

# Leviathan: A latter-day Job

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*Directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev; written by Zvyagintsev and Oleg Negin*

Russian filmmaker Andrey Zvyagintsev's Oscar-nominated *Leviathan* is a dark tale about an individual struggling against the power of the state in contemporary Russia.

Kolya (Alexei Serebriakov), an auto mechanic living in a small town on a peninsula in the Barents Sea in northwestern Russia, faces the threat of his house and land being seized by a greedy and crooked mayor, Vadim Shelevyat (Roman Madyanov). Kolya lives with his second wife, Lilya (Elena Lyadova), who works in a fish processing plant, and his restless, angry son from a first marriage, Roman (Sergey Pokhdaev). There are various strains in the family, not helped by Kolya's heavy drinking. The corrupt Vadim is able to buy up the beautiful cottage Kolya constructed with his own hands, located on prime waterfront property, for a fraction of its price. All of Kolya's legal appeals against the "purchase" are denied by the courts. In the pursuit of his case, Kolya has enlisted the aid of his old army friend, Dmitri (Vladimir Vdovichenkov), a lawyer from Moscow.

After the case is dismissed, Vadim, unhappy with Kolya's continuing resistance, pays the family a threatening night visit, accompanied by thuggish bodyguards. He drunkenly tells Kolya he has no rights and never will.

Dmitri comes up with seemingly damning material on the mayor and attempts, single-handedly, to force him to retreat. At first, Vadim seems daunted, but encouraged by a cunning, hypocritical Russian Orthodox bishop, he responds with an iron fist. Meanwhile, Lilya's affair with her husband's lawyer helps set in motion an ultimately tragic series of events.

This latest work, which has already won Zvyagintsev (born 1964 in Novosibirsk) the Golden Globe for the Best Foreign Language Film, the prize for best screenplay at last year's Cannes Film Festival and a 2015 Oscar nomination, is the director's fourth feature film, following *The Return* (2003), *The Banishment* (2007) and *Elena* (2011).

In certain ways, *Leviathan* is strong and haunting. Its gloom and desperation, its picture of annihilating indifference and spiritual destruction match the coldness of the landscape of near-Arctic Europe. A leviathan-whale briefly breaches the surface in one of the spectacular scenes, while the skeleton of a beached baleen dominates the landscape in another. The cinematography of Mikhail Krichman is sublime. The avoidance of vivid colors and the wide lens transmit the dominant feeling of human aloneness. The long takes create the impression of events passing in "real time."

Kolya, with his wrinkled, windswept face, resembles a statue of

a working man sculpted by the elements and represents resilience. His younger wife, burdened by hard work at the fish processing plant, is starved for love and craves the opportunity to escape the monotony of provincial life.

Kolya and his family are unable to find justice because "the divine being" that controls *Leviathan*, the mythological beast of power, is omnipotent and unpredictable. The individual in Zvyagintsev's world has no control over his or her fate; the irrationality and cruelty of life is inevitable, and resistance seems futile. In one scene, Mayor Vadim tells Kolya and his family "You are all insects." The power he represents will soon swallow them all like a whale swallows plankton.

The harsh critique of the Russian state backed by the Russian Orthodox Church officialdom, police and judiciary system has opened a Pandora's box in the director's native country. Zvyagintsev came under fire for "offending Russian authorities and the holy Orthodox Church," many nationalists labeling his film "anti-Russian." Angry critics demanded that Samara theater director Valeriy Grishko, who plays the Orthodox bishop, be sacked from his job for his "dirty and cynical parody."

All in all, numerous elements in *Leviathan* strike one as authentic and true. Unlike a good many other eastern European and Russian film directors at present, Zvyagintsev is not a charlatan and his sincerity is not in question. However, a thoroughly convincing and gripping work of art requires more than individually striking moments and performances. In some important fashion, the artist must be coming to terms with the central problems of his or her time.

Unhappily, there is also a great deal in *Leviathan* that is problematic, contradictory and even contrived. Analysis reveals that significant aspects of the drama have not been taken from life, but serve instead to bolster the filmmaker's confused and pessimistic view of life and humanity.

There are major dramatic implausibilities in the film that weaken and warp it. It is impossible to discuss some of these without revealing crucial plot twists and turns, so the reader who has not seen Zvyagintsev's work should beware.

For example, the film presents Dmitri as a savvy lawyer from Moscow, someone not green behind the ears. Yet he marches into the office of Mayor Vadim, throws down a file of damning evidence and attempts singlehandedly to blackmail the official into pulling back from his thieving efforts. Dmitri has already seen that Vadim employs goons. In contemporary Russia, is it farfetched to imagine the mayor resorting to violence and even murder? Vadim does precisely what we would expect of him, and Dmitri, lucky to be alive, scuttles back to Moscow. His conduct is not at all in

keeping with the social type the filmmaker has created.

The behavior of Lilya, Kolya's wife, is quite questionable in certain respects. The filmmaker paints her as mature, level-headed and loving, appalled perhaps by her husband's drinking. And yet she launches into an affair with Dmitri while Kolya is still in jail, where he faces who knows what sort of treatment. Worse still, she and Dmitri proceed to have sex where her husband can easily find them, shaking up their "common front" against Vadim and helping to bring about the tragic denouement.

Why are there such implausibilities, and others, and what can we see shining through the various holes in the story?

The situation in the former Soviet Union, which forms the background to *Leviathan*, the film itself and Zvyagintsev's own artistic-intellectual approach are complex and contradictory phenomena. The terrible social and ideological regression that has taken place since 1991 has had a devastating effect on art and cultural life in the former Stalinist-ruled countries. "Socialism" having been officially discredited, every sort of intellectual poison has seeped or poured into the vacuum, including orthodox Christianity and obscurantism, Russian nationalism and anti-Semitism, various forms of nihilism, postmodernism in an especially cynical form, and much more.

One might say, all things considered, Zvyagintsev doesn't strike one as the worst of the current lot. He says some very stupid and ignorant things ("Putin understands as well as Lenin did, he talked about cinema as the most important art form, to feed the propaganda machine"), but one has to remember that he is the product (and victim) of a historical tragedy of the first order.

In any event, the filmmaker seems to be in the power of distinct and opposed impulses. Clearly, he is horrified by many aspects of contemporary Russian society, where a handful of gangster-oligarchs holds sway. However, both ideological and social pressures, including perhaps despair over the possibility of any transformation taking place, prevent him from expressing that directly or consistently. Similarly to many of his global filmmaking confreres, in the face of the obvious, he tediously asserts that *Leviathan* is meant as a timeless parable about the human condition.

Typically, for example, Zvyagintsev told an interviewer from the *Los Angeles Times*: "Perhaps there is a social criticism; however, it's secondary ... It's more about the parallel to the Book of Job ... Perhaps people read things into it and they see social criticism. People are very involved in the political reality because that's what people know." He sums it up, referring to his film, "You can say that it's a tragedy of human destiny."

On another occasion, in an interview with *Russia Now* in 2012, when commenting on his film *Elena*, about a working class woman who becomes involved with a wealthy businessman and sets her sights on his fortune, the director remarked: "It is a pity many people tend to see things in terms of rich and poor; the bourgeoisie and the common people. I am amazed critics identify this as the core of the film, ignoring what to me is the main message. It is the story of the heroine's inner state of her fall." It is this sort of comment, and the indifferent attitude toward social life in the film itself, that attracts a good portion of the complacent, well-heeled and often misanthropic art film world, which is

currently hailing *Leviathan*.

Speaking again about *Elena*, Zvyagintsev told an interviewer from Metro.us, "The last thing I was concerned about was the division of society into classes. I'm more interested in moral issues." But, schizophrenically, he went on: "There's a very wide gap today that divides very few rich people from the majority of the poor people. It's not that I want to emphasize it; it's just there."

Using the symbolism of the Book of Job, Zvyagintsev in part turns *Leviathan* into the moral allegory of a universal fight between good and evil. Mayor Vadim, guarded by armed goons and advised by a Rasputin-like Orthodox priest, represents the absolute sovereign of the "commonwealth," or Satan. Kolya, an individual who does not consent to the social contract he finds unjust, is a tried, righteous, ultimately resigned Job, who asks his creator "Why me?"

Zvyagintsev lacks a broader social and historical perspective, above all, insight into the Russian Revolution and its fate. This leads him to blame humanity, not the social order, for the present predicament. He asserted in the same interview with *Russia Now*: "We are all victims of one and the same drama. We are at once the cause and consequence of all our woes."

But such miserable ideas are very damaging to an artist. Zvyagintsev is unable, ultimately, to extend great or at least sufficient sympathy to his characters. After all, through hubris, lust, selfishness, anger, alcoholism and other sins, they are "the cause" of their own downfall. Even *Leviathan*'s treatment of Kolya is somewhat cold. His fate is not enormously moving. The filmmaker has other metaphysical fish to fry. In fact, perhaps the most emotionally compelling shot in the film has no humans in it: it is of heavy equipment tearing down Kolya's house.

One's response to *Leviathan*, finally, is as contradictory and internally conflicted as the film itself. Portions of the work accurately reflect life and reality, but social facts and pressures, like a gravitational force, bend much of the film in false and deeply disoriented ways.



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