Never Gonna Snow Again: Polish film combines the social and the supernatural

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Directed by Ma?gorzata Szumowska and Michal Englert; written by Szumowska and Englert

A tall young man carrying few belongings walks through a lush, eerie forest. His journey takes him along desolate bridges and through an underpass until he crosses from Ukraine into Poland. Arriving at an immigration office, he tells a creaky bureaucrat simply, "I'd like to live here." The stranger seems vaguely familiar to the official, who begins to feel unusual and suddenly begs for the stranger's help. Moments later, the latter walks out of the building carrying the official document that he needs.

So begins *Never Gonna Snow Again* (2020), Poland's official submission to the 93rd Academy Awards, which were held in April. The film recently had its theatrical release in the US. Ma?gorzata Szumowska, one of its directors (the other is Michael Englert), is known on the international festival circuit for films such as *Elles* (2011), which starred Juliette Binoche.

The mysterious immigrant is named Zhenia (Alec Utgoff, *Stranger Things*). He has a broad, inscrutable face and an uncanny ability to win people's confidence. We learn that he was born near the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, seven years to the day before it happened. This Russian speaker claims to know every language and has no apparent difficulty with Polish.

Soon Zhenia has established himself as a freelance masseur in a gated community of white "McMansions." The majority of his wealthy clients are women of a certain age who send their children to the French school. They address him by his first name and freely (and sometimes unconsciously) reveal their preoccupations, insecurities and prejudices. Zhenia indulges them and says little.

Maria (Maja Ostaszewska), one of Zhenia's clients, has hostile children and an indifferent husband. She takes refuge in wine and cigarettes. As Zhenia massages her, she chatters about feckless delivery drivers whom one can't communicate with because "they're all Pakistanis or Ukrainians." Suddenly realizing her gaffe, she apologetically reassures Zhenia that he is different. He responds mildly that he is not offended.

Zhenia makes stereotyped remarks to his clients about the stress he can feel as he massages them. He names what he "knows" to be its causes. He also flatters the women by guessing, from the feel of their muscles, that they are younger than they are. One woman, Ewa (Agata Kulesza, *Ida*), calls him out on it. Educated and steely, Ewa sees Zhenia as naive. Yet this widow with a history of anxiety and a sullen, somewhat menacing son seems to need Zhenia's company. Who is in charge?

It emerges that Zhenia also performs hypnosis, and his clients soon ask for this service, too. One man who has cancer (Lukasz Simlat) swears by Zhenia. He feels rejuvenated after every visit and believes that Zhenia has healing powers. His wife (Weronika Rosati) observes Zhenia in silence.

At times, one fears that Zhenia's gentleness might conceal something dangerous. But, instead of taking advantage of his hypnotized clients, he plays piano or breaks into a dance as graceful as it is improbable.

The film treats its affluent characters with a certain sympathy and a touch of grotesquerie. The performances of Ostaszewska and Kulesza stand out.

At the end of the day, Zhenia walks home to the unwelcoming concrete building where he has a narrow, dim apartment. A socioeconomic gulf separates him from his clientele. Light and color underscore this

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difference: Zhenia's room is bathed in golden twilight, in contrast to the cold white and neutral grays of the gated community.

In his room, he thinks about his mother, who died when he was a child. The two appear in otherworldly flashbacks, standing in overgrown grass as strange, glinting particles fall. At her wake, Zhenia held his hands above his mother's corpse, trying to heal her. He finds that he still has the power of telekinesis he discovered as a child. Loud knocks on the door often break Zhenia's reveries, but there is not always anyone there. One day, he finds only a cryptic note from a prospective client who is waiting for him.

The only time that Zhenia lets down his guard is when he finally has a drink with the community's Ukrainian gatekeeper, who has been persistently inviting him. Slightly drunk, the two zip around the sleeping neighborhood on electric scooters. Zhenia happily shouts that he is a superhero who will save everyone.

The movie takes place in fall and winter, but we do not see snow. Occasionally, a character makes a remark to the effect that it will never snow again. Responding to one such comment, Zhenia says, "I've heard that, too, but maybe it will." The film thus raises the issue of global warming, but only in glancing references.

Utgoff is intriguing as Zhenia. He moves easily, and the appeal that Zhenia has for his clients is understandable. Yet Zhenia seems more like a composite of traits and behaviors than a fully developed character. He is mysterious, but the mystery ultimately does not seem to be of much consequence.

The movie itself resembles a patchwork of elements that do not add up to a whole. Promisingly, it raises issues of class, nationality, immigration, loneliness and desire. Introducing an interview with co-director Szumowska, *Deadline* commented that "Poland has generated some fresh class distinctions since communist days" and that *Never Gonna Snow Again* examines those distinctions "with a shrewd and merciless eye."

Deadline observed that the "concept of gated communities for the rich is quite a new thing for former Eastern bloc nations," but the other director, Englert, maintains that "It's quite common [in Poland]. This is something that kind of describes this pretty fresh democracy fascinated by capitalism."

Polish and other eastern European filmmakers are beginning to take up important social questions, but their efforts reveal the damage caused by Stalinist rule and the ongoing propaganda barrage claiming the later was "communism." The issues here (and in a number of other Polish, Romanian and Hungarian films) still receive desultory attention rather than sustained examination. The movie hints and alludes instead of presenting ideas that have been fully thought through.

In *Never Gonna Snow Again*, we get little sense of the larger world in which the wealthy clients, their odd children and immigrants like Zhenia and the gatekeeper live. The Polish state, which is linked closely with the Catholic Church, is in the hands of the right-wing Law and Justice Party. It has tightened restrictions on abortion and responded to mass protests with police violence. It is promoting far-right and anti-Semitic movements and persecut ing historians and journalists who investigate Poland's role in the Holocaust. These realities find no expression or even a hint in the film.

Beautiful long shots effectively depict and contrast the gated community with Zhenia's neglected neighborhood. The directors successfully create eerie moments, too. When under hypnosis, Zhenia's clients find themselves in a half-lit forest that gives the impression of being underwater.

But neither the social commentary nor the supernatural elements are developed to a conclusion. And because of the film's episodic structure, these two sides do not always cohere. For these reasons, *Never Gonna Snow Again* is ultimately unsatisfying.

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