



No

Director: Pablo Larrain
Country: Chile
Date: 2012

A review by Ryan Gilbey for the *New Statesman*:

How surprising that a film called *No* should be so positive. The Chilean director Pablo Larraín has been drawn previously to macabre interpretations of his country's past: *Tony Manero* used a Saturday Night Fever-obsessed psychopath as a symbol for the pervasive sadism of the Pinochet regime, while *Post Mortem* concerned a dead-eyed mortician present when the overthrown President Allende arrives on the slab.

Larraín hasn't left Pinochet behind with *No*: he is still gnawing away at him, just as Pinochet gnaws away at Chile. But the new picture is energised, its tenor brightened, by the switch of focus from history's abyss to a clinching moment of hope: the 1988 plebiscite held to establish whether Pinochet would stay or go. Fifteen minutes of daily television airtime was allocated to the regime in the weeks leading up to the vote, another 15 per day to its opponents. *No* examines how those anti-Pinochet broadcasts challenged a climate of "learned hopelessness," decisively steering the vote – and Chile's future.

René Saavedra (Gael García Bernal) is the hotshot advertising executive recruited to oversee the television spots for the "No" lobby. René's ex-wife, Veronica (Antonia Zegers), sometimes drops in to see their young son, Simon (Pascal Montero), when she is on her way back from the police station after running carelessly on to yet another police officer's fist, boot or baton. "Did they hurt you much?" René asks in the manner of someone enquiring about a dull day at the office. Veronica is aghast when she learns he has accepted the "No" commission: doesn't he see, she reasons, that merely participating will validate the entire fraud? But René has resolve. "We're going to get rid of Pinochet," he tells her firmly. Were the film a bigbudget star vehicle gunning for our goosebumps, the line would be pitched at full pelt with orchestral italicising. Here, it is delivered sotto voce so as not to wake Simon as he snoozes on René's shoulder.



Veronica is not René's only critic. His boss, Lucho (Alfredo Castro), who is masterminding the "Yes" campaign, tries to lure him away by promising to make him a partner. When bribery fails, the threats begin: phone calls in the early hours, sinister allusions to Simon's safety, strangers loitering outside René's window at night. Anyone familiar with Larraín's previous work may find Lucho's deviousness obscurely comforting: Castro, a brilliantly cold fish of an actor, played the chilling lead roles in those earlier films and it's hard to feel all is right with *No* until you've seen him behaving in a weaselly or intimidating fashion.

Castro makes a pointed contrast with García Bernal, who is not just a charismatic actor with his own advertising associations. (He was one of the faces of a recent ad campaign for a facial-hair styling product, the sort of thing that confirms we have too much time on our hands as a race.) He is also a rather delicate soul: he suggests a wee faun, bearded but boyish, a timeless Mr Tumnus.

Bernal's role in *No* doesn't demand any grand, stirring speeches – René's watchful, low-key confidence is that of a man who knows his power is the backroom kind, exercised in the editing suite or during the

shooting of life-affirming vignettes to promote the slogan "Happiness is coming." René thinks this will be a more effective tactic than dwelling on the executions, the oppression, the legacy of the thousands of people who were "disappeared" under Pinochet. That's a downer. Upbeat sells.

No is adapted from the play Referendum by Antonio Skármeta (who also wrote the novel that became the 1994 film *Il Postino*). A more cinematic treatment would be difficult to imagine. Period authenticity extends beyond the dapper ad men's wardrobes and into the texture of the movie. Larrain shot No on the U-matic magnetic tape prevalent in the 1980s.

For non-techies such as me this means the film blends seamlessly with archive material from the era, whether it's news footage of demonstrations or endorsements of democracy from Jane Fonda and Richard Dreyfuss (who played a Pinochet-style dictator and his double in the 1988 comedy *Moon Over Parador*).

The images look frazzled, as though the stock has been blitzed in one of the newfangled microwaves that René brings home to Simon. Father and son sit mildly dazed in front of the illuminated box as it melts cheese on to floppy bread. No is an inspiring watch. But that doesn't stop it suggesting that advertising, for all that it was instrumental in Chile's progress, may be having the same effect on our brains.

Taken from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/02/reviewed-pablo-larrains-no>