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Pablo Larraín: Is 'NO' Too Good to Be True?

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, February 13th, 2013

NO, the feature film from director Pablo Larraín (Academy Award nominee for Best Foreign Film, Chile) concerns the campaign of opposition leaders during the 1988 Chilean national plebiscite to win the vote in a referendum on whether to extend the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet — YES or NO. The victory of the NO campaign resulted in Pinochet voluntarily and peaceably relinquishing office, an incident without historic precedent. Larraín was just a child at the time of the vote, and his film is a fictionalized retelling from the point of view of an imagined advertising man, René Saavedra (a Chilean Don Draper of sorts), played by Gael Garcia Bernal (*The Motorcycle Diaries, Amores Perros, Babel*).

If *The Battle of Algiers* is the how-to manual for guerilla warfare, *NO* might be considered its materialist antithesis. *NO* is as much a meditation on democracy and concomitant capitalism, as anything else. The opening and closing of the film form tragi-comic bookends: close-up on René, as he pitches in hushed tones his ground-breaking, future-oriented proposal — cut to a spot for a soft drink, cut to a commercial for a soap opera, respectively. The consolidation of capitalism as the one viable economic system in Chile, has been effectively reinforced by the referendum and campaigns.

NO has stirred up its share of controversy in its native Chile where Larraín has been criticized by politicos for trivializing and misrepresenting the historical record. Archival footage and fictional sequences are so seamlessly intercut, that it is difficult to separate fact from fiction in viewing the film. Larraín explains that under the dictatorship of Pinochet, Chileans lived for many years without fiction of any sort, so its citizens are naturally accustomed to seeing films as propaganda. By way of rebuttal, Larraín argues that his film *NO* should more appropriately be read as “a fable.”

The retelling of history is always an abstraction that reflects most acutely the perspective of the storyteller. While historians may quibble about the details, *NO* is cutting across nationalistic borders to prompt introspection and dialogue in whichever markets it plays.

Cultural Weekly’s Sophia Stein recently sat down with Pablo Larraín to discuss his film, *NO*.

Sophia Stein: The plebiscite is an event that took place in 1988, when you were only 12 years old. What do you remember of that historic time?

Pablo Larraín: I don’t have an exact memory of the particular facts. What I remember, is more on an emotional level. We were living in a very dark and sad environment and mood, and all of a sudden, these guys came up with this super-fresh, optimistic, bright message, and it was quite shocking and unforgettable. That campaign not only aired during the referendum; it also aired afterwards, in special programs that would commemorate what happened.

S2: With the fictional character of René Saavedra, you have created a modern hero, who symbolizes the political awakening of an apparently apolitical person. You've commented that this rite of maturity happens "when one realizes that it is possible to change things first-handedly." You must have experienced such an awakening yourself?

PL: I come from a family that was right wing, that supported the "YES," at that point in time. So I had to learn by myself, while becoming an adult at university, what actually did happen. And once you learn all those facts, you create your own perspective, form your own opinion. When I was interviewing the people who actually participated in the campaign back then, they were just trying to follow their instincts, trying to change their reality through the tools that they had. I don't think that they ever really realized in that moment, how important what they were doing would be. Probably because of that, they acted with a lot of freedom. Most of the great human achievements are made in circumstances where a person is unaware of the full import of their actions. That lack of consciousness is very interesting to me. It's like when you make a movie — if while you're doing it, you're thinking "Is it going to be successful or not?" "What exactly is it going to mean?" and "How big might this be to others?" — you're probably creating something with too much self-consciousness, and it probably won't end up being that interesting. When you are making a movie, you just get into a private space with the other people who are making the movie. It's like a lab; you just work on it. And then when it's ready, you show it to others. And you hope that it makes sense, and that it will travel, and somehow win over audiences, and that it might be interesting for more people than just the people working on it.

S2: Will NO screen in the Middle East; in the wake of the Arab Spring, the resonance is undeniable?

PL: Yes, it will. What's funny and so beautiful is that this movie tells the story about facts that happened twenty-five years ago, in a little country in South America, and then when you show it in other countries, everybody reflects upon their own political situation. I was talking to Greek journalists and they said, "This could have been made here!" And then we were in France, and it was the same reaction. And again, in Mexico. Last October, right before the US presidential elections, we were screening the film at the New York Film Festival, and people there were telling me that we should release the film before the elections, so it would make sense to people here. And I said: "Yes, but wait — this is a referendum where people had to vote between a dictator and a democracy, so how could this be meaningful for you guys, today?" The politics might be so different, but finally, you reach a point where you start discussing the values and defects of democracy. How that democracy is affecting your quotidian life? That happens everywhere.

S2: There is a moment at the end of the film, where the "NO" campaigners have just learned that they have won the referendum, and there is a spontaneous eruption of dancing in the streets. René is carrying his son through the parade, but he is not dancing. He almost has tears in his eyes and a look of trepidation or anticipation. That moment so perfectly encapsulates feelings of optimism that maybe things could change, juxtaposed with pessimism that in reality, often things don't change as much as we would like. How did you direct Gael Garcia Bernal in that moment?

PL: No matter what his character says, you have the feeling that René is hiding something all the time. It's not just what I could think up as the director, that's on Gael's shoulders. Gael is able to manage that mystery that's so important to me, and I think it is important for the film because that's where the audience does their work. They start thinking and wondering what is really going on. So you bring it home and try to find some answers, where there is just no one answer, and that is interesting. Also, I think that the character is not really aware of what he has achieved, and that lack of self-consciousness is beautiful. He's not a hero that is fighting a war, where he knows what is going to happen if they win it. At that point, people didn't really know much of anything. They just knew that Pinochet was going to be out somehow in the coming years. They expected it to

happen, but the first step to do that was to win that referendum. It's also this sad sensation that René was used by political interests. After they'd won, once all his work and talent was used up in the campaign, the politicians would just take over and leave the others behind where they were — which is something that did happen in my country, sadly. So it's a combination of emotions.

S2: The screenplay is based on a previously unstaged short play The Referendum by Chilean writer Antonio Skármeta (novelist: Los días del arco iris and Ardiente paciencia, the basis for the film Il Postino). What about his play grabbed your attention?

PL: Antonio picked the perspective of the ad guy as a point of departure to tell this story. There were so many different roles to choose from; you might have picked the point of view of the politicians, the "YES" guys, the militarists, the demonstrators — you had many, many options, even Pinochet was an option. But the ad guy had this — danger and sharpness, that was interesting to us. After two years of research, interviewing everybody and finding all the archival footage, we had heaps and mountains of information, and it was so hard to compress into a script. Screenwriter Pedro Peirano (*The Maid*) was able to so wonderfully distill everything down into the script.

S2: The first thing that you notice when watching the film is the square aspect ratio (4:3)—that classic TV look. Can you talk about your choice to shoot with 1983 U-matic video cameras?

PL: Most of the time, the archival footage in a feature film is just a couple of minutes in the total length of the film. At least one third of our film was going to come from archival footage, so I didn't want to have the audience fighting the transitions from fiction to archival footage. We wanted to create an illusion for the audience where they would not recognize a difference between what we made and what had actually happened. So you create an amalgam: where the fiction footage we shot becomes documentary; and where the archival footage they shot becomes fiction. That is a very interesting crossover. It also has to do with an attitude. Sometimes people forget that a camera is like the paint that's applied to the canvas. It would be a completely different painting if it's oil or if it's acrylic. So too, with cameras and their textures. So we had to go there, because that really matters.

S2: You have said, producing this film with analog cameras is "a statement against the aesthetic hegemony of HD." Care to elaborate?

PL: You know, when you go to a film festival and see ten movies in three days, it is amazing how alike one another they look. Since HD is more accessible to a lot of people (which is wonderful), HD seems to be the only possible technology today. I have HD TV in my house, and you see a soap-opera that might be uninteresting (lousy and stupid), and then you see a movie, and they both look the same. So you want to try to create something that would be FRESH at least, or that it could have IDENTITY. And it would look, as only that particular movie looks. Which is how it used to be when we were working with film. Labs were different, the pros were different, and every DP would really control the look. No matter how much they tell you that you have a lot of tools in post-production to control the look of HD … I tell you, we tried. We shot tests in seven different formats, and it's just not possible to reach the look we were able to achieve with the U-matic video cameras. Because this is not only an old video camera, this is the first video system ever made by human-kind. Those tube cameras create an image that is just not possible to create through any other post-production process. So we wanted to be there, because it was better, and also because it is a statement against the hegemony of HD.

S2: NO is a US co-production with Participant Media. Executive producer Jeff Skoll and Participant have become synonymous with a certain type of story—films that compel social change. What did it take to get Participant Media on board to finance your feature?

PL: They read the script through Executive Vice-President, Jonathan King, and they thought it was

fantastic and felt connected, so they supported the film. Participant Media is creating interesting films all over the world. They don't care about all the little, insignificant things that most of the industry is worried about; they don't care what language the film is shot in. Those guys just love movies and have fun making them. It has been a privilege for us to work with them, and to work with Funny Balloons our co-producers in France. The producers were also smart in the editing process, helping us to create a movie that was more universal, helping us to understand what they didn't understand, and what was important to include for an audience that was less familiar with what had happened in Chile, than we were. I don't know if a movie can actually change reality. Maybe it does. I'm not really sure. But what I'm completely sure about, is that NO stimulates reflection in its audience. Maybe through that reflection, people will become more connected with their political reality. And if that happens, it would be amazing.

Images: Top, Gael Garcia Bernal (left) and director Pablo Larrain, photo by Tomás Dittburn; below, Gael Garcia Bernal as René Saavedra, photo by Tomás Dittburn. Photos courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

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