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Leviathan

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Leviathan* (2014), directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev.

Author Notes

Denis J. Bekkering is a Ph.D. Candidate in Religious Studies at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. His dissertation project explores "unfaithful" fan followings of controversial American televangelists. In addition to religion and film, his research interests include religion and media, religion and popular culture, and religion and sport.

Andrey Zvyagintsev's fourth feature, *Leviathan*, tackles themes that thread through his work: truth, death, justice, and human responses to the inscrutable, inevitable, and unfair. Opening with shots of the brutal majesty of the Barents Sea, Zvyagintsev leads us past frigid waters, primordial rockscapes, and rotten wooden ships to a hilltop, bayside home on the outskirts of a small town. Middle-aged mechanic Kolya (Aleksey Serebryakov) drives to the train station to pick up Dmitriy (Vladimir Vdovichenkov), an old army friend and Moscovite lawyer enlisted to help battle the expropriation of his family's property by the greedy mayor Vadim (Roman Madyanov). Kolya warmly embraces his would-be savior, little aware that Dmitriy's presence will further inflame Vadim's efforts to crush him under the weight of an irredeemably corrupt system, and tear at his relationships with wife Lilya (Elena Lyadova) and teenage son Roma (Sergey Pokhodaev).

Leviathan's debt to the Book of Job is made explicit in a late scene. Battered by disloyalty, loss, and political strength, a drunken Kolya gazes pitifully out at the roiling sea and voices the age-old question of the nearly defeated: "Why, Lord?" Recharging his Vodka supplies at a shop he is greeted by Father Vasiliy (Igor Sergeev), filling a bag with loaves of bread for the poor. "Well," Kolya challenges the priest on the shop's steps, "where's your merciful God Almighty?" "Mine is with me," Father Vasiliy counters, "As for yours I wouldn't know...Haven't seen you in church." Father Vasiliy's subtle endorsement of the Orthodox Church as a source of salvation is decidedly ironic as, unknown to the pair, the diocese's well-fed and financed bishop (Valeriy Grishko) urges an uncertain Vadim to rule with a heavy hand. "All power comes from God," the bishop sternly lectures the anxious mayor, "Where there's power, there's might. If you hold power in your territory, solve your issues yourself, with your

might.” Although Father Vasiliy may distribute daily bread to the downtrodden, his superior makes certain that they will always remain so under a veil of fear.

Through the caricatures of Vadim and the bishop, Zvyagintsev satirizes the collusion of Christianity and politics in contemporary Russia, and queries the religious authenticity and sincerity of a privileged and conservative Orthodox elite. The bishop’s closed-door advising of Vadim to forcefully deploy his power is ironically punctuated by a slow zoom on a bust of the suffering Christ, and juxtaposed, in a grimly comedic fashion, with a later sermon in which he publicly pronounces that the divine is not to be found in “strength,” but rather “love.” While the bishop promotes the Orthodox Church as a bastion of truth, morality, and order in a restless nation beset by ‘the enemy, Zvyagintsev argues that it is instead an agent of that ancient chaos referenced in the film’s title, visually symbolized through a surfacing whale glimpsed by Lilya at the height of her own despair, and a hulking, sun-bleached skeleton of the same lying at the feet of a distraught Roma as he weeps over his bleak and confusing circumstances.

Asked by a defiant Kolya whether his situation would improve if he submitted to the authority of the church, Father Vasiliy concedes his ignorance – “Our Lord moves in mysterious ways” – while also relaying God’s declaration of humanity’s impotence in the face of apparent chaos, as written in the 41st chapter of Job: “Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook, or tie down its tongue with a rope? Will it keep begging you for mercy? Will it speak to you with gentle words? Nothing on earth is its equal. It is king over all that are proud.” Comparing Kolya to Job, who was likewise ‘preoccupied with the meaning of life’ as he underwent unbelievable hardship, Father Vasiliy points out that the latter was blessed only after he had “resigned himself to his fate.” Although it is a well-intended lesson, Father Vasiliy unwittingly encourages Kolya’s acquiescence not to the mysteries of God, but to the injustices piled upon him by, in large part,

the priest's own church. Whatever small comfort it may offer its adherents, Zvyagintsev portrays the Russian Orthodox Church as an essentially unspiritual extension of a governing system maintained through deception, intimidation, and control. During the bishop's abovementioned sermon, preached before an attentive group of the area's elite, Vadim's young son looks up at the whitewashed ceiling of a newly constructed church, a gleamingly sterile edifice to the dominant order. Glancing at an overseeing icon of Christ, Vadim leans down and whispers an affectionate warning to his child – "God sees everything, son" – thereby directing him to obey the will of God as conveyed by the fraudulent church, through which, the bishop paradoxically promises, lies the path to true 'freedom.'

This scene inversely echoes one earlier in the film, in which a stumblingly drunk Kolya shouts out for his own son in the ruins of an abandoned church on the town's outskirts, claimed by local teenagers as a hangout. Informed that Roma had left for home not long before, Kolya, slumped against a brick wall, pulls from his jacket a half-full bottle of Vodka, tips it back, and gulps desperately. He looks longingly to the dark heavens beyond the church's dilapidated ceiling, yet finds no answers. Teetering on the brink of oblivion, his eyes land on a decaying fresco of the beheading of John the Baptist, a stark reminder that even God's most faithful servants are vulnerable to the destructive whims of the world's rulers. Although it offers no solace to the tortured Kolya, Zvyagintsev presents the crumbling building as an ironic antithesis to the town's authorized house of worship. Sharing cigarettes, beer, and laughter by a roaring fire, Roma and his friends find, in the dead church, freedom and fellowship unknown to those gathered within its sparkling, 'living' counterpart.

It is in these moments that Zvyagintsev hints at the possibility of respite and salvation for the persecuted, as in a promise of care made to Roma by family friends Pasha (Aleksey Rozin)

and Angela (Anna Ukolova), thus preventing him from being swallowed up by the state like his father. What will not necessarily set one free, however, is the truth, as discovered by the staunchly secular lawyer Dmitriy. Justice being inaccessible through official channels, Dmitriy resorts to blackmail to aid Kolya, having uncovered considerable ‘dirt’ on the oppressive Vadim. Presented with a detailed record of his damnable acts, Vadim attempts to establish some common ground with his antagonist by asking whether he has been baptized. “I’m a lawyer, Vadim,” Dmitriy replies, “I believe in facts.” Yet, without adequate power to back them, Dmitriy’s truths ultimately leave him bloodied and bruised, as does his hidden betrayal of Kolya, once brought to light.

In the end Zvyagintsev leads us out of his engrossing human drama the same way we came in, adding striking shots of Leviathan’s snow-dappled bones – a silent testimony to the deadly disorder of his nation. An exquisitely shot, expertly acted, and moving film, *Leviathan* well deserves its many international accolades.