

Beneath *Barelife*:

Still-Birth, Slow Cinema, and the Camera

MARK SLOANE EBBAY

Giorgio Agamben's concept of *barelife* remains a productive ground for formulating frameworks with which to think about how we today go about conceiving of "qualified life of the citizen," especially when ideas of qualified life, qualified citizenship, and human life remain continually contested terrains (Agamben, 1998, 124). Whether in thinking through biopolitical regimes arising within the COVID-19 pandemic or the many other various attacks on categories of human rights, the concept of *barelife* still seems a fruitful one for interrogating the ways in which we still fail to account for the most marginal of beings as protected individuals or entities. It also remains utilized in attempts to rebuild categories of the human in a holistic and all-encompassing way. The concept of *barelife* is utilized productively in an essay by Victor Fan, entitled "Rebuilding Humanity: Gaze of the Exile and Chinese Independent Cinema," wherein he calls attention to Agamben's idea that "a political community is subjectivized precisely by desubjectivizing *all* [sic] human lives to bare lives," and his idea that "the state's power to instantiate and manage them instantiates its juridical authority" (Fan 2017, 148). Additionally, in a talk given at Columbia University in commemoration of the late Thomas Elsaesser and in the midst of the pandemic, Fan revisited the essay (2020). What the essay and talk made apparent were two avenues of expansion with regards to Agamben's *barelife*. First, they made apparent a tautological relationship between the human, the qualified citizen, and qualified life. Each are dependent on the other for their proper definitions and each are never able to resolve themselves without the proper constitution of the other. Second, Fan's work invites the application of the biopolitical framework of *barelife* to slow cinema. In his essay, Fan takes examples of slow cinema, though he never directly addresses the linking of *barelife* and the formal aesthetics of slow cinema. Here I return to *barelife* not to reclaim it as a biopolitical framework but to address the liminal boundaries that structure it, and then to think critically of its applications to slow cinema.

Agamben figures the *barelife* as a categorical state of being into which we are slowly configured; he describes the *barelife* as an existence (not yet in the realm of the "human" and yet one which possesses a "body") "stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land" (Agamben 1998, 103). However, in practice, considering the option to save oneself through flight to a foreign land comes up against the contemporary bans on entry from and into many countries in the midst of the global pandemic. Thus the figure of *barelife* and its historical and material specificity may not be totally applicable as a framework for thinking of subjectivities and being in neoliberal capitalism at present, where national, social, and cultural boundaries are readily unsettled to the point of their vanishing; likewise we are seeing the boundaries of being and subjectivity readily dissolved and reconstituted, made instrumental for the construction of

categories of those national, social, and cultural boundaries. At present, we have seen this in the management of national and local movement of bodies via the distribution of vaccine identification cards. This is important as a reminder that the structures that manage such movements and define our bodily boundaries are ever-shifting, and while biopolitical frameworks remain potent for thinking about such boundaries we must be able to account for these shifts. In such a present, what subjectivities are afforded to one born in an era where flight and foreign land may no longer constitute options for escape or establishing forms of agency, subjectivity, or being? Furthermore, what is to be said about a subjectivity that exists in relative alienation while both bound to the peripheries of national understanding and unable to be recognized by its borders? The idea of *barelife* as the barest form of life is still dependent on qualification of life in the first place. In my reading, it exposes a tautological relationship of the qualification of life in order to then render it bare, and then for the idea of qualified life to again be built upon that quality of bareness. I conceive of *still-birth* here in an attempt to escape the tautological relation of qualified life to *barelife*.

Still-birth is the term that I propose we use to think about the extremes of deprived subjectivities that result as a function of systemic state powers that seek to deprive the body of agency and symbolic potential such that it can be appropriated for its own gains. *Still-birth* evokes at once the notion of the stillborn baby, evacuated of life and all symbolic meaning invested into its conception, but it also evokes the present ongoing process of becoming, of always still being interpreted, if not born, symbolically and materially. It may fall outside the normative understanding of life or death, but its being persists nonetheless. *Still-birth* suggests a framework for thinking productively about the suspension of life and of being through a desanctification of life; it suspends life not as a category to return to, but as a category fraught with failure. *Still-birth* exists on the border of conception as agent, subject, and object; it fails to exert agency in a manner legible as life, and thus cannot register fully as subject, but it is also never totally relegated to object as it also bears potentiality in the possibility of resuscitation. If the values of life are as fraught as Agamben suggests in stating that “today politics knows no value (and, consequently, no nonvalue) other than life,” then devoid of the value of life, what might be the limits of reconstituting being (1998, 13)? I posit *still-birth* as a being in the locus of a framework that attempts to trace being beyond the outskirts of legibility as life through agency, subjecthood, and objecthood. *Still-birth* attempts to negotiate a form of being unstructured by the tautological formations of qualified life, *barelife*, and human life.

Still-birth suggests further that in what is becoming an increasingly technocentric world, life can be productively read and challenged as a mediated and mediatized category which, while presenting some meaningful ways of progressing through space and time, need not be the transcendent and governing category of reality. *Still-birth* seeks to understand shifts in being as they are informed by the dominant logics of neoliberal capital; if the *barelife* is something into which its “inhabitants are were transformed,” then, beyond not being able to be killed, or killed with impunity, the *still-birth* cannot even be born, but yet must find other means of material being (Agamben, 1998, 97). That is, its ways of coming into being, or manifesting in the world and the thing which it comes to be are not legible according to present categorical schema of being. *Still-birth* suggests that when forms of being emerge under current racial, colonial, and capitalist schema, they may not necessarily be legible as *barelife*. It suggests further that a conception of *barelife* may also be contingent on a strata of being that structures

it, or even necessitates its conceptualization as a foundation for Agamben's own formulation of *barelife*. Put another way, I seek to explore the possibility that *barelife* itself, as the category of exclusion upon which proper political life is dependent, might also be dependent on an exclusion of being unable to be appropriated into even a category of life in its barest terms; that even *barelife* in its most minimal sense may contain some exceptionally qualified life. The *still-birth* is what emerges from beneath *barelife*, the thing that proliferates "to the limits of the visible and the invisible, rather than to disappear for good" (Foucault, 1976, 42). In the *still-birth*, at once vacuous and capacious, the body seems to be the site of this conflict even before its conception, while it is still being conceptualized, and on the border of the symbolic and the real. If the body is the site of conflict at which being is reduced into a point of nonexistence, it is from this nonexistence that the remains of an existence can be recuperated and can realize a possibility of embodiment (Agamben 1998, 97). Embodiment seems here important not only to point out a failure of state power to account for being, but also to gesture towards the potential in *still-birth* to think of being prior to embodiment.

I theorize the *still-birth* because it is both full of installed potential—none of its own really, but that which it inherits—and without any real agency or subjecthood. Yet, at the same time its demands on its hosts are powerful. It demands nutrition, to occupy space freely, and psychological investment, all without much output of its own. Even as I am able to name it (*still-birth*), it defies being named. It does not live, but neither does it die upon breaching the world, never to take a breath of it, but not needing it for the sustenance of its own potential. Yet, as it gestures toward a potential, it seems never to be realized; and still, the fact of a potential never to be realized makes impotentiality a seemingly impossible recourse.

Agamben situates the *barelife* as being able to reclaim power by choosing to embody potentiality, or otherwise to choose to not realize their potentiality. *Barelife* is thus able to reconstitute some form of agency and subjectivity for itself. However, what happens to potentiality when being is guided by dominant, or even totalizing, social, political, and economic forces? Does it get sealed in a realm of inaccessibility? It would seem that beneath *barelife* lies the *still-birth* which, while able to perhaps realize that potentiality exists, is a being inevitably marked by the failure to actuate that potentiality in the present. For *barelife*, being has the capability to realize potentiality temporally in the present as actuality and simultaneously is "*capable of the act in not realizing it,*" and thus, "it is sovereignly capable of its own im-potentiality" (Agamben 1998, 45). In other words, it would seem that access to one's present and history are the prerequisites to action and inaction: to one's potentiality or impotentiality. *Still-birth*, on the other hand, is situated as lacking a history within which it might reclaim potentiality, but it is a potentiality that is also made obsolete by future-oriented technocentric neoliberal capitalism—in either course potentiality seems just outside of reach. In the midst of these tensions, neither potentiality nor impotentiality seem to be possible for *still-birth*. What then might this mean for those for whom the struggles of decolonization remain unresolved, and for the various artists and writers still engaging with these struggles? I argue that the *still-birth* challenges this notion in that potentiality becomes fully deprived. As such any realization of potentiality or impotentiality seems negated in totality. Further, the drives of neoliberal capital make the tensions between potentiality and impotentiality so indistinguishable that they become nearly impossible to grasp and make serviceable to the legibility of exploited forms of being. *Still-birth* calls into question a being's potential to be, and draws attention to the liminal space from which it is constituted.

To further examine this, I take the examples of Lav Diaz's *Storm Children Book One* (2014), *The Woman Who Left* (Diaz 2017), and Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013) as cases which take advantage of the technologies of the camera and narrative structures of filmmaking in order to unveil the manufacture and coordination of exploitable being in the service of narrative and plot. Or, in other words, I examine the ways in which each film's conception of time and space constructs worlds and meanings in accordance with the concept of the *still-birth*. I will first examine Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* for the ways that it is able to abstract a hyperbolic form of world; through its narrative progression, all forms of being which might fall into filmic discourse as actors (including "extras" seemingly unimportant to the central progression of the film), the film unveils an instrumental way in which they are exploitable for the construction of the film's own drives. *Snowpiercer* thus presents a corollary representation to our present reality which allows us to reconsider seemingly basic notions such as being, subjectivity, and agency. However, I observe also the film's limitations as it posits that exploited forms of being remain an exceptional case. In the case of *Snowpiercer*, this form of being takes shape in the form of the child and the forces which are figured to be in the service of its rescue.

I then read Lav Diaz's films alongside *barelife* and *still-birth* because of the ways that his films capture and represent people in barely legible ways, such that their certainty of being is not entirely clear. I read his films for the ways in which they mobilize figures which are at first appearance easily legible from an audience perspective, but which then become subverted by way of various inversions and rejections. First, I examine his 2014 film *Storm Children* for its framing of a natural disaster and an emergence of being which become constitutive to our understanding of the operations and mediations of reality. Being here emerges in the form of children, just as the figure of the emergent child is critical to *Snowpiercer*. I will argue that the two films serve as parallels in their depictions of exploited being, and I will go on to compare the ways that each film's media reality' figures the exploited child in relationship with the world and the world's relationship to it. Next, I read Diaz's 2017 film *Ang Babaeng Humayo* (*The Woman Who Left*), for the ways that this film depicts the emergence of being in relation to a constructed media reality in order to demonstrate the relative ease of the construction, collapse, dissolution, and reconfiguration of categories of being. While works of slow cinema, Diaz's films are exceptional in the ways that they illustrate the rapidity in which being is readily unsettled and reconstructed not in categories that are so easily legible, but which are always subject to a tendency to relegate being to categorization—to naming. His films take advantage of the technology of the camera to capture and observe a scene without the automatic interruption of the blink of an eye to refresh the gaze in order to observe such an event unfolding. In the midst of such an unfolding, he seems to mobilize the camera's limits of observing being as it is categorically made and unmade and the various ways it is able to manifest as a way of then returning to the dominant logics of political operation that result in their conceptualization.

Together these films provide insight into the ways that we are driven to reproduce the "fundamental categorical pair of Western politics": that is, the exclusion and inclusion that separates a *barelife* from a *political existence* (Agamben, 1998, 8). Yet *barelife* still has a way of grasping power in that it "remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion" (Agamben 1998, 13). Contrary to this, *still-birth* seemingly has no option to reclaim power or agency, as I will elaborate through

my analysis of a slice of the critical reception of Diaz's films and critics' attempts to understand violence on Filipino bodies and the imagining of a Filipino future. In these sample reviews, the *still-birth* is evoked when being is relegated to a space where its body cannot exist, but yet becomes a receptacle of violence and stripped of a potential for imagining a way out of the violent situation, or even shaping its future. *Still-birth* is thus situated as having no possibility of being in this timeline or any imagined futures. In a sense, the *still-birth* seems stripped of any notion of potentiality, that thing which "precedes actuality and conditions it, but also seems to remain essentially subordinate to it" (Agamben 1998, 31). At the same time, it brings to mind the colonial heritages of thinking through the human and through the idea of man to conceptualize *freedom* as this aspirational form of agency. It is this relation of potentiality to actuality that the *barelife* still retains that I argue is evacuated in the position of *still-birth*. *Still-birth* is unable to exist in this or any other time, but rather is constantly torn between the temporalities that define different termini of its existence. *Still-birth* exists barely: always as a seemingly inert mass that is the product of multiple (intersecting, if one prefers) histories of violence; it is not yet dead labour, nor does it ever seem like it will become such, but it exists beyond and beneath the already barely qualified life of *barelife*. *Still-birth* manifests as the unincorporable (uncapitalizable), outside of capital's structures. Beings conceptualized in terms of the *still-birth* are impossible to make into wage labourers, and capital's social structures render them so far beyond being legible as labour that hardly a trace of their vital force can be found in it.

Before delving further into Diaz's films, where the driving mechanisms of reality are veiled through carefully mediated aesthetics and a carefully constructed media reality, I turn to a more readily apparent representation in Bong Joon Ho's *Snowpiercer*. This film's narrative uncovers class conspiracy and illustrates revolutionary war on an eternally running train, revealing at the end of the film that children are being born as pieces to turn the cogs that keep the train's eternal locomotive force intact. The factors that play a role in the decision of the child becoming a machinic component in *Snowpiercer* are simply that the child fit the environment, as only children of specific stature can play the part. As an example of *still-birth*, these children are neither human nor machine, but are merely reduced to components that maintain their various environments' guise of eternal operation. The child's life is of no importance as it becomes the necessary component to continue the machine's eternal drive. It can never return to its original environment, because its manifestation was as an environmental component to begin with: an embodiment that structures and sustains the environment without necessarily having real forms of agency or subjecthood. Its having lived is also effaced by the narrative situation of the revelation of the cog-child coming towards the end of the film—it has naught but moments of embodiment, and when it is embodied it is only as a contradiction: human child and cog in a clockwork machine.

Seemingly, *still-birth* here has neither class nor culture with which to put at stake in participation or even declaration of revolution. Its revolution is only to turn the cog. It is plucked off the assembly line and embedded immediately into the machine it was destined to support. Rather than *barelife*, whose inclusion into the political realm forms a nucleus of sovereign power, *still-birth* suggests that at times being may be already channeled into networks of use where political inclusion and exclusion are impossibilities (Agamben, 1998, 6). The conflict in *Snowpiercer*, then, is that of the alleged agency of properly qualified citizens,

exploited in their own right, who must come to terms with the exploitation of beings relegated to a lower class who are constitutive of their own realities. This we find at its most heightened form in the main character Curtis, who knows that in his world, beings knowingly feed upon their exploitation of each other, evident in his own horrified confession of the pleasure that “babies taste best.”

However, the film’s critique seems limited in the ways that it reveals just one category of being subsumed into the machinery of the world that it constructs; this is similar to the way that *barelife* is made an instrumental category to the production and maintenance of modern states and forms of power. In other words, the film seems to suggest that the reality of the present is structured and able to operate by way of the exploitation of just one specific underclass of being, rather than exploring the possibility of a plurality of underclasses of being. So, *Snowpiercer*, while productive in taking film narrative and putting it in service of the work of unveiling exploitation, has its limitations in still making certain types of exploitation exceptional alongside the forms of being that are made instrumental to its operation. The film utilizes classical narrative structure to illustrate a plot in which a group of resistance fights stages a rebellion from the back of the train making their way to the front of the train where the higher class occupants of the train reside and in order to overturn the rule of that dominant class. Yet, it still succeeds in drawing attention to the limited ways that even in these forms there exist ways of tracing them and a connection to social and political life, without the need to resuscitate them into a normative form of qualified life. The emergence of the cog-child is the critical figure for the illustration of this point. While the narrative illustrates that the rebellion does reach the front of the train and successfully leverages violence to negotiate with the ruling class, they come face to face with the cog-child that structures their reality of their life on the train. As beings made instrumental to capital as the structure and driving force of society today, and in light of the fact that capital continues to make exploitable these forms of being, *still-birth* questions the limits of escape so long as being in the world remains contingent on static definitions of qualified life. *Still-birth*, via *Snowpiercer* in the figure of the cog-child as an almost-disappeared body, seems unable to bear the signifying potential of a qualified life yet it gestures towards a mode of meaning where life is indexed in its full plenitude as a banal or mundane political category.

Like the cog-child in *Snowpiercer* whose origins are ambiguous, *Storm Children* takes the figure of the child and suggests the impossibility of tracing the precise mechanisms and webs of power and technology that surround a natural disaster. The disaster treated in this film is Typhoon Haiyan and its aftermath in Tacloban City. Whereas *Snowpiercer* finds being in the aftermath of a fictitious calamity which references present and “real” (albeit with its limitations being in the genre of science fiction) conditions of being, *Storm Children* uses the aftermath of a non-fictional calamitous environmental disaster. The film illustrates an aftermath of waste and survival and the beings emergent in such conditions. As a documentary, the film follows its little subjects and the ways they navigate being in relation to the waste of the environment. Critic Ronnie Scheib makes note of “pint-sized subjects” in Lav Diaz’s *Mga Anak Ng Unos* (*Storm Children: Book One*) who “exist entirely in the present scavenging the past for survival” (2015, 57). Yet the film demonstrates through its construction of a media reality in the immediate aftermath of natural disaster that being emerges not only in relation to a scavenged past, but also what it looks like when being is constructed while lacking the means to construct itself as qualified life. Like *Snowpiercer*, *Storm*

Children draws attention to the ways in which exploited being may at times distract from the macro-level structures that support the environments in which they are exploited. *Storm Children*'s clever trick is in calling attention to environment through the torrential rains of typhoon Haiyan and its aftermath. The film begins with the screaming volume of the typhoon's rains as its unmanageable force crashes in the surroundings, gesturing toward environments beyond the control of human management and agency. In his review, Scheib seemingly fails to recognize this environment entirely, and while he does acknowledge the film's tiny subjects as emerging from it, he does not question the figure of the storm and the importance of this environmental component to the structure of the film. The film gestures toward the question of whether the storm gives way to being or if being gives way to the storm. In its survival of catastrophe, is it being or the environment which is made exceptional?

Such tensions seem to act as the fulcrum upon which the scale of morality tips in Diaz's *Storm Children*. Scheib's insights on the scavenging children in *Storm Children* miss the ecological allusions that Diaz installs at the onset of the film and elaborates as products of long histories of material exploitation. Rather than scavenging, then, in the scene in question, the children actually perform an archaeology of waste, an archaeology of a certain afterlife. It is an archaeology not done in order to find some sort of entryway back into the social and political structures from which their status hails; instead, scavenging here acts not to set aside "its own potential not to be," but rather as a way for *still-birth*, even without the freedom to choose between potentiality or impotentiality, to find a form of being (Agamben, 1998, 46). *Still-birth* activates itself here in bearing the contradictions between an impossible existence and the structures that render it so (Agamben, 1998, 47). For all the waste and destruction that the typhoon did bring, it might be a surprise to see some form of being persisting in its aftermath. Indeed, we might be tempted to classify or categorize the sight of children scavenging as a recovered life. Slow cinema and *still-birth* here might converge in presenting the possibility of qualification, but its slow durational form allows a view into the ways we perform that qualification. We cannot help but meditate on these children, as scavengers and as subjects existing somewhere between boundaries of qualified life; *Storm Children* challenges its viewers to rethink any easy declarations about this kind of being and its relationship to our own present social and political situations.

Diaz's *The Woman Who Left* takes a similar narrative structure, using its environment in order to give way to the production and configuration of being. Before offering my own thoughts on how this film opens up to such readings, however, it might be helpful to consider some critical literature and reviews of Diaz's works. Though auteurist discourse on Diaz tends to not directly discuss *The Woman Who Left* as part of the same constellation of Diaz's films (usually made up of such films as *Norte* and *Evolution of a Filipino Family*), some general conclusions and assumptions can be drawn from these critics' analyses. Writing for *Offscreen*, Parisa Hakim Javadi notes of Diaz's film *From What is Before* (2014) that it was "filmed at an actual Filipino village that in 2013 still had a Sixties/early-Seventies kind of look" (Javadi 2018). Another critic, Johnathan Hopewell, writing from *Variety* magazine, critiques one of Diaz's latest films *Ang Hupa* (*The Halt*, 2019): "It's understood that Diaz's low-budget techniques require a suspension of belief: thus we accept a powerful dictator only seems to have a staff of two" (2018).

What we see in these two critiques of Diaz's cinema are two things. First, an inability to place the Philippines in the world at the present moment. Second,

a certain impossibility of imagining a future for the Philippines no matter dystopian or utopian it might be. Then, at the center of this all: the Filipino being, constructed as *still-life* through these critics' interpretations, which seems to then become folded into time and space itself, but yet whose existence is seemingly unacknowledged.

Still-birth disturbs time and space in such a way that it becomes possible to reconcile the paradox of a "real" Filipino village's materiality as being caught in the past and its actual existence in 2013 (the time at which the film was circulating in festivals) without challenging the reasons why these material conditions allow for this type of existence to be acceptable. It is telling that Javadi did not wonder further about the said "real Filipino village's" existence in 2018 (when the article was written) and the forces that make its material reality a possibility. Her observation, however, allows a window into the temporal incongruity of being that is necessary for capital's continued operation as the basis for the production of social interaction. When we see the *still-birth* emerging from the constellation between critic and film, we experience the jarring incongruence of such materially deprived existence in the present. *Still-birth* suggests that the possibility of qualified life necessitates a degree of permission to the exploitative forces that bring about its operation and maintain its existence through the continuation of its production. *Still-birth* further gestures toward a suspension of the structuring powers that guide our understandings of reality, to such degrees that mythological (in the Barthesian sense) forms of being come to structure in their stead. *Still-birth* here also draws attention to the notion that being is exploited and made instrumental to the operations of capital even in the moments of its conception in the imagined realms of political existence.

Diaz seems to take advantage of such slippages in the ways we conceptualize being and the confrontation that occurs within ourselves and against our systems of constructing political existence in *The Woman Who Left*. It follows a wrongly imprisoned woman, Horacia Soromostro (Charo Santos-Concio), a former schoolteacher who, after having served thirty years of her life sentence, is released from prison because the true perpetrator of the crime suddenly has become overcome by the desire to confess her sins. My reading will focus on the emergence of being from the structures that frame the emergence of these beings as indistinguishable from their environments and constitutive of the operation of their media realities. The film begins in medias res with its action first unfolding in an auditory register through an acousmatic radio program that plays alongside introductory credit roll. As slow cinema, with its long takes, long scenes, and often static positioning of the camera, this framing makes this action difficult to grasp. The action occurs invisibly through the sonic echoes of the radio as it points to the difficulty in grasping the modes of power in which technology operates. When the action becomes visible, it is of a seemingly idyllic scene with women tending to pastures and tilling soil. The credits and radio broadcast act as a sonic bridge that emphasizes a disembodied voice of sovereign power always in action and never static or fixed, even as it indexes itself into the media reality's immediate past. The content of the radio broadcast identifies, among other things, a rising occurrence of kidnapping in the Philippines to epidemic proportions and elaborates that the victims tend to be among certain classes of people: tourists, children of Chinese-Filipino businessmen, and children of celebrities and politicians. Finally, the radio broadcast indicts the government for not being able to provide protection for these classes of people and suggests that they might flee to other parts of the country, or perhaps other countries.

The radio segment suggests a sort of paradigm for inclusion or exclusion into Filipino public life: only those that are able to generate capital are able to have their existence acknowledged by the public and the government. Meanwhile those like Horacia, ex-convicts and otherwise, are kept from achieving any kind of actuality by means of acknowledgement by public programs or the Philippine government. The radio broadcast continues to describe statistics collected by the Philippine National Police, affirming the position of the protected class of citizens while leaving us to wonder about what protections the inmates of this prison unit, wherein Horacia dwells, might be afforded, if any at all. This voice “expresses the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named” (Agamben 1998, 20). From this sonic bridge proceeds the visual image of women tilling fields, which eventually gives way to the revelation of the protagonist of the film: a wrongly convicted woman now set free into the world.

What follows is a vaguely neo-noir plot where Horacia investigates her wrongful imprisonment and confronts her ambitions for revenge against the forces which caused it. Along the way, she meets two locals who form a constellation of being around her. Each of their interactions, when one or the other is drawn in and out of this constellation, allows a moment for the audience to reconsider the ways that the film frames them and subsequently our own mechanisms of framing and perceiving being. In the first place, Horacia, while free and cleared of her criminal past, becomes the investigator of her own conviction. She seeks justice on her own terms, though audiences are left to consider how we might judge the morality of her own vengeance. Here she is figured as the exceptional protagonist and driver of the narrative, but through her interactions with others in the constellation of their being, the ease with which we interpret her as a just and moral political figure is unsettled and contradicted.

Unlike Horacia, who emerges from this tightly politically framed space, the figures who surround her emerge in the dark void of the night, framed by the darkness of the environment and the underdeveloped light of the slums. It is night, the slums are barely lit by streetlamps, most of the scene’s lighting is provided by the communal light provided by the shacks of the slums and the streetlights. While underdeveloped and only scantily available, this is the only light that offers a view of the site. The figures of the scene are framed simultaneously, then, by insufficiently available light, and the all-consuming darkness of the night. The camera, static and unmoving, keeps everything in frame while the long duration of the shot gives way to an idea of the slow settling of the scene. The gated and guarded mansion of Rodrigo Trinidad (the mastermind behind Horacia’s wrongful imprisonment) hovers over the slums, which almost appear as the mansion’s foundation. While scoping out the mansion, Horacia happens upon a vendor peddling balut (partially cultivated duck embryos: a popular Filipino snack) to the armed guardians of its gates. The vendor, after completing his business, converses with Horacia about the classes of protected citizens discussed in the opening radio broadcast and about Rodrigo Trinidad’s shady dealings. Throughout the scene, this vendor is made only barely legible, being faintly traced by the light of the slums—their being never entirely produced or constructed. Dealing only in appearances, we are unable to position them in the world, and they thereby exist only properly in relation to Horacia.

Following the conversation, the balut vendor rises, revealing his disabled form; while bellowing with resounding timbre, “Balut! Balut!” His being thereby folds again into the sonic environment of the scene; the camera acknowledging

his existence as a part of the scene while abandoning it as its sonic traces echo out of the scene and our memory. That same night, making her way home after abandoning her mission of scoping out the mansion, Horacia sees a figure dancing in the street. She stands, back turned to the camera, watching the figure, lit only by a solitary streetlight. Without warning, the figure collapses to the ground and begins convulsing. Horacia then runs to her aid. The camera cuts to closeup with Horacia cradling the figure in her arms, with both figures only faintly traced by the light. Neither figure moves and they are both quite still before the unknown person sits up and asks, “Where am I?”



Figure 1.

Screen capture from *The Woman Who Left* (2016).

This person’s name is Yolanda and their presentation invites feminine readings from the signifying power of the dress they wear and their long hair, but their gender is only gestured to through these signifying features: it is never fully elaborated in the diegesis. Indexed in the costuming is the instability of our own structures of inscribing value to life. Like the disabled balut vendor, Yolanda’s figure simultaneously invites and rejects such inscriptions of meaning. In these scenes it is the framing of the light that provides only a faint trace of the physical being of these characters, light enough to trace the contours of their being, but never enough to commit to the act of categorizing their being into a fixed and settled position. Like an omniscient and omnipotent voice that hails “hey, you there!,” these lights hail and interpellate being, minor and as integrated as they may be to the structures of our lived realities (Althusser, 1970, 174). In *The Woman Who Left*, Diaz makes clear through the constellation of these figures our limitations in perceiving being outside of the value systems of qualified life. Yolanda and the balut vendor are introduced in such a way that we might be tempted to read them as instrumental to Horacia’s own plot, but it is actually

Yolanda who carries out the assassination of Rodrigo Trinidad and exacts revenge on Horacia's behalf. Horacia, upon learning of this fact, screams. While the only being figured in the diegesis as a qualified life, Horacia seems to be figured in the narrative as expressing anger not for her continued existence as such but for the relative failure her character experiences in being able to influence the outcome and form of her being.



Figure 2.
Screen capture from *The Woman Who Left* (2016).

In conclusion, throughout this article I theorized the *still-birth* as a state of being which is unable to bear the signifying potential of life as a necessary component of modern political inclusion; in this sense, it is excluded from having any rights worth protecting. This concept becomes useful in a world where being conceived, being imagined as a concept or becoming a material existence in the world, means being explicitly deprived of potentiality. While the histories of colonialism that inflect this discussion ultimately lie outside the scope of this essay, I hope that my integration of *still-birth* into readings of Lav Diaz's films might open its possibility in future writings. As Agamben himself states early in *Homo Sacer*, "modernity does nothing other than declare its own faithfulness to the essential structure of the metaphysical tradition" (Agamben, 1995, 8). *Still-birth* is an attempt at unsettling just one of those structures in what I hoped to have demonstrated as a tautological relationship between *barelife*, human, qualified life, and qualified citizen. Many of our contemporary categories of being are already compromised when considered concurrently with histories of exploitation embedded into colonial and capitalist schemas. Frantz Fanon stated that the human laid dormant in a "zone of occult instability," but in the present perhaps it isn't towards the human but to the *still-birth*—of the beings in constellation, and these constellations themselves—that we should seek a return (Fanon, 182, 1963). To take the *still-birth* as a starting point means thinking without taking life for granted nor necessarily thinking of an inscription of life as an end goal of a political project that aims to reclaim a more holistic version of humanity.

Still-birth suspends the notion of life in an attempt to depart from the tensions from which it has historically inscribed meaning to our shared existences.

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Notes

1. I adapt the term media reality from Elsaesser's "media-world" in order to describe the ways in which filmic worlds can be constructed through visual and aural references to reality (Elsaesser, 1993, 243). Importantly, Elsaesser's media world acknowledges the very constructedness and mediated nature of the world, while also recognizing that this does not absolve viewers of inactivity and that it should rather motivate the viewer to act morally responsibly in light of it. In my own formulation, I adopt the word reality over world, however, to draw attention to the ways that film may at times only demonstrate an immediate reality: an immediate media reality from which we may draw conclusions but which may not always be able to be extended into the world at large.

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