

No

The Academy Awards were awarded on February 24th, in a season where numerous nominated films had in common that they were “based on” or “inspired by” true stories. The major English-language films of this type included “Argo,” “The Impossible,” “Lincoln,” “The Master,” “The Sessions,” and “Zero Dark Thirty.” Another film from a more obscure source also fit this designation and was also in the running: “No” from Chile, nominated in the Best Foreign Film category. It is an historical re-creation of an important chapter in recent Chilean history, and, though it didn’t take home the Oscar, it is told with real verve and pulse

After a 15-year reign as Chile’s dictator, General Augusto Pinochet, pressured by the US, calls for a referendum on his presidency in the summer of 1988. A broad coalition of Chilean opposition political parties approaches a young advertising executive, René Saavedra (Gael García Bernal), to spearhead their campaign. Saavedra is known as a “closer,” respected by his clients for his smarts and his guile. As it happens, René’s boss at the agency, Lucho Guzman (Alfredo Castro), is also a high-ranking member of Pinochet’s advisory board.

René is estranged from his wife, Verónica Caravajal (Antonia Zegers), a radical activist who feels the plebiscite is a fraud only aimed to legitimize the dictator. While she dismisses her husband’s involvement with the campaign, commonly called “The NO,” René has hopes they can reconcile and make a home with their young son Simon.

Reviewing previous opposition materials, René is convinced their grim, relentless accounting of Pinochet’s horrors will turn off voters, and he urges his side to take a leaf from his advertising book and offer “Happiness” to a people aching for a better future. Though the NO campaign is outspent by an estimated 30 to 1, their feel-good ads, enlivened by local celebrities, contrast ever more strongly with the ponderous government output, motivating more and more Chileans to their side. Danger resides in the campaign also, as the NO leaders realize they are being shadowed and often directly confronted by Pinochet’s secret police.

On October 5, 1988 Pinochet is denied his presidency: with 97% of registered voters participating, the NO campaign wins almost 56% of the vote, and Chile is on the way to renewing its democracy.

Though the background of the film is true to history, it is a fiction (based on a play by Alexander Skarmeta, writer of the novel which became “Il Postino”), and it plays—very consciously—like a documentary. One striking and intriguing aspect of its production is that the director, Pablo Larrain, decided to create the contemporary feel of 1988 by shooting the film with old U-matic video cameras to capture the photographic feel of the time (such footage also blended better with the considerable amount of original video of the period, including the original ads of the campaign itself).

This cinematic throwback proves disconcerting at first, as you think the filmmakers are presenting what looks like a very grainy, amateurish print. With time, however, you adjust to the old-style look and accept it for what it is—as a way to tell the story. I think moviegoers go in knowing that the film uses vintage equipment for a

purpose—like my readers—will adjust to it that much faster. The director’s brother Juan, who was also a producing partner on “No,” points out that the hand-held video camera, with its flashes and flares, is intentional and noted “Pablo wants the camera to be as much a participant in scenes as the actors.”

The film is not flawless: chronologies and locations (important for a film with documentary pretensions) are not always clear. The family problems between René and his wife could have been dropped for all they contribute. Garcia Bernal himself seems desultory at times, though perhaps this is a candid expression of how an ad man—he is definitely not a protest hero—might really behave in his circumstance. Still, the film illuminates a small but significant story of building democracy in the Americas writ large. (*The film is in Spanish with English subtitles, is rated “R,” and runs 110 min.*)

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