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## Corruption as Shared Culpability: Religion, Family, and Society in Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014)

### Abstract

This article engages in close analysis of how Andrey Zvyagintsev depicts corruption and its various manifestations: moral, familial, societal, and institutional, in *Leviathan* (*Leviafan*, 2014). While other post-Soviet films address the problem of prevalent corruption in Russia, Zvyagintsev's work is the first to provoke strong public reactions, not only from government and Russian Orthodox Church officials, but also from Orthodox and political activist groups. The film demonstrates that the instances of legal and moral failings in one aspect of existence are a sign of a much deeper and wider-ranging problem that affects all other spheres of human experience. By elevating corruption from a well-known and accepted mundane problem to a religio-philosophical one, *Leviathan* creates a sense of shared culpability that underpins contemporary Russian society.

### Keywords

*Leviathan*; Zvyagintsev; corruption; Orthodoxy; Job; family; social disintegration

### Author Notes

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## Introduction

Religion is one of the most powerful factors shaping the post-Soviet experience in the twenty-first century, from (re)building places of worship to aligning post-socialist national identities with dominant confessions. The wide range of religious tropes, symbols, and imagery, once again readily available for use by artists, directors, and writers, has also fundamentally impacted cultural production, from exhibits dedicated to (re)defining the concept of religion and anti-clerical performances to Orthodox romance novels and films re-examining the role of organized religion during the Soviet period. In the context of the heightened visibility of religion in the post-Soviet public sphere, film director Andrey Zvyagintsev stands out as an artist whose work is deeply and meaningfully engaged with Biblical tropes and narratives. His oeuvre of five full-length feature films to date includes *The Return* (*Vozvrashchenie*, 2003), *Banishment* (*Izgnanie*, 2007), *Elena* (2011), *Leviathan* (*Leviatan*, 2014), and *Loveless* (*Neliubov'*, 2017). These movies probe such moral-philosophical questions as the meaning of family and faith, as well as such problems as the impact of material and social conditions on an individual's life and ethics. While deeply moving and beautifully shot, Zvyagintsev's films rarely cause controversy as he avoids overtly political topics and his examination of social and moral problems takes on timeless mytho-poetic qualities. That is, until the release of his fourth full-length feature film, *Leviathan*,

which uses Job's story to contemplate and assess the human condition in contemporary Russia.

The film's depiction of religious, political, and social problems in a realistic style, combined with allusions to controversial current events, began polarizing audiences even before its official release in Russia in early 2015. The movie was first shown at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival and immediately received wide international acclaim, winning a number of foreign film awards in 2014 and 2015.<sup>1</sup> *Leviathan's* reception in Russia, however, evoked accusations of blasphemy and hatred of the motherland alongside the high praise.<sup>2</sup> Zvyagintsev was hailed as the heir to Andrei Tarkovsky<sup>3</sup> – the Soviet auteur director par excellence – and the socially engaged Soviet cinema of the 1970s and 1980s; simultaneously, he was reviled for producing an *a la carte* film for Western audiences that lacks in genuine Russian content.<sup>4</sup> The domestic critics' dismissal of *Leviathan* as inauthentic and irrelevant, however, does not account for the acute reactions provoked by the movie among politicians, clergy, and activists. These wide-spread negative critical responses in Russia reveal a deeply-seated uneasiness about contemporary social and political realities in the Russian Federation.

In this article, I aim, firstly, to enrich the existing scholarship on Andrey Zvyagintsev and *Leviathan* by employing the idea of corruption as a metaphor for the various moral, religious, social and political processes shaping contemporary Russian society. Secondly, by unpacking the significance of corruption as an

ideological and theological concept, my goal is to offer a possible explanation for the unprecedented strong reactions to the film, despite its Biblical subtext.<sup>5</sup> *Leviathan* demonstrates that moral and physical decay, in all its forms, does not exist in isolation, but is a testament to a process of degeneration affecting all levels of human existence: narratives, institutions, interpersonal relations, and the material conditions. Presenting corruption as a state of being, rather than simply a legal-bureaucratic problem, *Leviathan* suggests the idea of shared culpability, provoking, as a result, discussions, reactions, and actions from individual viewers, as well as institutional and non-governmental actors.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the film has become one of the most powerful examples of post-secular art in contemporary Russia.

### **Corruption as a Theoretical Concept**

Recent scholarship dedicated to Andrey Zvyagintsev and *Leviathan* ranges from general overviews of its structure and cultural significance to more focused analyses of the title's implication, the director's use of space or the film's function within a wider cinematic landscape.<sup>7</sup> *Leviathan* also serves as a symptomatic case study of wider political and ideological problems in contemporary Russia.<sup>8</sup> However, despite the rich secondary sources dedicated to the director and his oeuvre, the film's central theme of corruption remains largely unexamined. To an extent, this is explained by the fact that the institutional malpractices in the film are depicted so straightforwardly as to need no further unpacking to be understood.

However, the instances of what can be considered traditional corruption – racketeering, blackmail, and behind-the-scenes deals – are only a small part of a much larger problem, both social and existential, that plagues *Leviathan*'s world. I propose using the concept of corruption, a complex and multilayered phenomenon, as a new interpretative framework for the film.

The term “corruption” in English comes from the Latin (*corrupto, corruptus, corrumpere*) and has preserved its multifaceted meaning. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, in contemporary usage, it can be defined as “dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power, typically involving bribery,” as well as “the action of making someone or something morally depraved” and “decay; putrefaction.” In Russian, there is no one term that combines all these meanings. The most literal equivalent, *korruptziia*, is limited to the legal-political sphere. In the Russian-language Bible, originally translated from the Greek, the various connotations of corruption are interpreted as “depravity,” “debauchery,” or “sinfulness.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the concept of corruption, however it might be translate in various languages, and the way it is used in the Holy Scriptures is a productive framework that can help bring together an analysis of *Leviathan*'s depiction of such disparate elements as familial dynamics, material conditions, and institutional malpractices.

### **The Individual vs Institutional Authority**

*Leviathan's* ability to provoke reactions from a wide range of audiences is due, to a great extent, to the message of shared culpability. Institutional corruption is presented not as an outside factor, but as intrinsically linked to personal failure and social disintegration, which facilitate the individual's destruction by the institutional machine. The protagonist's fight against injustice is doomed from the start due to the indifference of his family, friends, and neighbors.

The film's premise centers on a legal land dispute between a mechanic, named Nikolai (Kolya), living in a small village in the Russian Far North, and the local mayor, Vadim. Kolya owns a large and well-appointed house that also serves as his place of business. The land is coveted by a local bishop who is able to recruit the mayor's help in his attempts to procure the property for the Russian Orthodox Church. In an attempt to keep his home and livelihood, Kolya sends for an old army friend, Dmitri (Dima) – an influential Moscow lawyer with connections in high places. Dima's efforts, however, fail to prevent the court's ruling against the mechanic. The subsequent attempt at blackmail backfires and he is threatened with murder. In the meantime, Kolya's family is slowly falling apart, indicated by the love affair between Dima and Kolya's second wife, Lilya. After their infidelity is discovered, the lawyer returns to Moscow while Lilya remains behind, but soon after disappears without a trace. It is unclear what exactly occurs, but when her dead body is discovered a few days later, Kolya is accused of her murder and

sentenced to prison. The mechanic's house and workshop are demolished and a new church is built on top of their foundations. His son, Roma, is to be brought up by his friends.

In the post-Soviet period, real estate ownership is both a desirable commodity and a marker and guarantee of economic security and social success. Acquiring and retaining property, however, is becoming progressively more difficult due to a rapidly growing economic gap.<sup>10</sup> *Leviathan's* depiction of Kolya's house, thus, touches upon universal desires for domestic happiness and stability; the home's destruction, consequently, plays on unspoken, but prevalent fears engendered by a weak rule of law.

While the desire for private property and its significance for the family are a central social concern in contemporary Russia, they are relatively uncommon themes in Russian-language art.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, in order to articulate his ideas, Zvyagintsev finds inspiration for the plot in two foreign examples: the story of an American man, Marvin Heemeyer, of whom he heard during his 2008 visit to New York and a novella by Heinrich von Kleist.<sup>12</sup> In 2004, Heemeyer went on a rampage in a modified bulldozer in Granby, Colorado as a sign of protest against the court's ruling against him. He was dissatisfied with the town's decision to build a cement factory that would prevent access to his workshop. Heemeyer shut himself in the bulldozer and, after destroying his shop and damaging city hall and several other buildings, shot himself.<sup>13</sup>



Kleist's novella, *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810), is also based on a real-life example and explores the idea of justice outside the social system. The plot is a fictionalized account of the life of a sixteenth-century merchant, Hans Kolhase, who attempted to dispute an unfair and arbitrary fine imposed on him by a nobleman. The court denied his demands for justice, and, outraged, Kolhase issued a challenge to the province of Saxony, as a whole. He formed a band of outlaws, and, purportedly, began a reign of terror, burning down villages and robbing travelers until he was captured and executed. Kleist's novella depicts the polis as morally compromised and suggests that justice must be enacted by an exceptional individual outside of institutional structures.<sup>14</sup>

Because of the Western origins of these stories, one of the major criticisms against *Leviathan* is that the film must be intended for non-Russian audiences.<sup>15</sup> Zvyagintsev's particular aesthetics and arthouse style, captured masterfully by his preferred cinematographer, Mikhail Krichman, often relegate him to the film festival director category, implying that his work is meant for international critics, rather than domestic audiences. Indeed, his first two films establish an auteur vision of the human condition as transcending national, political, and temporal boundaries and fundamentally shaped by individual faith.<sup>16</sup> *Leviathan* is no different. In addition to the two real-life accounts mentioned above, the director also refers to the *Book of Job* as a source of inspiration, since it also examines the idea of a conflict between an individual and a higher power.<sup>17</sup> Despite their temporal,

cultural and geographic distance, the narratives inspiring the film's plot share fundamental similarities that underscore *Leviathan's* universality. The film's general message about injustice, moral failings, and the individual's struggle against higher powers is anchored to real and recognizable places and extradiegetic events,<sup>18</sup> marking *Leviathan* as a much more context-specific, or "Russian," work than Zvyagintsev's *The Return* or *Banishment*. In its contemporaneity, the film is more similar to *Elena* and *Loveless*, both of which are clearly and purposefully set in present-day Moscow. All of the director's films deal with the problem of the family and its disintegration, in some form or another, but *Leviathan* is the work that most overtly connects familial, social and moral disintegration to the concept of corruption, as a whole.

In order to explore and dramatize the far-reaching consequences of a corrupt state in the post-Soviet context, *Leviathan* focuses on Kolya's struggles to preserve his ancestral home cum family archive in the face of unjustified institutional demands. A house often stands in for man-made order, stability, and legitimacy, as well as a person's psyche.<sup>19</sup> The story of the building's creation by Kolya's grandfather and father and the photographs on its walls depicting the region's past clearly demonstrate that the building is not simply a material possession, but embodies the history of this place and its people. In a sense, it is a temple dedicated to Kolya's family. In the absence of both historical continuity and organized religion during the Soviet period, blood connections could serve as an alternative

way of creating personal and group identity. The house's destruction, then, is the result of a corrupt legal process and a symbolic obliteration of the protagonist's memories and past: his very personality.

The whale, the second leitmotif in the film, embodies corruption-as-decay on the social, moral, and physical levels.<sup>20</sup> The carcass brings together the literal monster mentioned in the *Book of Job* and the metaphorical leviathan from the 1651 eponymous political treatise by Thomas Hobbes. The director claims that he was not aware of Hobbes' work initially, but that after becoming familiar with the political treatise it helped shape his understanding and depiction of the relationship between state, church and the individual.<sup>21</sup>

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes proposes the notion that the natural human condition is of "war of every one against every one."<sup>22</sup> In order to achieve a peaceful society, it is necessary to create a state, or a commonwealth, made up of all its citizens and ruled by a strong sovereign who will impress only one religion on his subjects and will have the right to defend his power by whatever means necessary. This socio-political structure is what Hobbes calls the leviathan.<sup>23</sup> The Biblical term in this context underscores that in the human world institutions are the tool of the absolute sovereign.



Figure 1: Roma sitting next to the whale skeleton.

Zvyagintsev's film undermines the belief that an authoritarian state under a strong leader is the solution to the natural human condition of war and chaos. As the director himself articulates it, "Thomas Hobbes was fundamentally mistaken to idealize the state."<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, the physical fighting and implied off-screen violence, the villagers' living conditions, and the various injustices suffered by the film's characters belie the promise of a financially secure and conflict-free existence under an authoritarian leader. On the other hand, the whale skeleton could suggest that the social and institutional order depicted in the film have nothing to do with the Hobbesian concept of a well-organized state. The metaphorical leviathan has been killed and abandoned.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Biblical Leviathan**

Since the Hobbesian leviathan is a creation consisting of all its citizens, the symbolic decomposition taking place on an institutional level would also imply social and personal failings. In this way, the whale skeleton also exemplifies the loss of divine authority. The link between the political treatise and the Old Testament is established during a conversation between Kolya and Dima early on in the film when the lawyer refers to the mayor as a “monster” (*chudovishche*) and uses the phrase “with fasting and praying” (*postom i molitvoi*) to describe their strategy of resisting the state demands. The original Russian word is the same one traditionally used to describe the leviathan. Dima’s words conflate the town official who represents the state with the Old Testament creature, which symbolizes divine authority. Both have clearly lost their power.

The degradation of the divine is further demonstrated by the literal corruption of Job’s story as retold by the village priest. The original Old Testament narrative is traditionally interpreted as underlining the limitations of human understanding when faced with divine will and justice, where the monster leviathan serves as a stand-in for God’s omnipotence. The Book of Job juxtaposes two narratives: the interaction between God and Satan, resulting in God’s decision to test Job; and Job’s attempts to understand and manage the misfortunes that befall him for no apparent reason: his wealth and family are taken away and then he himself becomes gravely ill. His friends attempt to help by telling him to repent for

whatever sin Job has committed. However, God appears and condemns Job's friends: as someone who can create the leviathan his power is so great that no human can pretend to understand divine will and to pass judgement on others. Misfortunes are not a proof of guilt and vice versa – success and happiness are not necessarily the signs of a pious life.

The film's version of Job's story, however, is fundamentally inaccurate. While waiting for news on Lilya, Kolya runs into the local priest, who engages him in a conversation. According to him, Job's problem was questioning the meaning of life and, by extension, God's will which led to his misfortunes. The pastor summarizes Job's story in the following way:

Like you [Kolya], he [Job] was wondering about the meaning of life. Why this? Why me? He made himself so sick his body was covered with scabs. His wife tried to straighten out his mind, and his friends told him, "Do not anger God!" And still he complained, sprinkled ashes on his head. Then the Lord relented and himself appeared to him in the form of a hurricane. [...] And Job was humbled. He lived a hundred and forty years, saw the sons of his sons to the fourth knee, and died in old age, fulfilled.<sup>26</sup>

The priest's retelling leaves off the problem of the limits of human perception and the inaccessibility of wisdom. It focuses, rather, on uncritical obedience to a higher power. Job, in this version, is not the random victim of some unknown divine plan, but the cause of his own misfortunes. His suffering is well deserved and was brought upon himself by Job's attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of life.

Kolya's identification with Job is substantiated when the Biblical narrative and Kolya's life converge through his exclamation, "Why? What for, Lord?" upon learning of Lilya's death. However, the corrupted version of Job's story presented in *Leviathan* poses an interpretative problem. On the one hand, Kolya does not accept the random impeachment of his rights without protest. It is clear that he sees nothing wrong in his behavior and desire to preserve the family home. The mechanic questions God's will in the form of the state in taking away his wife and his property. Thus, the misfortunes that befall Kolya could be interpreted as punishment for bad behavior, at least according to the film's version of Job's story. He loses his freedom, as well as his family, and, finally, his house and mental health - at the end of the film he appears to have entered into a catatonic state.

On the other hand, in a faithful retelling of Job's story, Kolya's suffering would be unjustifiable by human standards since it is impossible to know God's will. It is unclear which interpretation the film favors, if a religious one at all, since the framing narrative of Job's story is substituted in the film with long shots of nature. Consequently, the misfortunes suffered by the mechanic could truly be a divine test, but just as easily can be interpreted as punishment, or explained away as a legal system failure. Content and form converge to highlight the limits of human understanding. In his characteristic manner, Zvyagintsev withholds much background information: who exactly are Kolya and Dima?<sup>27</sup> Who was his first wife? Where does Lilya come from and what really happened to her? What drives

the mayor and the bishop? These and similar questions are left unanswered to drive home that no single individual possesses all the information and that there is no such thing as an omniscient viewpoint. This technique forces both the characters and the viewers to rely on their limited perceptions and to make a choice: to accept the bishop's and mayor's behavior as part of a higher plan, in which case civil protest would be counterproductive, or to reject their demands as unjust, in which case protest becomes a moral imperative.

An interpretation in favor of Kolya's innocence and unjustified suffering is supported by the parallels drawn with the New Testament. Kolya's abovementioned exclamation, "Why? What for, Lord?", echoes Christ's words on the cross as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34), as well as at the beginning of Psalm 22. Since Jesus knew what was to pass, his words are often interpreted as an exclamation in the face of suffering or an unburdening, rather than a literal question seeking a meaningful answer. In the New Testament, Christ's pain has a clear purpose and recipient; it is also successful, since he is able to save humanity. In the film, in contrast, Kolya's suffering is caused by very pragmatic financial reasons. His fate, like Christ's, has been decided in advance, but unlike in the New Testament, the mechanic's misfortunes serve no greater purpose in the film's worldview. His own lack of faith leaves him no recourse to inner sources of meaning-making and, thus, Kolya's suffering has no clear recipient and cannot grant transcendence. He becomes an aborted, or corrupted, Christ-



figure, and a secular, failed Job.<sup>28</sup> His character is reduced to the mundane and profane and, consequently, so is the possibility of a “higher meaning” or divine interpretation. Such an interpretation shifts the focus from Kolya’s actions and fate to the people and social conditions that force him to go through such meaningless suffering. The lack of a transcendental potential through death subverts the protagonist’s claim to martyrdom and victimhood. Kolya is all too happy to sink to the level of his enemies by resorting to violence or illegal means, such as blackmail, to solve his problems. The lack of a transcendental aspect to Kolya’s, and everyone else’s daily misery, makes the situation unbearable. There is only suffering – no outlet is suggested, either in life or death. It is an untenable situation, a banal version of hell, without grand drama: a life that deadens the soul and inures it to the suffering of others.

### **Ideological Trappings for Institutional Goals**

Bringing together the Biblical and the political interpretations through the visual symbol of a whale skeleton suggests that both the secular and the religious, represented by the State and the Church, are corrupt and any authority they claim is questionable. Substantiating this message of linked failure of authority is the scene in the bishop’s office where Vadim and the cleric discuss Kolya’s legal case. The Church representative states:

You and I are partners, of course, we are working together towards the same goal. But you have your sector, and I have mine. [...] I told you recently and I repeat: all power comes from God. Where there is power, there is force. If you hold the power over your sector, then solve your local problems with your own force.

The two sectors alluded to by the bishop are presumably the two realms that inform human existence in the Christian worldview: the mundane and the divine. This speech indirectly alludes to Job's story, where the human and non-human worlds follow fundamentally different rules. However, the bishop is paraphrasing, to an extent, the village priest's take on the Book of Job. He claims that "all power comes from God" implying that his criminal behavior is part of a divine plan. The bishop's words create once more the need to choose a reaction based on his assumptions. This choice is presented to the other film characters, such as the mayor and, indirectly, Kolya, and through them – the audience. Accepting his words at face value implies disengaging from political involvement and justice-seeking, as any breach of protocol or malpractice could be justified as being part of a larger, divine plan. Refusing to follow his demands would require a critical attitude towards him as both an individual and a representative of a larger institution.

Furthermore, the bishop's speech suggests that the state, in this instance, serves as a tool for furthering the Church's interests. Such a reading supports the idea that the Russian society depicted in the film is far from Hobbes' vision of an institutionalized religion in the service of the authoritarian state. This reversal of

power dynamics, depicted by Zvyagintsev, is an illustration of the shortcomings of Hobbes' theory when applied to a post-Soviet centralizing state power.

At the end of the conversation scene, a long frontal shot shows a photograph of high-ranking clergy foregrounding an *ecce homo* bronze bust.<sup>29</sup> This mise-en-scène underscores that the bishop's compromised worldview is not simply an individual problem, but that it also reflects on the entire institution of the Church.



Figure 2: An *ecce homo* bust in the bishop's office.

The allusion to the New Testament and the bishop's words suggest that his behavior parallels that of Pontius Pilate. The cleric does not personally commit any illegal acts, but implicitly gives his permission for Kolya and his family to be destroyed, if necessary. By alluding to the New Testament, the film suggests that those who know of and support a crime, but refuse to take responsibility for it, are

even more morally bankrupt than those who actually commit the deed. The choice of mise-en-scène further suggests that the Russian Orthodox Church, represented by the photograph in the background, as an institution, is culpable for tacitly accepting and even encouraging crimes in order to further its interests. The film emphasizes the irony of the Russian Orthodox Church, suppressed in a variety of ways during the Soviet regime, emulating, in a way, the Soviet disregard for the individual, albeit in the name of a different ideology.<sup>30</sup>

Placing the photograph in the background implies that both the Christian values implicit in the *ecce homo* bust and the national discourse focused on the idea of Church and state unity, symbolized by the other two statues, are simply an expedient front. The statue to the left is easily recognizable as St. Vladimir the Baptizer who is traditionally seen as the “father” of Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>31</sup> His image is often interpreted as the symbol of a strong Russian state based on Orthodox values.<sup>32</sup> Combined with what is likely another likeness of Vladimir to the right,<sup>33</sup> the two statues visually frame the defining ideas and narratives of contemporary Russian ethno-nationalism: state and Church are inseparable. At the same time, the positioning of the photograph in the background, a visual metonym for the entire clergy, suggests that all these ideas and images are simply decoration that can be easily moved around, removed or added, as needed, to further institutional interests.

### **Corruption as Material Decay**

The tripartite set-up used in the *ecce homo* scene, a triptych of sorts, is also present in the film's general composition underscoring how corruption transcends institutional and social disintegration and permeates even the physical environment. A moment of silence, or, rather, a pause, in Philip Glass' haunting soundtrack serves to juxtapose the initial and concluding shots of pristine and grandiose nature to the longer middle part depicting human suffering and decrepit habitats.<sup>34</sup> The lack of music in the transitional shots, which give the impression of moving closer to the village by gradually revealing more signs of human activity, such as power lines, roads, and discarded man-made objects, brings attention to the middle segment of the film. The camera focuses and lingers on fences and house facades that are clearly falling apart, as well as on the unpaved roads. Even the main square in the town center where the courthouse is located looks decrepit, with grass growing between the stone tiles. Finally, a number of boats, which visually echo the shots of the whale skeleton, are strewn around, rotting in the middle of a cove. Their remains, together with the general air of disrepair, characteristic of the region, suggest a far-reaching process of disintegration of human civilization: an externalized sign of inner decay.

### Visual Parallels as Philosophical Message

In addition to highlighting the state of physical corruption characteristic of human habitation, the visual parallels between the beginning and the end blur the lines between “good” and “bad” characters, suggesting moral failure on a fundamental scale. *Leviathan* opens with Kolya leaving his home early in the morning to go and meet Dima at the train station. The house’s lights are visible on the left side of the shot. Due to the camera’s position, the mechanic’s car traverses the screen from right to left. This scene visually parallels the film’s ending, where the delegation of politicians and businessmen and their Moscow guests similarly drives away in a right-to-left direction. On the left side of the shot, a new church has replaced the family home.



Figure 3: The procession of visitors to the new church on the way back.



Figure 4: Kolya driving to the train station to pick up Dima.

The parallels between these two scenes seem contradictory since movement from the right to the left is perceived as counter-intuitive by Western audiences where reading and writing traditionally follow a left-to-right direction. Additionally, in theatre, the appearance of an antagonist frequently happens from the right.<sup>35</sup> The procession's movement at the end of the film makes sense as the Moscow visitors are clearly marked as the film's negative forces responsible for Kolya's suffering. It seems inexplicable, however, that the mechanic's early morning trip follows the same counter-intuitive direction since there is an implicit expectation that he is a positive character. Furthermore, Kolya's outing occurs in the dark, whereas the one undertaken by the visitors from Moscow takes place in the daytime, further alluding to the first trip's negative nature.

The visual echoes between these scenes suggest that Kolya and the mayor have more in common than meets the eye and that their conflict of interest might be only superficial, rather than an expression of a fundamental difference of values. Such a conclusion is supported by the multiple scenes in the film where both the mechanic and the mayor are shown drunk, shouting, and cursing. Kolya's temper prevents him from being a stereotypical hero figure; but the mayor's glimpses of humanity, such as his seemingly genuine faith, or his affection for his son, also add a layer of verisimilitude and complexity to what otherwise would be a two-dimensional villain. Such careful nuancing of the main characters negates, to a degree, what should have been a clear moral dividing line between Kolya and the mayor. Corruption in the form of personal failings precludes the existence of entirely positive characters in the film. Furthermore, functioning in a morally compromised landscape of unjust institutions and compromised narratives, no one could retain any kind of moral higher ground. The prevalent corruption depicted in the film on all levels of existence achieves the erasure between "good" and "bad" people and between "positive" and "negative" actions leaving a morally grey state of being that inflicts suffering on everyone, equally.

### **Familial Dissolution**

The visual connections between the mayor and Kolya contextualize the destruction of the home at the end of *Leviathan* as simply the last stage in a long-



drawn process of familial and social dissolution. The material loss at the film's conclusion is prefigured by the loss of personal and family values depicted at the beginning. This decline is shown to be already well underway before the land dispute, which becomes a catalyst, rather than the reason, for the family's downfall. As in his other films, in *Leviathan*, Zvyagintsev depicts a family (and a society) in a moment of deep crisis that might be exacerbated by context, but originates from within and leads to tragedy.<sup>36</sup>

Kolya's close personal relationships are shown in the process of slow degeneration, reflecting his inner moral failings. The roles of husband, wife, father, mother, and close friends are all depicted as dysfunctional. Lilya, the second wife and stepmother, is isolated and disconnected from her surroundings. She is first introduced in the middle of the kitchen, which is considered, traditionally, a woman's space. Her gesture of affection is inexplicably rebuffed by what we later learn is her stepson. Their verbal exchange becomes progressively more hostile and even offensive. While at first it seems that the hostility between them is the boy's fault – a teenager who is in a “transitional age,” according to his father – it gradually becomes evident that the situation is much more complex. Lilya's attitude towards child rearing is summarized by her words to Kolya: “he is your son. It is up to you whether he becomes a man or an ape.” Thus, while Kolya refers to her as Roma's mother, Lilya clearly washes her hands of her shared responsibility in making sure the boy grows up “a man” and not “an ape.” She consciously distances herself from

the traditional duties of a mother. The emotional isolation from her family is reflected in her distance from other women in the town. On her daily bus ride, Lilya sits facing away from everyone else and does not participate in any of the conversations going on around her.

Things are also far from perfect between the spouses which becomes clear from Lilya's passive acceptance of Kolya's kiss at the beginning of the film. To his pronouncement of love, she replies simply, "I know," suggesting that she might not return the sentiment and laying the ground for her subsequent unfaithfulness. Furthermore, Lilya engages in extramarital sex with Dima, while her husband is locked up briefly. However, even with her lover, who should be a representation of her desires, the young woman is unable to forge a meaningful emotional connection. Dima does not want to accept her love confession, stating that he believes in facts, not in God, but offering, nevertheless, to take her with him to Moscow. Lilya's desire for love remains unfulfilled, prompting her to return to her husband and ask for a child of her own. The act of adultery underlines her emotional isolation and lack of connection to her family members.

Kolya's continuous drinking, sudden rages, and temper outbursts reveal his own personal failings. He casually roughs up his son, sarcastically dismissing any criticism by claiming that he does it "lovingly." The audience is made aware that aggressive roughhousing is Kolya's way of expressing affection, but it nevertheless introduces the possibility of abuse, especially considering the mechanic's

temperament and Dima's bruised face after his affair with Lila is discovered. The mechanic is also frequently shown imbibing alcohol and acting aggressively towards the people around him. All these small details that bring Kolya's character to life also illustrate his fallibility. In fact, the only reason he is considered the film's protagonist is his role as a victim of the state and the Church. There are no intrinsic qualities that make him likable or morally superior to the other characters depicted in *Leviathan*. In other words, Kolya is a corrupted version of a positive hero.

Other social ties, such as the bonds of friendship established in the army, like the ones bringing Dima and Kolya's together, slowly begin to unravel because of the mechanic's constant drinking and inability to control his temper and Dima's casual approach to sex. Soldiers' camaraderie and sense of brotherhood are typically depicted as sacrosanct and above petty mundane problems.<sup>37</sup> However, *Leviathan* reveals how even such a deep interpersonal connection can become slowly corrupted when faced with the prevalent disregard, both social and institutional, for law and justice.

The family is often taken as a basic unit of society in religious discourse or psychological studies; therefore, if one is displaying signs of disintegration or trauma, then, so would the other.<sup>38</sup> In Zvyagintsev's film, the other town inhabitants are shown sporadically and briefly, usually in a negative light. The villagers seem to be ignorant or indifferent to Kolya's attempts to fight the mayor. Furthermore, the police officers expect free car maintenance in return for vodka, demonstrating

how corruption on a high institutional level is mirrored by smaller acts of injustice on the local one. The house's demolition at the end of the film is, thus, a physical manifestation not only of institutional malpractices, but of the prevalent social and personal disintegration taking place at large.

### **An Alternative Biblical Narrative**

*Leviathan's* condemnation of the current social and political situation is ultimately substantiated with the image of a fresco depicting the beheading of John the Baptist located in the semi-abandoned temple where both Kolya and Roma seek refuge in times of emotional turmoil. According to the Gospels, John the Baptist was executed by the ruler of Galilee on the request of a dancing woman, traditionally identified as Salome, and her mother, the ruler's second wife. John perceived the king's second marriage as unlawful and voiced his protests. The ruler himself did not desire John's death, but he chose to preserve his image in front of his subjects and ordered the unjust execution, thus going against what is morally right. In historical accounts, the beheading of John is sometimes ascribed to the king's fear of rebellion in the face of John's great popularity and influence.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 5: Fresco of John the Baptist's head being offered to Salome.

This particular choice of mural reminds viewers that in addition to obeying unquestioningly divine will, Christianity is also traditionally associated with resisting state and social injustice. In the New Testament, true believers and followers of Jesus, such as John, oppose institutions when they perceive them to be corrupt. John the Baptist's story, echoing in some ways Kolya's own resistance to unjust demands, is housed and framed by the semi-destroyed pre-Revolutionary temple, hinting at an alternative way of being for the current Russian Orthodox Church had it chosen to align itself with those in need, rather than with those in

power, as suggested by the bishop's speech. However, such a subversive version of Christianity, embodied by the temple, is shown as almost completely destroyed, whether by war, Soviet state repression, or by simple human neglect. Its position in the community has been marginalized and its potential for questioning unlawful practices is supplanted by the new church, built on top of the literal and metaphorical ruins of Kolya's life. Thus, the film suggests that while the potential for moral redemption through Christianity still exists, it has been corrupted and made powerless through repression and neglect

### **Corruption as a Way of Being**

The film's interpretation as a tale of justified punishment is undermined by the lack of any supernatural or miraculous elements. In the Old Testament story, there is no doubt that Job is obeying a nonhuman, divine entity that exists independently outside of his subjective understanding of reality. In contrast, *Leviathan's* world, like in all of Zvyagin's other films, is metaphysical, rather than supernatural.<sup>40</sup> The unrealized Job and Christ figures represented by Kolya preclude the possibility of a miraculous aspect to the film's reality but imbue it with questions about the limits of human rationalism and understanding. In fact, the director's style is more easily aligned with the Russian realist tradition, and its metaphysical trend, than with the transcendental one, exemplified in film by Tarkovsky, despite some critics' attempts to link the two.<sup>41</sup> In terms of plot and

character construction, the script's situational nature and the hopelessness and humanity of Kolya, Dima, Lilya, and even the mayor are reminiscent, for example, of Anton Chekhov's personages, who are forever searching for something to believe in and fight for, but are doomed to failure by their surroundings and their own foibles. The Christian undertones and the social cross-section, created by the interactions of characters of various standings, are reminiscent of Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

The wide camera angle and long shots without dialogue depicting grandiose or pristine nature, juxtaposed to dreary urban life, and cataloguing everyday activities in *Leviathan* and, later, in *Loveless*, are more similar to the observational film techniques, used by the Thaw poetic cinema or by such directors as Mikhail Kalatozov, Viktor Kossakovsky, and Marina Razbezhkina.<sup>42</sup> The candid shots of people on the bus or women at work at the fish factory use local people, instead of professional actors, and are set in pre-existing places. The realistic depiction of daily life, combined with allusions to extra-diegetic people and events, such as the Pussy Riot feminist punk rock group's controversial performance in the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow,<sup>43</sup> adds a sense of contemporaneity and immediacy to the film, making the corruption and machinations depicted on screen seem to spill over from the screen into "real" life. By exploring the human origins of depravity and anchoring it to the Russian present-day context, the film debunks any attempt to explain Kolya's suffering as a divine or demonic intervention, while

simultaneously suggesting that his situation is a specific example of a universal problem.

The credibility of *Leviathan's* corrupted world is illustrated by the final scene sequence, taking place inside the newly-built church: a space created by the obliteration of Kolya's identity and family history. The bishop is conducting a sermon and his audience consists of the mayor and assorted politicians and other influential people both from the town and from Moscow. Their clothes and accessories mark them as the new elite and convey their status as stand-ins for the ruling class in contemporary Russia. They all listen attentively, some of them, especially the women, with a rapturous expression.



Figure 6: Inside the new church.



Despite the convincing visual presentation of this congregation as devout, the behind-the-scenes events leading to this moment make it impossible to reconcile the on-screen expression of piety with the past behavior of the two characters the viewer recognizes: the mayor and the bishop. Even if the rest of the actors appear for the first time and their devotion seems sincere, their very association with the two antagonists puts into question their moral integrity.

A similar doubt of sincerity is planted by the bishop's actual words. His sermon touches such concepts as "truth" and "blaspheme." These words allude to the extradiegetic events of the Pussy Riot case.

Because when people destroy crosses, [...] when they blaspheme by calling demonic rites prayer [...] it is a lie [...]. The contemporary world is characterized by the constantly changing systems of reference and by the substitution of true values with false ones. But even in such a world, we retain the most important, we know the way – it lies with Christ. [...] But the Church is made of us and of everyone else [...] Truth is with us.

The bishop's use of the phrase "blaspheme by calling demonic rites a prayer" is paraphrasing the Russian media's description of Pussy Riot's controversial performance of the song "Punk-Prayer – Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!" inside Christ the Savior Cathedral.<sup>44</sup> Such word choice, especially when framed by the iconostasis of the newly built church, immediately connects the on-screen service to the off-screen events at the Moscow cathedral. Ironically, the bishop's own speech parallels, in a way, Pussy Riot's performance. Both rely on the power of words uttered within an ostensibly sacred space. However, the bishop's lack of

integrity deflates his rhetoric. His definition of truth and disapproval of “blasphemous” acts are problematic as he himself is shown to be compromised. His claim about Real Truth (*Istina*) cannot be taken at face value. By concluding with this scene, which would be hopeful if taken in isolation, Zvyagintsev challenges not only the authenticity and authority of high-ranking clergy, but also the willingness of the Orthodox community and the rest of Russian society, to accept unquestioningly high-brow rhetoric without actually internalizing the Christian ideals of selfless love and humility. The new church, representing the post-Soviet Church, is literally built through society’s failure. It is the product of shared culpability, beginning with Kolya’s and including that of his family, friends, and society at large.

### **Political Impact**

By establishing a connection between the film and current events and by showing the far-reaching and detrimental effects of corruption when tacitly accepted and ignored, Zvyagintsev aims to force, in a way, audiences to re-examine their own life and behavior. In an interview following the film’s release, the director describes *Leviathan* as “a sort of diagnosis,” which he hopes will cause people to change.<sup>45</sup> In another interview, the director also comments that “this mighty creature, the leviathan, in reality grows out of ourselves [...] our government is a continuation of our selves [...] the church is all of us, and not just the priests.”<sup>46</sup>

Such statements, combined with Dima's words in the hotel room, "everyone is guilty of everything," echo the Dostoyevskian belief in shared culpability: corruption in institutional structures is possible because of the moral failings of society at large and vice versa.<sup>47</sup> If the Church is made up of everyone and its individual members are morally compromised, then it follows logically that it must be a fundamentally flawed institution, both as a physical organization and a metaphorical community.

The film's premise did cause tangible reactions and served as a catalyst for change, but not necessarily in the way the director probably hoped for or intended. *Leviathan* is by far the most commercially successful "festival" film of the past two decades.<sup>48</sup> Its popularity among audiences, however, is rivalled by its denigration by critics, politics, and activists. Pavel Florov, the head of the Association of Orthodox Experts, claims that "*Leviathan* is evil."<sup>49</sup> In the same speech, he demands concrete actions, such as a state-sponsored "Orthodox Hollywood." Similarly, the Synodal Office for Public Relations considers that the film is geared towards Western audiences by reproducing negative myths about Russia. According to its head, at the time, the late Protoiereus Vsevolod Chaplin, debasing the Church is equivalent to debasing Christ.<sup>50</sup> Another member of the clergy, Andrey Tkachev, calls *Leviathan* "a depressive film with anti-Biblical themes and a suicidal after taste."<sup>51</sup> Regional representatives also demanded that *Leviathan* be banned from distribution across the Russian Federation arguing that the film is a

misrepresentation of the Russian Orthodox Church and of the locales where it is set.<sup>52</sup>

The derogatory comments by Orthodox and political activists echo the unflattering official stand articulated by the then-Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, and served as an excuse to institute an even stricter control over cultural production. The post-*Leviathan* situation can be summarized with the minister's words, "I don't see the point of [...] making films with [state] funds that not only criticize but vilify the elected government."<sup>53</sup> Zvyagintsev's film is not the cause behind this new directive for Russian state-sponsored art, but its timely appearance and the reactions it elicited have forced state and non-governmental actors to clearly articulate what was previously a tacitly implied expectation of national loyalty and abstinence from overt criticism of the Church and the government.

Despite institutional opposition, the film's popularity speaks to the universality and relevance of its subject-matter. It is undeniable that the controversy surrounding *Leviathan* has successfully sparked polemics not only about the film's messages, but also about bigger questions concerning Russian nationalism and culture. The film has become a public platform, of sorts, allowing for discussions about institutional practices and the function and limits of art in contemporary Russia, as well as drawing attention to the progressively tighter state control being instituted over all types of cultural production. In this respect, *Leviathan* continues to be one of the most politically successful artistic works of the past decade and a

potential model for post-secular art that wishes to challenge established views and norms.

## **Conclusion**

Andrey Zvyagintsev's fourth full-length film *Leviathan* is the director's most impactful and debated movie to date. Its continued relevance is based on the director's multi-faceted approach to the idea of corruption, both as a plot device and a moral-philosophical concept, transforming it from an everyday institutional problem to a state of being. *Leviathan* stands apart from other contemporary filmic depictions of corruption in revealing institutional malpractices and injustices not as the cause of an individual's downfall, but as a symptom of a larger societal and moral problem. The people shown in the film are all complicit in the state of affairs that weighs them down: the same natural desire to preserve and assert the self that prompts Kolya to defend his home causes his wife and friend to seek an emotional connection through extramarital sex and the mayor to use all the means at his disposal to protect his own interests and do what he considers to be right. The use of biblical elements to debunk institutional failures, which both affect and are perpetuated by moral failure at large, opens up a space for questioning not only the current status quo in Russia, but the wider human condition. By depicting corruption as an existential issue that colors every aspect of human existence, both internal and external, the film, according to the director, aims to provoke both

reactions and actions. The mobilization of political and orthodox activists after *Leviathan*'s release proves that it is one of the most powerful post-secular films in contemporary Russian cinema, despite, or maybe because of its unapologetic decoupling of faith and the Church and its message of shared culpability.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, *Leviathan* received awards for best scenario at the Cannes Film Festival and for best feature at the Fifty-eighth London Film Festival. It also won the Seventy-second Golden Globe Award for best foreign language feature. In 2015, the film was nominated for an Oscar for the best foreign film award.

<sup>2</sup> For one of the very few positive reviews by a clergy member, see Father Diodor, "Leviathan. Chestnyi fil'm o Boge i vere," *Pravmir*, January 18, 2015, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://www.pravmir.ru/Leviathan-chestnyiy-film-o-boge-i-vere/>. For the more prevalent negative reviews of the film, see, for example, "V OP prizvali Zvyagintseva publichno pokaiatsia za 'Leviatan' na Krasnoi ploshadi," *Govorit Moskva*, January 20, 2015, accessed January 2, 2017, <https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/26245/>; Iurii Poliakov, "Talant Zvyagintseva, po-moemy, sil'no preuvelichen," *Izborskii klub*, January 15, 2015, accessed June 20, 2017, <https://izborsk-club.ru/4607/>; Viktoria Vziatysheva, "Leviathan – eto zlo," *Bumaga*, January 16, 2015, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://paperpaper.ru/Leviathan-zlo/>.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of stylistic and biographic similarities between the two directors, see, for example, Nancy Condee, "Knowledge (Imperfective). Andrei Zviagintsev and Contemporary Cinema," in *A Companion to Russian Cinema*, ed. Birgit Beumers, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons (2016): 565-584.

<sup>4</sup> Dmitrii Bykov, "Leviathan' rezhissera Andreyia Zvyagintseva poluchil premiiu "Zolotoi globus" kak luchshii inostrannyi fil'm goda." *Novaya gazeta*, January 13, 2015, accessed June 20, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/01/13/62603-learn-we-are-fun>.

<sup>5</sup> No other arthouse film has caused such public debates in Russia since 2000. In fact, most religion-related films are received positively, see for example, "V stzenariah my naravne s amerikantzami," interview with Arif Aliev, *Ogoniok* 43, May 11 (2019): 34.

<sup>6</sup> In this article, I use the term post-secular to indicate both the post-Soviet period and the freedom of religious practices it entails and the ability and desire of artists to incorporate religious themes and motifs into their work.

<sup>7</sup> For a general review and analysis of the film see Julian Graffy, "Andrey Zvyagintsev: *Leviathan* (Leviathan, 2014)," *KinoKultura*. April 24, 2015, accessed September 20, 2018, <http://www.kinokultura.com/2015/48r-Leviathan.shtml>; Julian Graffy, "Leviathan." In *The Contemporary Russian Cinema Reader (2005 – 2016)*, edited by Rimgalia Salys, 305-327.

Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019; and Nancy Condee, “*Leviathan*,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 607-608.

For a detailed analysis of the film’s title see Aleksandr Filippov, “*Leviathan*: mezhdu uzhasom i priznaniem,” *Vestnik Evropy*, no. 44-45 (2016), accessed January 20, 2018,

<http://magazines.russ.ru/vestnik/2016/44-45/Leviathan-mezhdu-uzhasom-i-priznaniem.html>;

For analysis of the connection between space and power see Julia Vassileva, “Russian *Leviathan*: Power, Landscape, Memory,” *Film Criticism* 42, no. 1 (March 2018), accessed April 1, 2018,

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/fc/13761232.0042.101/--russian-leviathan-power-landscape-memory?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

For an analysis of the film’s connection to other recent Russian films see Justin Wilmes, “From *Tikhie* to *Gromkie*: The Discursive Strategies of the Putin-Era Auteurs,” *Russian Literature* no. 96-98 (2018): 297-327.

<sup>8</sup> For analysis of how the Russian state uses *Leviathan* to strengthen its soft power base see Vlad Strukov, “Russian Manipulative ‘Soft Power’: Zvyagintsev’s Oscar nomination, (non-) government agency, and contradictions of the globalized world,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 14, no. 1 (2016): 31-49.

For a broad discussion of the political situation in Russia through the lens of the film see Susan Wengle, Christi Monet and Evgenia Olimpieva, “Russia’s Post-Soviet Ideological Terrain: Zvyagintsev’s *Leviathan* and Debates on Authority, Agency, and Authenticity,” *Slavic Review* 77, no. 4 (2018): 998-1024.

<sup>9</sup> In the Greek version of the Bible, which served as the basis for the Slavic translation, the Latin *corrupto* is rendered as *φθίρεισθαι* or *φθορά*, which indicate a movement from a higher to a lower form: deterioration, decomposition, degeneration. The lack of a similar multi-faceted term in Slavic languages prompted the use of several related terms, depending on the context.

<sup>10</sup> Economic inequality in post-Soviet Russia is significantly higher than in other post-socialist societies, such as China. Filip Novokmet, Thomas Piketty and Gabriel Zucman, “From Soviets to Oligarchs: Inequality and Property in Russia 1905-2016,” *WID Working Paper Series*, no. 9 (2017):1, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://wid.world/document/soviets-oligarchs-inequality-property-russia-1905-2016/>.

<sup>11</sup> As others have noted (Wilmes 2018; Iaroslav Zabaluev and Aleksei Krizhevskii, “Anatomia ‘Leviathana’,” *Gazeta.ru*, February 03, 2015, accessed June 15, 2018, [https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2015/02/03/a\\_6398269.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2015/02/03/a_6398269.shtml)), *Leviathan* in some ways parallels Boris Hlebnikov’s *Long Happy Life* (*Dolgaia schastlivaia zhizn’*, 2013) where the question of real estate ownership is also central. However, except for Hlebnikov and Zvyagintsev, few other directors, since 2000, have treated the idea of private land and property as a main theme.

<sup>12</sup> Carmen Gray, “Breaking the waves: Andrey Zvyagintsev on his award-winning film *Leviathan*,” *The Calvert Journal*, November 3, 2014, accessed January 15, 2015, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3315/russian-film-director-Andrei-Zviagintsev-leviathan>.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Rohter, “Champion of the Lone Russian Everyman,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2015, accessed January 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/movies/in-leviathan-andrey-zvyagintsev-navigates-tricky-terrain.html>.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Clark Sterne, *Dark Mirror: The Sense of Injustice in Modern European and American Literature*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Masha Lipman, "The Campaign Against 'Leviathan' in Russia," *The New York Times*, January 16, 2015, accessed February 30, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/campaign-leviathan-russia>.

<sup>16</sup> For a succinct discussion of Zvyagintsev's style and techniques, see Condee, "Knowledge (Imperfective) Andrei Zviagintsev and Contemporary Cinema," 565-584.

<sup>17</sup> The producer, Alexander Rodnyansky claims the film "is a modern retelling of the Biblical story of Job" (John Hopewell and Elsa Keslassy, "Berlin – Pyramide Intl. Rolls Out Pre-sales on 'Leviathan,'" *Variety*, February 17, 2014, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://variety.com/2014/film/news/berlin-pyramide-intl-rolls-out-pre-sales-on-leviathan-russian-director-andrey-zvyagintsevs-follow-up-to-elena-1201108816/>).

<sup>18</sup> As I discuss further in the article, the film alludes both obliquely and directly to the 2012 Pussy Riot process. Three of the group's members were arrested after their performance inside the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow. The song they performed inside the church referenced a black line of limousines, one of the film's final images. Their performance was also referred to in the media as a "blasphemous prayer" (*koshchunstvennyi moleben*), the same phrase used by the bishop in his speech at the end. Additionally, right before Kolya's arrest he sees on TV a wall graffiti with the words "Pussy Riot." For an English-language media take on the trial, see Masha Lipman, "Putin's Religious War Against Pussy Riot," *The New Yorker* July 24, 2012, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/putins-religious-war-against-pussy-riot>.

<sup>19</sup> In Jungian psychology, a house is often interpreted as a symbol of the human body and the self (Jung, Carl. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Fontana Press, 1963). It is also related to ideas of creation, legitimacy, and patriarchy (J. J. Van Van Baak, *The House in Russian Literature: A Mythopoetic Exploration*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009). Such a reading of the film's use of the house is supported by the home's uniqueness in the Russian context. Personal property of such size would have been nearly impossible to keep in the family during the Soviet period. The house is certainly not representative of the lifestyle of most Soviet citizens who shared communal apartments, had identical Stalin- or Khrushchev-era single-family apartments in urban areas, or lived in pre-revolutionary village housing, without amenities. Furthermore, family homes with their own history and meaning, such as nineteenth-century mansions, were usually reserved for state cultural institutions, such as museums or union headquarters. Kolya's family home with its spacious design and its status as a personal place of meaning is rather unusual in the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian cinematic traditions.

<sup>20</sup> Originally, the word "leviathan" referred to a sea monster, but eventually became conflated with whales. Herman Melville, most notably, uses "leviathan" to allude to whales in his novel *Moby-Dick* (1851). In modern Hebrew, "leviathan" means whale.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Guillen, "Cinema as Spiritual Literature: Andrei Zvyagintsev Discusses *Leviathan*," *Cineaste XL*, no. 2 (Spring 2015), accessed January 15, 2016, <https://www.cineaste.com/spring2015/cinema-as-spiritual-literature-Andrei-Zviagintsev-discusses-leviathan-web-exclusive/>.



<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Edited by C.B. Macpherson. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968. pt. 1, ch. 14, par. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. 1, ch. 14.

<sup>24</sup> See Zvyagintsev's interview: "Andrey Zvyagintsev: On art-house film, spirituality and the rule of law," interview by Valery Kichin, *Russia Beyond*, October 28, 2014, accessed March 5, 2020, [https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/10/28/andrey\\_zvyagintsev\\_on\\_arthouse\\_film\\_spirituality\\_and\\_the\\_rule\\_of\\_law\\_40933.html](https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/10/28/andrey_zvyagintsev_on_arthouse_film_spirituality_and_the_rule_of_law_40933.html).

<sup>25</sup> Such an interpretation is supported by Oleg Kharkhordin, "Andrei Zviagnitsev kak zerkalo russkoj evoliutsii," *Vedomosti*, February 10, 2015, accessed June 29, 2020 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2015/02/11/russkii-mir-nastoyaschii-leviafan>.

<sup>26</sup> All translations of the film script are mine.

<sup>27</sup> As other critics, such as Nancy Condee, have noted, two of Zvyagintsev's preferred techniques are effacement and indeterminacy. In all his earlier movies, personal background information is scant and there is often a puzzle left unanswered. Condee, "Knowledge (Imperfective) Andrei Zviagintsev and Contemporary Cinema," 574-575.

<sup>28</sup> When discussing Zvyagintsev's tendency to subvert or invert symbols, Condee coins the term "secular counter-Mary" ("Knowledge (Imperfective) Andrei Zviagintsev and Contemporary Cinema," 570).

<sup>29</sup> In the Christian doctrine, the *ecce homo* scene is a key moment in the passion of Christ. It takes place when Pontius Pilate delivers the bound and tortured Son of God to the angry crowd, saying "Ecce homo" or "Behold the man" in the Vulgate translation (John 19:5), symbolically relinquishing any responsibility. One of the most notable contemporary interpretations of the *ecce homo* theme is considered to be Otto Dix's 1948 painting *Ecce Homo with Self-Likeness Behind Barbed Wire* expressing the horrors of WWII and the Holocaust, particularly (German) society's indifference to and complicity in the atrocities taking place around them. The Biblical theme, thus, has come to symbolize moral failing through inaction and tacit acceptance in the face of criminal behavior.

<sup>30</sup> The Russia Orthodox Church was suppressed in various way throughout the communist regime. In the early Soviet period, for example, churches were closed down, often destroyed, or used as storage. Soon after the October Revolution, all monasteries and nunneries were shut down and all Church property was nationalized, preventing clergy from receiving any financial support. Priests and their families were often treated as enemies of the state. In the latter half of the twentieth century, a rapprochement between the government and the Church resulted in the close involvement of the KGB in monitoring Church activities and, consequently, the development of an underground system with secret priests, monks, and nuns. For detailed accounts of the history of the Russian Orthodox Church, see, for example, Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995). A more general history of the atheism campaigns can be found in Victoria Smolkina, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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<sup>31</sup> The figure of Prince Vladimir has recently become even more visible in the social sphere due to President Putin's and Patriarch Kirill's unveiling of a large and imposing statue outside the Moscow Kremlin walls in 2016.

<sup>32</sup> According to Russian media, Prince Vladimir unites in his figure a saint, a warrior, and a politician ("Pamiatnik kniazii Vladimiru," *Dostoprimechatel'nosti Moskvy*. November, 2016, accessed January 15, 2018 [https://www.msk-guide.ru/page\\_21131.htm](https://www.msk-guide.ru/page_21131.htm)).

<sup>33</sup> The bust is most likely from Feliks Shopen's nineteenth-century workshop. Recently, a very similar image has also been used by Zurab Tsereteli to depict Prince Vladimir in his series of Russian rulers located outside the Museum of Military Uniforms (RVIO) in 2016.

<sup>34</sup> The music is from Philip Glass' 1983 opera *Akhnaten*, "a meditation on the tumultuous rule of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhnaten," or Amenhotep IV, who attempted to re-shape Egyptian society by imposing a monotheistic religion and was killed and discredited for his efforts. Anthony Tommasini, "Akhnaten' Puts You on Philip Glass Time," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2019, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/10/arts/music/review-akhnaten-philip-glass-metropolitan-opera.html>.

<sup>35</sup> In his book, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), Rudolph Arnheim notes that audiences perceive movement in a left-to-right direction as effortless and more "natural." Furthermore, in a theatre play, protagonists often move to the right, whereas antagonists move to the left, or at least might appear from the right side of the stage in relation to the audience (35).

<sup>36</sup> In all of his film, Zvyagintsev traces how the moral demise of the family leads to literal death and destruction. Social context and conditioning sometime play a role in this tragic process of dissolution, but the root of the problem seems to be personal choice and lack of faith or forgiveness, rather than an outside force. In *The Return*, for example, the director portrays a Christ-like alienated father figure who fails to connect to his sons, ultimately leading to his death. In *The Banishment*, the lack of love and trust between husband and wife turns an Edenic setting into the backstage for death and betrayal. In *Elena*, a fake, unhappy marriage and financial need motivate the husband's premeditated murder. In *Loveless*, the lack of love in Zhenya's early life makes her unable to connect to her child, which leads, ultimately, from the emotional to the physical loss of her son.

<sup>37</sup> As in such films as *Two Soldiers* (*Dva boitza*, 1943, dir. Leonid Lukov), *Officers* (*Ofitziery*, 1974, dir. Vladimir Rogovoi), and *Brother 2* (*Brat 2*, 2000, dir. Aleksei Balabanov), for example.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the family as representative of society at large, see Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979); in art, Hugh Dalziel Duncan's *Communication and Social Order* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1985).

<sup>39</sup> Josephus, Flavius. *Jewish Antiquities*. Ed. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> See for example, Naum Kleiman's remarks in "Algebra i metafizika: o kinematografe Andreia Zviagintseva," *Dykhaniye kamnia* (Moscow: NLO, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> As others, such as James Meek, have pointed out, it is easy to be misled by the two directors' preference for silence, wide shots of nature, and slow-paced action ("From Russia with Compassion," *The Guardian*, June 25, 2004, accessed May 27, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2004/jun/25/features.jamesmeek#maincontent>). Within the post-1990 period, Zvyagintsev is the director whose work comes the closest, visually, to that of Tarkovsky; *Leviathan*'s focus on the family home naturally brings to mind *The Sacrifice* (*Offret*, 1986). Additionally, both directors build their work around philosophical and moral questions. However, Zvyagintsev does not usually utilize dream-like sequences and avoids his predecessor's frequent disorienting use of montage as a way to circumvent linear storytelling. Zvyagintsev's films are picturesque, but linear, and his use of angles and montage aims to efface the camera, rather than challenge the viewer. In fact, his work displays the influence of Asian and European post-war art cinema: Bresson, Bergman, Kurosawa, and Antonioni. The same filmmakers, incidentally, whom Tarkovsky admired and sometimes outright emulated. For example, both *Loveless* and *Leviathan* take explicit visual and thematic cues from Antonioni's *The Adventure* (*L'Avventura*, 1960). Guillen, "Cinema as Spiritual Literature: Andrey Zvyagintsev Discusses *Leviathan*."

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Kalatozov's use of nature shots and documentation of daily life in *Salt for Svanetia* (*Sol' Svanetii*, 1930), or Kossakovsky's preference for wide grandiose nature shots and slow pace in his documentaries *Vivan Las Antipodas* (2012) and *Aquarela* (2019). Razbezhkina's *Time of Harvest* (*Vremya zhatvy*, 2004) is another example of observational cinema where daily tasks are filmed on the background of beautiful nature. Marlen Khutsiev's *July Rain* (*Iul'skii dozhd'*, 1967) is another example of camerawork that records and explores without a clear-cut judgement.

<sup>43</sup> The first allusion is a very brief, almost indistinguishable appearance the group's name on TV, towards the film's end, right before Kolya's arrest.

<sup>44</sup> Pussy Riot, "Pank-moleben - Bogoroditsa Putina progni!" August 17, 2012, accessed September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPDkJbTQRCY>.

<sup>45</sup> The English translation is mine. Andrey Zvyagintsev, "V Levifane vse tak kak na samom dele," interview by Seva Novgorodtsev. *BBC Russian Service*, January 13, 2015, accessed January 30, 2017, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2015/01/150113\\_zvyagintsev\\_interview](https://www.bbc.com/russian/society/2015/01/150113_zvyagintsev_interview).

<sup>46</sup> The English translation is mine. Andrey Zvyagintsev, "Zvyagintsev: Na russkom severe chelovek ponimaet, chto on svoboden," interview by Iekaterina Abramova. *Mir24*, January 18, 2015, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://mir24.tv/news/16323415/zvyagincev-na-russkom-severe-chelovek-ponimaet-chto-on-svoboden>.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed analysis of the idea of "universal guilt" as used by Fyodor Dostoevsky, see, for example, William van den Bercken, *Christian Fiction and Religious Realism in the Novels of Dostoevsky* (New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2011) and Ivan Esaulov, *Pashal'nost' russkoi slovesnosti* (Moscow: Krug, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> *Leviathan* was seen by 349,000 viewers in theaters. The number is just a little lower for Zvyagintsev's latest film, *Loveless*, which can be explained by *Leviathan*'s success. His third film, *Elena*, in contrast, was viewed by only 142,000 moviegoers. *Leviathan*'s commercial success is undisputed in comparison with other well-known "festival" filmmakers. Kirill Serebrennikov's

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*The Student (Uchenik*, 2016), which also deals with religion, reached only 58,000 official viewers, while his latest film, *Summer (Leto*, 2018), has done much better – 320,000 viewers – likely because of the scandal leading to the director’s house arrest and the popular subject matter dealing with the 1980s Soviet rock scene. Kira Muratova’s last film, *Eternal Redemption (Vechnoe vozvrashchenie*, 2012), had 11,000 viewers, while Aleksei Balabanov’s last film, *Me, Too (Ya tozhe hochu*, 2012), gained only 30,000. All numbers pertain strictly to movie goers in the Russian Federation. Data taken from <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/1009413/>.

<sup>49</sup> Oleg Karmunin, “Aktivisty prosiat sozdat’ ‘pravoslavnyi Gollivud’,” *Izvestija*, January 15, 2015, accessed January 20, 2018, <https://iz.ru/news/581778>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Andrey Tkachev, “Leviathan,” *Radonezh*, January 13, 2015, accessed January 20, 2018, <http://radonezh.ru/analytics/Leviathan-127626.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Shaun Walker, “Oscar-nominated *Leviathan* upsets officials in native Russia,” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2015, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/16/leviathan-russian-reaction-oscars-golden-globes>. “Pravoslavnye aktivisty trebujut zapretit’ “Leviathan” v RF,” *BBC Russian Service*. January 15, 2015, accessed January 20, 2018, [http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2015/01/150115\\_leviathan\\_oscars\\_medinsky](http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2015/01/150115_leviathan_oscars_medinsky).

<sup>53</sup> Andrey Arkhangelskiy, “Setting the Boundaries: Russia’s New Cultural Policy,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, September 21, 2017, accessed October 1, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/73182>.

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