New Russian Cinema KinoKultura

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Evgenii Sheliakin: *Good as New* (*Kheppi-end* 2020)

reviewed by Lars Kristensen © 2021

The theme of Russians traveling abroad on film has a longstanding tradition in Soviet and Russian cinema, with memorable comedies such as *The Diamond Arm* (*Brilliantovaia ruka*, 1968) and *Window to Paris* (*Okno v Parizh*, 1993) representing the pinnacles of this tradition. In recent years, Thailand has become an important location in such films as Maksim Voronkov's *Stepanych's Voyage to Thailand* (*Taiskii voiazh Stepanicha*, 2005) or Natal'ia Uglitskikh's *On the Hook* (*Na kriuchke!*, 2011). The first of these films has certain similarities with Evgenii Sheliakin's *Happy End* (with the international distribution title *Good as New*), as they are both set almost entirely in Thailand. However, these comedies are told in remarkably different ways. Sheliakin is less interested in slapstick and puns on language barriers, but instead has his eyes on much harder questions like self-discovery, human well-being and whether happiness is possible at the tail end of a life.

The film starts in snowy Russia, in the countryside. We see a house with a few windows glowing. An elderly man sits on his bed and looks out of the window. There is a cut to him walking into town and we see him from behind, holding a dangling shopping bag. Cut to a sandy beach, the music is

now lightly upbeat. The camera zooms in on a hand, a foot, and the head, which has blood marks on the hairless scalp. It is the same man, but now in jeans and a long-sleeved striped undershirt (a *telnyashka*), and obviously robbed while on holiday. He is disorientated, gets up and looks around. The camera captures him as a lone figure on the sunny beach facing land, which is the same way that François Truffaut shot his 13-year-old character Antoine at the end of *400 Blows* (*Les Quatre Cents Coups*, 1959), freezing the frame as the boy stands with his back to the sea while looking straight at the camera (see illustration).

As an intertextual reference, the differences are notable too. Sheliakin's character is at the final stages of his life, on a warm sunny beach, and we are at the opening of the film as he wakes up—all of which indicates that this film is another spin on the personal identity search that Truffaut initiated. Indeed, Sheliakin's character has lost his memory and does not know who he is, which could suggest that the protagonist of *Happy End*, like Antoine, is on the road to self-discovery, but that the films are beginning at opposite ends.

Where Truffaut's semi-autobiographical character has to get ready for the future, the protagonist in *Happy End* needs to gain insight into his identity by rediscovering his past. The mugger's hard blow to his head has obliterated that past. When he approaches a fisherman further up the beach, he asks in Russian where he is, only to receive an answer in Thai. He wanders around, trying to sell his watch for some food but without any luck. As a last resort, he enters a chili-eating contest, betting his old timepiece. But the police take him in as he starts arguing about the result of the competition.

Enter Ekaterina Lvovna *alias* Irina (Evgeniia Dmitrieva), a seasoned Russian expat in Thailand, who runs a fashionable beach resort. She is asked to take in the stranded fellow countryman so that he does his community service at her resort to make amends for his unlawful debacle with the local fishermen. At first Irina is apprehensive about taking in the old chap ("not much of a worker," she mumbles), but eventually she agrees. Of course, later she will warm to him and his mysterious identity. Who is he, and why has he ended up in Thailand?

The amnesia narrative, where the protagonist wakes up having lost all recollection of himself, is not new to cinema. Of course, Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) springs to mind, but another example is Aki Kaurismäki's *The Man Without a Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, 2002). Where in computer games a protagonist with amnesia leads to explorations and search missions, in cinema a blank memory is a

way of improving the former self; it is about reinventing oneself due to a dislike of what emerges about the former self and/or a desire to live a new life. This is the case of Markku Peltola as M in *The Man Without a Past*, but also the elderly protagonist of *Happy End*.

The first tasks that he gets from Irina is to buy fish at the market early in the morning, but once he has a little sum of money in his hand, our mysterious pensioner turns out to have a special skill—trading. He returns to the fisherman to whom he lost his watch and proposes that they go fishing together. The identity-less hero trades the only thing he has—his labor—for a few kilos of fish, but with the added bonus that he can save Irina's money for himself.

On the boat, the two fishermen find a mutual understanding, and the boat's skipper introduces himself as Buncha (Charay Mueanprayun). When Buncha understands his companion's loss of memory, he hands over the watch that he won at the pepper-eating contest. It bears an inscription: "To Xenophon with love from the colleagues." Xenophon has a name—a first step to recovery. Maybe the name is also a clue to the role that this Russian pensioner is about to play in the Thai community.

As soon as the two men return to the harbor, the local fishing racketeer haggles with Buncha over the price of their catch. In fact, the "codfather" (see Goldfarb 2017) is also the owner of the boat, and of all the other boats in the harbor; Buncha only rents the boat and is forced to pay twice to the kingpin rentier, who is, according to Xenophon, a brutish thug. Xenophon knows the only way to deal with thugs: to stand up to them with even greater force. Fear is what thugs thrive on; once that is gone, there is only brute force to be reckoned with. Like his Greek namesake, Xenophon has an authoritative command of his surroundings, teaching his new-found friends emancipation from the rent-seeking business that has entrapped them.

While Xenophon (430-354 B.C.E.) was critical of Athenian democracy and more inclined toward an oligarchy run by a few strong sets of hands (Browning N.D.), our Xenophon is more of an astute wheeler-dealer on his way to building a small business empire. Soon, Xenophon has expanded Buncha's fishing enterprise to include all-inclusive tourist boat trips with photographers, chefs and diving instructors onboard. If Xenophon is a "strange voice" (xeno – strange, foreign; phono – voice) in this foreign landscape, he certainly understands how to forge for himself a space of his own in this earthly paradise.

In the tradition of cinematic heroes who have ventured abroad in Russian cinema, then, Xenophon cuts a strange figure. On the one hand, he encapsulates the Soviet Russian going abroad, or into space, to free the enslaved masses and be celebrated as a true hero; on the other hand, he is a brutish, stubborn and ignorant male hero, who cannot find peace with himself outside his native Russia. Xenophon is neither and both of these Russians abroad. He is an oddly contemporary colonizer with his business

adventure, but also a lonely figure searching for a lost self.

One of the reasons for Xenophon's duality can be ascribed to Mikheil Gomiashvili, who plays Xenophon. There is both comedy and tragedy in Gomiashvili's face every time he gets a clue thrown at him. The smell of a meal or an emotion from a family quarrel leads to visual flashbacks that have Gomiashvili looking both serious and perplexed at the same time. Xenophon is a character out of this (Thai) world—strange and foreign—but Gomiashvili grounds him in a subtle human humbleness.

This is not to take anything away from the actresses: in particular Evgeniia Dmitrieva, who plays Irina, stands out with an air of aloofness and superiority around her character—not one single bone in her body wants to return to Russia. The three female dancers who visit Irina's resort to make a video of their performance are unfortunately not as well scripted as Irina. Even if one of the dancers has an identity crisis that could be seen as mirroring Xenophon's, this storyline never gets any traction and serves more as a breathing space for the audience.

The fact that Gomiashvili is of Georgian origin endows Xenophon with an ambiguity that we only see in the best of the "Russians aboard" films, such as the two titles mentioned at the beginning of this review. Gomiashvili starred as the lead character in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The President* (2014), as well as in the smaller production of George Gachava's *The Enemies* (2017), which caught the attention of festival audiences. His performance in *Happy End* landed him the prize of Best Actor at the comedy film festival "Smile, Russia" (shared with Roman Kurtsyn) (Shulepova 2021). Casting Gomiashvili was a brave move by Sheliakin and his team, and it suggests that there is still a desire to breathe new life into the Russian abroad narrative. I will not spoil the ending here, because it is well worth waiting for and adds a wonderful holistic perspective to the film, as it brings the title of the film, *Happy End*, into question.

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Good as New / Happy-End, Russia, 2020
Color, 90 minutes
Director: Evgenii Sheliakin
Script: Konstantin Charmadov, Evgenii Sheliakin, Pavel Usachev
DoP Kseniia Sereda
Composr: Aleksei Aigi
Production Design: Tat'iana Zinchenko, Elena Dronova
Editing: Daniel Ovrutskii, Maria Sidel'nikova
Cast: Mikheil Gomiashvili, Evgeniia Dmitrieva, Vladimir Mishukov, Charay Mueanprayun, Roza Khairullina, Evgenii Sangadzhiev, Alina Astrovskaia, Polina Pushkaruk, Anastasia Somova
Producers: Vasilii Soloviev, Iulia Mishkinene, Iurii Khrapov
Production: Vita Activa, 2D Celluloid

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