

# J.A. Bayona's *Society of the Snow*: An optimistic view of humanity

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*Society of the Snow* (*La Sociedad de la Nieve*) is Spain's submission for international feature film at the 96th Academy Awards, one of two awards for which the film is nominated. The film is written and directed by Juan Antonio (J.A.) Bayona, and earlier this month won 12 Goya Awards, making it the third-most prized film in the history of the Spanish awards. It is streaming on Netflix.

*Society* tells in an original way the traumatic and ultimately inspiring story of the October 13, 1972 plane crash of Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571, which had been chartered to take the Uruguayan Old Christians Club rugby union team and their family members, friends and supporters from Montevideo, Uruguay, to a match in Santiago, Chile.

Carrying 45 passengers, the plane crashed in a remote area of the Andean mountain chain, nearly 12,000 feet above sea level. Twelve passengers and crew would die immediately in the crash and another 17 would perish over the course of two and half months due to exposure, injury, illness, hunger and a terrible avalanche that killed eight people.

After 72 days in the most hostile environment, 16 people would eventually be rescued, after two members of the group accomplished the herculean task of hiking out of the mountain chain for 11 days (over peaks nearly 15,000 feet high) to find help, with no climbing experience or equipment.

The story is well known throughout Latin America and has even taken on the character of a national myth in Uruguay and beyond, commonly referred to as both a tragedy and miracle, *La Tragedia de los Andes y El Milagro de los Andes*. It is one which has been told and retold numerous times in documentaries, books, interviews and film, including the 1993 film *Alive* directed by Frank Marshall and starring Ethan Hawke, based on the 1974 book by Piers Paul Reed.

*Society's* screenplay is adapted from Pablo Vierci's 2009 book of the same title. Vierci was a childhood friend and classmate of those on the flight from Montevideo's Carrasco neighborhood. His book is significant, as it is composed of first-person testimony from survivors collected some 36 years after the crash. Bayona came across the book as he was preparing to direct *The Impossible*, about the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in Thailand.

Setting the most recent film apart from the previous efforts is the narration by Numa Turcatti, played by Uruguayan actor Enzo Vogrincic. Turcatti's death on December 11, 1972 provided the impulse for Nando Parado (Agustín Pardella), Roberto Canessa

(Matías Recalt) and Antonio 'Tintín' Vizintín (Agustín Della Corte) to set off December 12 in the hopes of hiking out of the Andes and finding help in Chile's valleys to the west. Upon realizing the trek was going to be much more difficult than expected, they decided that Vizintín should return to the fuselage, and he gave his rations to Parado and Canessa.

In a 2011 letter from Bayona reaching out to Vierci and the survivors describing his interest in the film he wrote,

Something about your story obsesses me greatly and that is the profoundly human and optimistic view of mankind. I don't believe that the 'naked heart' that Adolfo Strauch speaks of, 'where one human being gives all of himself for another,' has ever really been portrayed in film. I believe there is no better motivation when it comes to making a film than to highlight the nobility Roberto Canessa refers to when he speaks about 'the chance to live life for those who did not have the opportunity to do so.'

Bayona himself fought for ten years to tell *Society* in the Spanish language and with a budget that could accurately reflect the drama of the events and capture the enormity of the Andean mountain range. The project continued to be rejected in a film market dominated by Hollywood and English-speaking films. The endeavor was nearly scrapped before Netflix finally picked it up.

*Society of the Snow* was shot in chronological order, that is, as the sequence of events actually unfolded, something rarely done. This was organized to assist actors with understanding the developing events, but also so the actors could lose large amounts of weight, corresponding to their 72-day ordeal in the mountains. Vogrincic, for instance, reported that he went from 154 pounds down to 103 over the course of filming.

After over a week on the mountain as the survivors' bodies break down and food has long run out, members of the group begin putting forward the idea of ingesting the bodies of the dead to survive, known as survival anthropophagy. Eventually, nearly all relent, particularly after a radio they get working confirms the search for the missing plane has been called off after eight days.

The subject is long wrestled over, and Bayona's film not only captures the complexity and weight of the decision, but is commended for its lack of sensationalism and muted portrayal. It

should be noted that for a time the survivors were dragged through the mud by the media for this desperate act, after their return to civilization.

The casting by María Laura Berch and team is exceptional. The majority of the actors had never been in a film, having only performed in theater or having no acting experience at all. The performers established close relationships with the living survivors, as well as the families of the deceased. In this manner, the preparations went far beyond the film crew, as family members helped to impart to the actors the nature of the men and women they were portraying.

*Society of the Snow* naturally focuses on what took place on the mountain, and only alludes to the social circumstances, mass popular unrest in Uruguay at the time of the disaster, toward the beginning. A large demonstration is taking place outside a cafe where the rugby group plan their trip. The film portrays the group as standing apart from the protests, which is not entirely inaccurate. The young men from the Old Christian Rugby team were from middle class backgrounds, and for the most part had not entered into the political upheavals happening around them.

The contribution by Pedro Algorta (Luciano Chatton) to Vierci's book tends to confirm as much when he writes that in 1972 "we were living in very frightening times—the Vietnam War, the reverberations from Paris '68, and in our own country there was a situation of unrest and disorder, on the brink of explosion. I studied Economics and I had a highly critical view of what was going on. In some way, during that time I wanted to change the world—something which set me apart from many of my companions in tragedy."

Other than this scene, little is indicated in *Society* about the social and political circumstances. It was in this context, however, that the search was called off far too soon and to the great pain of many family members, some of whom were compelled to take up their own searches, including most famously the father of José Luis "Coche" Inciarte (Simon Hempe), who led his own expedition.

The decision to stop the search was supported by all the South American governments involved, including Uruguayan president Jorge Pacheco Areco, Chilean president Salvador Allende and Argentine military dictator General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse. Each initially sent search and rescue aircraft, but agreed to call off the hunt for crash survivors after eight days.

Had rescue operations continued and the survivors been located, there is a good chance many more lives could have been saved, particularly if rescuers had reached the group prior to the avalanche on day 17.

At the time of the crash, however, Pacheco's government was facing an existential political and economic crisis, fueled by high inflation and the explosive growth of demonstrations by the working class and youth. Pacheco and the Uruguayan ruling elite were focused on repression of left-wing sentiment and suspending civil liberties. This included the banning of the Socialist Party of Uruguay, fighting the Che Guevara-inspired Tupamaros guerrillas, shutting down left-wing newspapers, suppressing labor unions and purging left-wing professors from universities.

Pacheco was also engaged in an effort to keep himself in power, disallowed by Uruguay's constitution, by holding a referendum that would have permitted him to run for a second term. The referendum was rejected by the population two-to-one, but the Colorado party remained in office by receiving the most total votes, which placed Juan Maria Bordaberry in the presidency.

Bordaberry handed over power to a military "security council" run by the army, air force and navy in exchange for keeping his position. The 1973 coup d'état put in place a bloody military dictatorship that lasted until 1985. The US government and military were directly involved in supporting the wave of military dictatorships that seized power throughout Latin America in Operation Condor.

If one might sum up the power of the drama represented in *Society of the Snow*: it puts the lie to the claim that human nature is innately brutal, individualistic and rotten à la William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, about a group of boys on a desert island, filled with cruelty, murder and the self-destruction of the group.

The Andes group endured due to heroism, selflessness and love for one another. Bayona's film is genuinely optimistic, powerful, deeply human. It argues very firmly that camaraderie, and not "every man for himself" individualism, is what prevails in the bleakest conditions.

It is only lamentable that *Society* has received only two Oscar nominations, as compared to Greta Gerwig's vapid *Barbie*, which received eight nominations from the well-to-do and gender-obsessed Hollywood milieu.

As noted, *Society* is available for streaming on Netflix and is now the second most-viewed non-English language film of all time on the platform. Within 11 days of its initial release, it had garnered 51 million views, reaching the top 10 non-English language films in 93 countries including the US, Germany, Brazil, France, the U.K. and Mexico. Its popularity is a testament to the widespread interest in serious filmmaking, and the power of art to strike a chord that reverberates and unites the world.



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