very different. We have already seen how the action of the film starts in a disco that serves as a border blocking certain individuals from a space for leisure consumption. In this sense, the disco is a typical non-place, following Marc Augé's definition of 'spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure)' (Augé 1995: 94). The other subterranean space is the garage where Victoria and the four young men meet the criminal gang that will force them to rob a bank. These two places are a good illustration of the duality highlighted by Pike, according to which subterranean spaces often operate as integrated into the capitalistic urban aboveground, but at the same time serving as a hideout for subversive activities (Pike 2005: 19). When the five characters in *Victoria* drive their car into the garage, they are not fully aware of what is waiting for them. From behind the wheel, Victoria can see bulky men armed with machine guns. There ensues a profuse display of violence and in this new order, where guns and threats are the norm, the young protagonists are powerless. The leader of the gang demands a sum of money as payment for a favor done for Boxer during his time in jail. If they refuse to rob the bank he will keep Victoria until Boxer repays the money. After this, the young men, forced to oblige, rehearse the robbery under the supervision of the gang leader. In a movement of both space and time, the underground setting of the garage becomes a reflection of the future aboveground setting of the bank and the action that takes place below earth mirrors what will happen later on the surface. Both spaces, the bank and the garage, display a focus on money.

Whereas the bank is a part and instrument of the capitalist system, the garage is trying, by means of violence, to break the rules that dictate access to wealth.

This descent into the garage is a turning point in the film that now shifts from a lighthearted relationship story into a frantic action drama. The action of the film spirals upward, beginning with the drugging and arming of the protagonists and climaxing with the death of Sonne after being shot by the police towards the end of the film. After her descent into hell in the garage, Victoria undergoes what Falconer calls a ‘transformative passage, the destruction and rebirth of the self’ often associated with descent narratives (2007: 1). The garage is, in this sense, a key to Victoria’s transformative passage. As Prescott points out in her analysis of three literary portrayals of subterranean London, ‘the space beneath the city intervenes and disrupts all three protagonists’ attempts to master’ the capital (Prescott 2011: 159). Something similar happens to Victoria when she is thrown into this quest. Her attempts to create a new life for herself are quickly jeopardized, but instead of becoming a victim, Victoria takes control in a way that she has not quite shown at the beginning of the film, where she mostly seems to follow the young men in their wandering around the city of Berlin. In this sense, Victoria’s contact with the underground, though traumatizing, forces her into action and has an empowering effect. Victoria is the one to encourage the others to complete their mission. She is the one who drives the car, who devises the plan to kidnap a baby in order to escape the police, and who finds a hotel room where she can hide after the robbery with the badly hurt Sonne. Once Sonne dies, after a painful scene of mourning, it is Victoria who seems to ascend from the ashes. In the final scene she walks out into the daylight street and finally gains her freedom, leaving the camera behind as she moves away from the viewer.

In a key scene in the film Victoria plays for Sonne a classical piece on a piano in the café where she works. It is just the two of them. She plays intensely and Sonne looks both touched and surprised by Victoria skillful and self-absorbed performance, which seems to have

transported her to her past in Spain where, as she tells Sonne, in her fruitless quest to become a professional pianist, she put aside friends and leisure. Victoria's journey to Berlin can easily be seen as an escape from the past and, in a sense, her sadness after playing shows both a sorrow for her failure and an identity crisis. Space and subjectivity thus run parallel paths in *Victoria*, as the protagonist's search for a new identity accompanies a change of space, the physical journey mirroring an internal one.

Bodies in limbo or the limbo of the bodies

There are two only scenes in *Biutiful* shot outside the city. The first one, already mentioned, is the scene where Uxbal and his father meet in a forest, an identical scene that is shown at the beginning and end of the film. The other one shows the corpses of the dead Chinese workers, who, after dying in the cellar, have been thrown out at sea and are now floating by the shore. The scene in the forest, where Uxbal meets his dead father, stands out for the use it makes of light and color. Whereas most scenes in the film are both dark and full of different elements in the background, the forest is covered with snow and fog. The white hue is only broken by some birch tree trunks, also partially white. The only people in this forest are Uxbal and his father. Uxbal, who throughout the film appears as a complex and somewhat tormented figure, seems happy and full of expectation in his encounter with his father, their looks being as expressive as their words. This scene breaks the rules of time and space because the father is significantly younger than the son. Time has stood still for him, his body remaining as young as it was when he died after fleeing to Mexico after the Spanish Civil War. This scene represents a limbo in time as well as a spatial limbo. The whiteness and the fog blur the view, a sense accentuated by the position of the camera that focuses on close-ups. We know that the characters are in a forest because we can see some tree trunks behind them, but the camera avoids showing what is above them (there is no sight of branches or leaves) and the fog makes it difficult to see more than a

few meters. Nature is in this scene naked and bare, composed only of simple elements. Uxbal's father stresses this feeling when he says that before in this space there was not anything, only salted water: 'Aquí antes no había nada, solo agua, salada' (0:03:17 and 2:10:46). These words, and a short tale that the father later tells, is replicated in the scene towards the end of the film, where Uxbal is lying in bed, dying, and talking to his daughter. Right before that, we can see how Uxbal's body starts to multiply, mirroring itself in different places throughout the house: we see him in a mirror in the bathroom, walking behind himself, and stuck on the ceiling (just as the Chinese workers had done before). At the end of this scene, the transition from life to death is represented by the shift in the take that moves from filming the bed, where Uxbal is lying beside his daughter, to filming its reflection in a mirror, where we can see both Uxbal's dead body lying in bed and his ghost sitting next to it on a chair. Even if both bodies look still, Uxbal's voice talking to his daughter can still be heard. The body of Uxbal is thus reflected and multiplied, both visible and invisible, muted and audible. In this sense, what can be seen as a mere mirage devoid of materiality, adopts bodily characteristics and the ability to make sound and communicate. Similarly, the souls of Uxbal and his father in the forest show corporality. They look cold, slightly hunched in their coats, and they breathe out foggy air and light a cigarette. At the end of this scene, Uxbal asks his father what there is beyond this place, '¿Qué hay?' (2:11:58). His questions, posed as the film closes, and remaining unanswered, stress the transitional function of this forest, its role as a limbo and border between the material life and another place that awaits.

The sea is a space between countries, an element that enables the transportation from one nation to another and at the same time blocks such access and leads to death. In the film, Uxbal tells the story of his father's journey across the sea to Mexico and how it soon ended with his death by pneumonia. The sea is even more strongly linked to death and migration in the scene when the Chinese corpses are seen floating near the beach, some of them lying on the sand.

From the beginning, the idea of throwing the bodies into the sea aimed to erase the physical bodies of the dead workers. However, this had the opposite effect. The invisible is finally made visible in several ways: the dead bodies hidden in the cellar, by rising to the surface and the media attention this attracts, makes visible the otherwise invisible enslavement of these workers.

The connection between the subterranean and the limbic is seen in the scene of the cellar, a scene with metaphorical implications. The bodies trapped on the ceiling, unable to find a way out, in a limbo between life and death, between the visible and the invisible, is a metaphor of the social limbo where the Chinese workers have lived, out of sight, caught in the hands of exploitation, waiting in vain for a better life. Vicente Luis Mora points out the link not only between limbo and waiting but also between limbo and in-betweenness when he writes: 'In as much as a place for waiting, limbo and purgatory are spaces between spaces, symbolic spaces whose essential characteristic is that of being in suspense' (2014: 10, my translation). The Chinese workers display this limbic situation in a circular movement that passes through several liminal spaces: from the cellar (between earth and ground) where they are metaphorically buried alive, to the sea (between continents), then to the shore (between sea and land) and finally back to the subterranean, where they are most likely to be buried. In this journey, their identity, already blurred by the fact that they live clandestinely in Spain and have no residence permit, is definitely erased, as their lifeless unidentified bodies are found floating on the sea.

A religious reading could show how Uxbal, partly responsible for the enslavement of the workers, is a sinner who enters his own purgatory once he discovers that he has terminal cancer. He tries to make things right, both by giving his ex-wife Marambra a second chance and by buying the gas heaters, but he only makes things worse. After the death of the Chinese workers, when Bea, Uxbal's friend and medium, tells him to search for them and ask for their forgiveness, she is suggesting that he make contact with an alternative space-time construction,

a limbo, so he can ask for a double forgiveness, both for the life conditions in which he has been an accomplice and for his involuntary role in causing their deaths. Towards the end of the film, the message is more hopeful. Uxbal helps Ige, a homeless Senegalese woman and her baby find a home, a generosity that gets returned to him when, after his death, she stays at his home to take care of his children.

Just as in *Beautiful*, the first scene in *Victoria* sticks out in its use of sound and image. The film opens with loud techno beats and a blurred image that changes shape until it slowly becomes Victoria and the movements of her head to the music. This opening scene displays an audio-visual limbo, a kind of suspense as both speech and sight are rubbed out. However, more than limbic spaces, what is found in *Victoria* are limbic experiences. Another scene where music is played in the film, other than the music that is added in post-production, is the one mentioned earlier where Victoria plays the piano for Sonne. In a sense, this is a limbic scene where the piano puts time and space on hold and the action in suspense. When she plays the piano, Victoria transforms herself, leaves her playful and lighthearted attitude aside and becomes both absorbed and emotionally distressed by the act of playing. Even though she is physically in the café with Sonne, her mind has crossed a border and placed her on an inward journey to her past in Spain, a past that she describes in terms of isolation, failure and futile competition. The body has a key role in the transmission of this limbic experience. Her facial and bodily expressions allow us to realize that something is happening in Victoria's mind while she is playing. Like the dying characters in *Beautiful*, Victoria unfolds into two different dimensions: she is present in the café with Sonne but her mind has travelled somewhere else. Victoria's body thus serves as a reflection of her inward journey and the feelings this journey has aroused. Johan Schimanski (2006: 42) questions the assumption that a border-crosser has to be 'an individual human subject' and argues that border-crossing is not compulsorily attached to the concept of a subject and can be done by a group or an object. In *Victoria* what the piano

scene shows is how the border-crossing agent is a portion, and not the whole, of the subject. A part of Victoria is a border-crosser: while her body exists in this Berlin café, her mind is taking in an active journey towards some kind of limbo, a place beyond space-time, an internal journey into memory that displaces a part of her into a parallel imaginary sphere. The connection of this limbo with the underworld becomes apparent when Victoria tells Sonne that she is playing Mephisto's Waltz, a piece about the 'devil' as Sonne says, which makes her inward journey a katabatic experience as well.

When she finishes playing, her body becomes once again the vessel of meaning about her border-crossing. Her eyes are far away, not looking at Sonne, nor at the piano, but still trapped in the limbo she is experiencing. Her tearful expression conveys her sorrow both for her strenuous past and for something, a space and a time, that has been lost. In these two limbic scenes, the one at the disco and the one with the piano, there is a communication between three elements: speech, music and the body. In the film as a whole there is a running dialogue but in both of these scenes, speech is silenced by music. When this happens, the body takes over, interacting with the music in both a more passive (as in dancing) and in a more performative (as in playing) way. In both scenes, the lack of speech implies an isolation, and Victoria, even if in the company of others, appears utterly remote.

In a sense, both the film as a whole and the quest that the five characters undergo are limbic experiences. The film is made from one single take with no cuts whatsoever. The camera follows Victoria from the beginning, where her image is gradually unblurred, to the end. The film thus creates a border around Victoria, a barrier that keeps all of the elements that closely surround her in, and excludes everything else. This bubble, where Victoria is trapped, is only compromised at the end of the film, where Victoria, for the first time, moves away from the camera and walks into the city. The whole robbery quest is, as well, a kind of limbo that puts the action in suspense. The first part of the film shows five young people in a happy mood,

flirting and getting to know each other, wandering around the city until interrupted by Boxer's plea for help. Just as Uxbal in *Beautiful* has to redeem his sins, Boxer in *Victoria* has a past to come to terms with. After Boxer receives the phone call demanding that he come to the garage with a car and four companions, the action is put on hold. Victoria, who just shortly before was planning to go leave, Sonne, who was fully occupied in flirting with Victoria, and the other three young men who were celebrating Blinker's birthday, have to set everything aside to help Boxer. Boxer's sin and debt unite the five characters and put them into a world that seems strange to them: the world of hard criminality. When descending into the garage, the protagonists cross a border. The rest of the film is a nerve-breaking struggle to accomplish their task thus saving Boxer from the threat of the underworld.

Final Considerations

Migration is inherently connected to the notions of border, space and corporality. As much as one can question the notion of the border and its artificial and aleatory nature, the notion of migration relies heavily on the existence of a border that is being crossed. At the same time, as much as the border can be seen as a geo-political construct, its connection to the spatial is unavoidable and two-fold: it is a thin line that separates two or more spaces and a space in and of itself. Gloria Anzaldúa distinguishes these two spatial spheres of the border by calling them border and borderland and stresses their connection to a long-lasting trauma when she writes about an 'open wound' (1987: 3, my translation). The connection between the border and the body is as well multifarious. The body is the key agent in the action of border-crossing, not only because of the physical action of moving from one place to another but also because the body is the carrier of a series of marks that reveal its otherness. As Prem Kumar Rajaram and Grundy-Warr point out the 'way people dress, speak, and socialize all have effects on

recognition' (2007: xiii) and all these are linked to the bodily. At the same time, the body constitutes an ineludible thin border between me and the Other, as well as between the invisible (the psyche or the soul) and the visible (the material body). The body, however, is not only a border but is also a space in itself and as such it has a role in the transmission of a series of meanings. The role of corporality in the metaphorical processes attached to underground and limbo is recurring in both films and exposes phenomena linked to visibility/invisibility and speech/silence. Speechlessness is a recurring element in Victoria's limbic experiences where music takes over and interacts in different ways with the body. In the film the body is, at one and the same time, the vessel for and expression of otherwise invisible processes, as Victoria's internal journey in the piano scene points out. In *Biutiful*, on the other hand, corporality splits into two spheres: the visible (the body) and the invisible (the soul). The camera reproduces Uxbal's capacity to perceive human souls by making them visible to the viewer. That process of making visible, displayed within the film, mirrors the role of *Biutiful* in giving visibility to socio-economic processes attached to capitalist production and consumerism that often pass unnoticed. The action of throwing the bodies of the Chinese workers into the sea is an attempt to silence the unpleasant. In that sense, the sea pushing the bodies onto the shore can be read as an indication that truth has a tendency to always finally come out, like an unrelenting natural force.

By approaching the study of the subterranean, limbo and corporality in *Biutiful* and *Victoria* we have seen how these elements are intertwined and, through a system of metaphorical associations, play a central role in the portrayal of the migrant. In *Biutiful* there are a variety of subterranean and 'new underground' spaces associated with exclusion, exploitation, subversion, transformation and death. In opposition to these claustrophobic urban undergrounds, the film displays two scenes shot in natural scenarios, the forest and the sea, that represent the limbo of the souls and the limbo of the bodies, both of which are transitional

spaces associated with migrant waiting. There is a place, though, that unites the subterranean and limbo: the cellar where the Chinese workers sleep and die. The enslavement showed here mirrors an aboveground reality where human lives serve as the fuel of a ruthless production system. In *Victoria* underground locations have an important function too. The film displays two main subterranean spaces: the disco, where the underground is integrated into the urban above; and the garage, a place for subversion and the 'unfit'. Victoria's descent into this garage is a descent into hell and is the beginning of a transformative passage for a character that is going through an identity crisis. Victoria's geographical border-crossing in her journey to Berlin mirrors a border-crossing into a limbic sphere beyond space and time, a journey into memory.

Both films display descents into the subterranean that are key to the development of the plot in general and, more specifically, are central to the portrayal of migration and border-crossing. However, these descents operate differently. In *Biutiful*, underground experience is linked to death and the fantastic. Uxbal's growth throughout the film is attached to guilt, both in his role in the exploitation of the migrants and in his journey towards acceptance of his imminent death. Uxbal undergoes a process of self-development that involves the loss of control of his body and a journey across the border between life and death and echoes the experience of the Chinese migrants both in their quest for a better life and in their sudden death. Victoria's descent, on the other hand, is not linked to the fantastic but to the harsh reality of the criminal underworld. Her encounter with the subterranean has a disempowering effect, but at the same time, her journey shows her growing into a sense of control, as she takes command within the group and as she gains independence from the camera and walks away into the distance. As opposed to *Biutiful*, this last movement is a passage from death to life and suggests a migration back to her origins, to Spain, and to life as a newborn, stronger subject. Though avoiding a happy ending, both films have clear hopeful conclusions. In the last seconds of *Biutiful*, Uxbal's

father moves to show him the way, and we see Uxbal looking expectantly into the distance. In *Victoria*, the protagonist leaves the hotel where she has been hiding and walks away from the camera. In both cases there is uncertainty and hope, and in both cases, significantly, the journey is not over.

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NOTES

¹ For a study on waiting and the border see Henk van Houtun and Stephen F Wolfe (2019).

² Alba Marcé García suggests that Uxbal can be seen as coming from the south of Spain based on his use of Catalan, which she says is scarce and with a marked Spanish accent (2018: 88).