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Andrey Zvyagintsev LEVIATHAN (2015), 140 min.

Andrey Zvyagintsev graduated from the Novosibirsk Actors School in 1984 and started to act on stage in provincial theatres. In the early 1990s he came to Moscow—the center of the Russian film industry—with the ambition to star in movies. Moscow was not welcoming to the newcomer. As Zvyagintsev put it later: “I was hungry, in need of work, I auditioned for everything.” From 1992 to 2000 he appeared as ‘extra’ in numerous TV series and feature films but with little success. A friend offered him a job as director at REN TV, an independent production company that makes cop shows and day-time soaps. Zvyagintsev directed several episodes for a popular TV series and impressed producers with his skills. He was offered to direct the feature length film The Return (2003), a low-budget family drama that turned out to become a major success and an international critical triumph. The film won the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival in 2003. When Zvyagintsev returned to Moscow, he was given a hero’s welcome, as his was the first Russian film since Close to Eden (1991) to win this honor. This international success allowed Zvyagintsev to continue to write and direct short films. He directed the award-winning films The Banishment (2007), Elena (2011) and Leviathan (2014), shooting in exotic locations in Russia, Moldova, France, Belgium and the USA. His second feature The Banishment (2007) premiered at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival and surprisingly won the Best Leading Actor Award for Konstantin Lavronenko who previously starred in The Return (2003). Lavronenko became the first Russian actor ever to win this honor. The controversial Leviathan (2014) became an international sensation winning Best Screenplay at the Cannes International Film Festival, the Golden Globe for the Best Foreign Language Film and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2015.

ANDREY Dergachev (b. unknown) is known for his sound work on Elena (2011), Leviathan (2014) and The Banishment (2007).
PHILIP GLASS (b. January 31, 1937 in Baltimore, Maryland) is an Oscar-nominated avant-garde composer whose notable works include his debut opera Einstein on the Beach as well as such film scores The Hours (2002) and Notes on a Scandal (2006). As a child Glass worked in his father’s radio store and discovered his passion for music by listening to the offbeat Western classical records customers didn’t want. He studied the violin and flute, and obtained early admission to the University of Chicago. After graduating with a dual degree in mathematics and philosophy, he went to New York’s Juilliard school, drove a cab, and studied composition with Darius Milhaud among others. At 23, he moved to Paris to study under the legendary Nadia Boulanger, who had taught almost all the major Western classical composers of the 20th century. While there he discovered Indian classical music while transcribing the works of Ravi Shankar into Western musical notation for a French filmmaker. A creative turning point, Glass researched non-Western music in India and parts of Africa, and applied the techniques to his own composition. Glass adopted an approach to musical composition that relied on repetitive, sometimes subtly nuanced musical structures that became a cornerstone of contemporary minimalism. (The composer later saw the term “minimalism” as an outdated way of describing his work and the varying sounds of up-and-coming artists.) In 1967 he formed the electric Philip Glass Ensemble, an avant-garde group that would continue to earn buzz over the years. Playwright Robert Wilson worked with the composer to bring Glass’ first opera, Einstein on the Beach, to the stage in 1976. Based on the life of the famed physicist and relying upon an unorthodox, repeating sonic framework, Einstein earned major acclaim. Glass composed more opera including 1980’s Satyagraha, which followed a portion of the life of Mahatma Gandhi. The prolific musician composed several symphonies and concertos as well, performing his work internationally as part of his ensemble and having works staged in venues like the London Coliseum, Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. His albums include Glassworks (1982), Songs From Liquid Days (1986)—with contributions from David Byrne, Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt and the Kronos Quartet—and Hydrogen Jukebox (1993). Glass has provided scores for a litany of movies such as Koyaanisqatsi (1982), a project directed by Godfrey Reggio that uses visuals and music to create a story about humanity’s relationship with nature. Other big-screen scores from Glass are Hamburger Hill (1987), Candyman (1992), The Truman Show (1998), Secret Window (2002), The Illusionist (2006), Leviathan (2014) and Fantastic Four (2015), as well as documentaries like Pandemic: Facing AIDS (2002) and A Sea Change (2009). Glass received Academy Award nominations for the musical scores of Kundun (1997), The Hours (2002) and Notes on a Scandal (2006). In September 2016, President Barack Obama presented Glass with a National Medal of Arts. Glass is also the only (Western) classical composer to appear on Saturday Night Live.

MIKHAIL KRICHMAN (b. June 17, 1967 in Moscow, RSFSR, USSR [now Russia]) once said that it was his love of the smell of paint as a child that led him into a career in film. In an interview with a Russian film blogger, the cinematographer describes his beginnings: “Those were the things from my childhood that made me start my studies at what is now Moscow State University of Printing Arts. And it so happened that I met a guy that was about to graduate from the cinematography department of the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography. It was a birthday party, and I asked a question that probably a lot of people ask in a similar situation – would it be possible to visit a set and see how things work when they shoot a movie. We talked for a bit and then he disappeared, and I almost forgot about him. Then after a year he got in touch, saying that he had an opportunity for me to come and visit a set. That was how I saw a film set for the first time—shooting a commercial. But that’s not how I started my path to becoming cinematographer. A bit later, again with the help of the same guy, I visited the editing room of a TV station. Back in the 1990s it was simply possible to go there and enter the buildings. The editing room was empty apart from one day a week. It was full with Betacams and mixing consoles, and I remember spending day after day reading the manuals, learning how different machines worked, trying to mix source materials that didn’t even belong to me. After some time, I became a junior editor. I met Leonid Kruglov who was doing a travel show for a national TV station. He invited me to Cuba to make a documentary with him, which was my first job in doing documentaries. It was only him and me, making a show about Santería and their religious beliefs.” According to Zvyagintsev, the cameraman learned cinematography by reading American Cinematographer magazine. He met the director in 2000 while he was working at REN TV. He was looking for cinematographers to shoot individual episodes, and one of my director friends put us in touch. Of his craft Krichman remarked, “I think that aesthetics are an important part of making a film. When the form is untidy and messy, the content is sometimes lost. And [Russia] was struggling to pull their weight against the smooth form of the American films. It feels that only now I am starting to discover Russian cinema. Andrei Tarkovsky was a formidable figure. I might not have been able to appreciate his content at the time, but the form was powerful.” Krichman has worked on 15 films, some of which are Blowers (2017, TV Series), Loveless (2017), The Secret Scripture (2016), Miss Julie (2014), Winter Journey (2013), Silent Souls (2010), The Banishment (2007), Roots (2005), The Return (2003) and Sky Plane. Girl (2002).

ALEKSEY SEREBRYAKOV (b. June 3, 1964 in Moscow, RSFSR, USSR [now Russia]) is one of the most popular and highly paid actors in Russia. Beginning when he was only 13, for years Serebryakov worked with the two most famous theatrical...
companies in the country: Tabakov Theatre (1986—1991) and Lenkom Theatre (2009-2012). In March 2012, Serebryakov emigrated to Canada with his family, citing corruption and political unrest in Russia as barriers to raise his children. Of his decision, the actor told a Canadian news outlet, “I came to the age, and my children have grown up to the age, that I can offer them something. So I suggested this departure. About boorish attitude to people in Russia. The fact that I studied there, and quite well I can swim in the swamp. But I would like my children to swim in the clear water. In the water, where there are rules, laws, where they met, where the value of human life, human dignity.” Yet, despite the relocation, the actor continues to work in his home country. Last year it was announced that a Russian version of the American TV show House would be produced by Alexander Rodnyansky’s Non-Stop Production, which was the production company behind Leviathan. Serebryakov has been cast in the titular role made famous by Hugh Laurie. His upcoming work also includes Koma (2018), The Big Fight (2018), Language (2018) and Van Gogi (2018)

ELENA LYADOVA (b. December 25, 1980 in Morshansk, Tambovskaya oblast, RSFSR, USSR [now Russia]) graduated from the Mikhail Shchepkin Higher Theatre School in 2002 and was accepted into the troupe of the Moscow Theatre for Young Audiences. In 2012 she was awarded a Nika for Best Actress for her role in Zvyagintsev’s Elena (2011). Two years later, she again received a Nika for Best Actress Golden Eagle for her role in Alexander Veledinsky’s movie The Geographer Drank His Globe Away (2013). She is also known for The Banishment (2007) and performing in New York, I Love You (2008) in the “Apocrypha” segment directed/written by Zvyagintsev. In 2015, she married actor Vladimir Vdovichenkov.

VLADIMIR VDOVICHENKOV (b. August 13, 1971 in Gusev, Gusevskiy rayon, Kaliningradskaya oblast, RSFSR, USSR [now Russia]) stardom was solidified after acting in two prominent Russian cult hits: the film Bimmer (2003) by Petr Buslov and the TV series Brigada (2002). Growing up, Vdovichenkov pursued boxing while at school. After graduating from 42nd Kronstadt Nautical School in 1989, he served four years in the Northern Fleet and the Baltic fleet. He worked as a waiter while taking preparatory actor courses. As a student he appeared in music videos and commercials. On the fourth course (in 2000) of the VGIK, director Alexey Sidorov cast Vdovichenkov in the main role in the television series Brigada. This brought him fame in Russia and other Russian-speaking countries. In 2001, Vdovichenkov graduated from Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, Russia. He has performed at the State Academic Theater of Vakhtangov since 2002. The actor has starred in over 40 films and was nominated for Nika for Best Actor in 2015 for tonight’s film. That same year, he married Elena Lyadova who became his fourth wife.


ANNA UKOLOVA (b. February 15, 1978 in village Sbornyy, Syzrantskiy District, Kuybyshhev Oblast, RSFSR, USSR [now Russia]) finished school, and did not know what she wanted to do. At that time, Ukolova’s brother graduated from the Samara Institute of Culture and advised her to apply. There were 10 openings, for which Ukolova sang, danced, read a poem of her brother’s. For her audition, famed director Vladimir Andreev sat on the bench and watched. Ukolova spoke to him, told her that
Andrey Zvyagintsev (Wikipedia)

Andrey Petrovich Zvyagintsev (Russian: Андрей Петрович Звягинцев; born 6 February 1964) is a Russian film director and screenwriter. He is mostly known for his 2003 film The Return, which won him a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Following The Return, Zvyagintsev directed The Banishment and Elena. His film Leviathan was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 2014. His most recent film Loveless won the Jury Prize at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival.

Zvyagintsev was born in Novosibirsk, Siberia. At the age of 20 in 1984 he graduated from the drama school in Novosibirsk as an actor. Since 1986 he has lived in Moscow where he continued his studies at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts until 1990. From 1992 to 2000 he worked as an actor for film and theater. In 2000 he began to work for the TV station REN TV and directed three episodes of the television series The Black Room.

In 2003, he directed his first feature film The Return, which received several awards, including a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. His second feature film The Banishment premiered at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for a Palme d'Or. In 2008, he directed "Apocrypha", a short segment for the film New York, I Love You. The segment was eventually cut from the film’s theatrical release but is included on the DVD.

His 2011 film, Elena, premiered at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, in the Un Certain Regard section, where it won the Jury Prize.

His 2014 film Leviathan was selected to compete for the Palme d’Or in the main competition section at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, where Zvyagintsev and Oleg Negin won the award for Best Screenplay for the film. Leviathan won the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film and was nominated for the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film. In 2015, Zvyagintsev was a jury president of the 18th Shanghai International Film Festival.

His most recent film Loveless won the Jury Prize at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. It went on to win the Best Film at the 2017 London Film Festival, making him the second director to have won the award twice, having previously been honoured for Leviathan.


Andrei Zvyagintsev entered filmmaking relatively late in life, and to date has produced only four feature films. Yet he is arguably the most prominent Russian filmmaker working today, and his new film “Leviathan,” opening in limited release on Christmas Day before going wide next year, has recently advanced into the foreign-language Oscars short-list, following a triumphant march along the festival circuit. With his first two features, allusively titled “The Return” (2003) and “The Banishment” (2007), Zvyagintsev earned a reputation for crafting family dramas with a distinct flavor of Old Testament parables. “Leviathan,” then, is at once a return to form and an advance into wholly new territory. Its central conflict is, ostensibly, one of the individual against a deeply corrupt, drunken and murderous state power with methods that bear more than a passing resemblance to those practiced by the current Russian government. Plus—perhaps somewhat unexpectedly for a modern-day update on the Book of Job—it nearly becomes a murder mystery.

Given the resounding success of Zvyagintsev’s daring amalgamation of current events and Biblical parable, I wanted to look closely at the way the film’s constituent parts function together, and also to examine briefly its immediate socio-political context, which may not be readily accessible to audiences outside of Russia.

It so happened that a few weeks ago I co-moderated a post-screening discussion of “Leviathan” in a theater in suburban New Jersey. A very solid (and solidly American) audience was very much interested in finding out whether “he did it or not.” (Just who did or didn’t do what I will not say for fear of a spoiler.) I expect that Russian audiences—if and when they get to see the film—will not be of two minds on the question of the accused’s innocence. As Andrei Zvyagintsev reminded me when we met in New York during his recent U.S. press tour, “some thirty percent of Russia’s prisoners are entrepreneurs of various kinds, who got “fixed”—either by their competitors or by the government. They simply disappear. There is no recourse for these people. The most prominent example, of course, was Khodorkovsky.”

He might have also mentioned Alexei Navalny, an inveterate Putin scourgé and anti-corruption activist, who is currently facing a ten-year sentence on allegations that his
company overcharged a client (something even the client denies),
or the two girls from the punk-band Pussy Riot, who spent two
years in a prison camp for “hooliganism.”

As it happens, Pussy Riot do make a split-second
appearance in the film by way of spray-painted graffiti on a
partly-obliterated TV newsreel. And they receive an even more
oblique mention towards the end, in a sermon delivered to a
church full of unrepentant wheelers and dealers, whose message
is: we are the church, ours is the truth, our prayers get answered,
not those of blasphemers capering about the altar. The last bit is a
reference to Pussy Riot’s “punk prayer” performance (“Mother of
God, drive Putin away!”), which ultimately landed them behind
bars. While Russian audiences are far better equipped to pick up on
such subtleties than their New Jersey counterparts, I suspect they
will be equally hard-pressed to say what the film’s many allusions,
elisions and suggestive symbolism ultimately amount to.

What does it mean that portraits of communist leaders
are used for target practice? That crooked officials plot their
vengeance under the watchful eye of Putin’s still “untargeted”
portrait? That an old, beautifully frescoed church is in ruins,
while a new, immaculately white church welcomes the blackest
of sinners (whose black luxury cars fill its parking lot)? That
Philip Glass’s Akhnaten overture opens and closes the film? And
what, in the end, is the film’s titular beast? For “Leviathan” turns
out to be—perhaps of necessity—a highly convoluted, slippery
creature, only partly glimpsed from the shore, and its somewhat
paradoxical circumstances only add to the general uncertainty.

Whereas “The Return” and “The Banishment” were set
firmly in no-place and no-time, far from the affairs of the day,
Zvyagintsev’s “Leviathan” appears to be an unsparking
indictment of the lawlessness and corruption of Putin’s authoritarian
regime… Or perhaps of a deeply corrupt regional administration
that is so far removed from the center of power that the
aforementioned portrait of the dear leader appears to be about
fifteen years old… Or perhaps of the Russian Orthodox Church,
whose chillingly menacing representative seems to be pulling the
strings of a puppet hydra, whose smirk, writhing heads are the
town’s mayor, judge, prosecutor and police chief… Or all of the
above. However it may be, the film paradoxically received some
$2.5 million or about 45% of its budget in government funds.

Following the film’s premiere at Cannes, the Russian
culture minister said that it was not to his liking (no idle words in
official Russia); moreover, he let it be known that films
portraying Russia as a “shithole” [sic] would no longer receive
state funding. Despite such ominous pronouncements,
“Leviathan” was subsequently chosen as Russia’s official entry
in this year’s Academy Awards competition. In today’s
increasingly witch-hunting Russia, the nomination of a film that
can easily earn its director the label of a Russophobe (common
and most damning), traitor to the motherland (perennial favorite)
or, at the very least, a CIA shill, might seem like an act of
remarkable courage and defiance—had the film actually been
shown there.

More likely, it is an equally remarkable instance of
pragmatism and clear-sightedness from a cronny committee that
has managed to get but a single film into the Oscars short-list in
the fifteen years of Putin’s rule, and last year nominated the
monstrously kitsch WWII epic “Stalingrad”—in IMAX 3D.

In welcome contrast, “Leviathan” is somehow taut and
fragmentary at once, admirably acted, unabashedly stylish, and
very aware of the tropes and tastes of international
arthouse cinema. It is entirely telling that Nikolai’s house at
the center of the conflict bears no trace of the
traditional izba, but is a smart seaside cottage with large
windows running the length of an entire wall. At the same
time, the film has its deep and sprawling roots in the
early 19th century German novella

“Michael Kohlhaas,” Thomas Hobbes’ “Leviathan or The
Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall
and Civil” and a somewhat more recent American news item: the
“Killdozer rampage.”

Since carrying off the prize for Best Screenplay at
Cannes the film has amassed a very impressive cache of festival
awards, nominations, distribution deals and critical praise. One
member of Russia’s nominating committee has opined that it was
one of the very few Russian films made in 2014 that could be
“accessible to an American audience,” while its relentlessly
bleak depiction of Russian society would be an advantage, given
the state of U.S.-Russia relations. In short, “Leviathan” has a
very real chance at the Oscars—if only as a perfect opportunity
for “Yankee-go-home” to thumb their collective nose at Russia.

For all its anti-Russian, anti-Putin or anti-clerical
rhetoric, “Leviathan”’s international accomplishments are
meticulously documented in official Russian press. There is no
doubt that ordinary Russians are genuinely proud of their
compatriot’s success and would like to see him honored with
America’s top film award. At the same time, no one seems to be
in any particular hurry to see the film. “Leviathan” has not
received a domestic release, and its fate remains somewhat
ambiguous.

Originally scheduled for a November release, the film
ran afoul of a new law prohibiting the use of obscenities in public
media. Taboo language has a rich and vivid history in Russia and
remains an indelible fiber in the fabric of Russian life [vide
supra]. Its banishment from the speculum of this life is—
according to the filmmaker—a “senseless, thoughtless, foolish
measure.” Zvyagintsev’s characters, who spend most of their
time in a state of great nervous tension or consuming frightful
quantities of vodka (still ok) for its relief, take natural and
frequent recourse in common vulgarities. Whitewashing their
speech would be about as natural as having them speak
Mandarin.
Zvyagintsev initially bristled at the idea, but was eventually forced to capitulate. “If I want people to see the film in theaters I must abide by Russian law. But that’s hardly the greatest of the evils that might have befallen the film.” Whether greater evils will spare “Leviathan” in its native land remains to be seen. As of this writing, the film has been completely re-dubbed for a rescheduled February release. Everywhere else, audiences will get to see and hear the film in its original form—even if in most cases it will be filtered through subtitles.

Asked whether he thought the decision to send “Leviathan” to the Oscars and suppress it at home might be a brilliant feat of perverse propaganda, Zvyagintsev assured me that “there is no mechanism in place to release or suppress the film. The only contract I signed was with my producer, and no institution can interfere with the film’s progress. They would have to come up with some really unheard-of law to keep the film from being shown outside Russia.” Indeed, the late release may be a clever strategy engineered by the film’s seasoned and savvy producer Aleksandr Rodnyansky (also of “Stalingrad”): the greater the film’s profile abroad, the harder it will be to suppress it at home.

Both Zvyagintsev and Rodnyansky have taken every opportunity to explain to international audiences and media outlets that “Leviathan” was directly inspired by the “Killdozer rampage” of one Marvin Heemeyer of Colorado. It seems Zvyagintsev heard of Heemeyer while in the U.S., working on a short film for the omnibus “New York, I Love You” (his segment was ultimately excluded), and was bowled over by the story of one man’s violent revolt against an entire town. Rodnyansky is, moreover, confident that “Koreans, Belgians, Americans or Italians will have no trouble relating to the Russian film because Leviathan speaks of man’s lot and fate.”

At first I was skeptical of all such pronouncements. In the Soviet Union of my childhood, fiery invectives against injustice and oppression… in the Bourgeois West were the only way to hint at these matters at home. But having read and spoken with Zvyagintsev, and considered his previous films, I am much more inclined to take seriously the filmmaker’s claim that “Leviathan” is a “universal” or “eternal story,” and that “its two feet are planted firmly in the realm of art. The characters speak Russian only because I happen to be Russian. This is why we transposed the story from Colorado to Russia, but the conflict, the struggle of a simple man against fate, god or state—here personified by the mayor—this could have happened anywhere.”

Actually, I am willing to concede only one foot, not two. I think that Zvyagintsev’s natural instinct is only to craft stories with the suggestive allusiveness and universal concerns of parables and allegories—stories set in the Land of Uz. His second instinct, perhaps, is that of a seasoned dramatist. Questioned about the unrelenting pessimism of “Leviathan” (which I foolishly mistook for an assessment of Russia’s prospects under Putin), Zvyagintsev explained, “When you want to explore a subject you must place it under a magnifying glass and tighten the screw until it breaks, to see how much pressure your subject can withstand. I want to see what my hero is made of, test his mettle.”

He is in his natural element, then, among the age-old and still unrelied travails and heartrending contradictions of human existence—even more specifically, the existence of the family unit. It is the family, perhaps more than the individual hero, that is put to the screw in “Leviathan” to see how much suffering it can bear. It is no accident that the family unit is deliberately weakened from the outset—it is a composite, artificial family, whose cracks become evident in the very first scenes.

The same may be said of all four of Zvyagintsev’s films, including his previous effort “Elena.” It was Zvyagintsev’s first collaboration with Rodnyansky, and while its setting is far more defined geographically, and its concerns seemingly far more topical and distinctly Russian, the social and political realities of contemporary Russia are kept very skillfully in the background. Indeed, to this viewer they appeared almost purely incidental.

“Leviathan” is a far more earnest effort to transplant a universal tale onto Russian soil—to make a topical film that can be acutely relevant in the socio-political circumstances of today’s Russia. And while the film unquestionably deserves its many accolades, I think it has not been entirely successful in marrying the parable of everyman’s (or every-family’s) struggle against fate, god or state to the (alas, much too drawn-out) “newsreel” of corruption and lawlessness that reign over many aspects of life in Putin’s Russia.

The great difficulty here is finding the elusive and highly precarious balance between the veiled, suggestive language demanded by the genre of parable and the explicit, factual language of the everyday. Indeed, such a balance may be no more than a phantom. In any case, with “Leviathan,” Zvyagintsev had certainly set himself a daunting and extremely delicate task. Too many recognizable details, too explicit a target for righteous indignation, too solvable a riddle, and the eternal story recedes into the background. This is why Pussy Riot are merely a flash on the screen and a veiled reference in a soporific
And why the final sequence of the film may leave many—Russian or otherwise—puzzled. When I wondered why so many key facts are deliberately suppressed, while an awfully cruel (and perhaps ultimately irrelevant) truth is revealed at the very end, Zvyagintsev confided that when he and his writing partner came up with the finale “it was like a bolt of lightning—we felt that we had made an incredible discovery, that with this finale we were approaching some kind of terrifying truth.”

I can believe that some in the audience will indeed experience such a shock, but only if they do not spend the entire film looking for veiled allusions to contemporary events—or, indeed, look for clues to the murder. In the world of the parable, in the Land of Uz, the ending will have its proper effect.

Meanwhile, “Leviathan” remains something of a composite beast. It may be an awesome sight at sea, but it stands a bit precariously on land.


In 2008, the Russian director Andrey Zvyagintsev was in Manhattan shooting a chapter of the anthology film “New York, I Love You,” when he heard the story of an auto-repair shop owner in Colorado who had demolished the town hall and a former mayor’s house with an armored bulldozer after losing a zoning dispute. From that American seed has sprung “Leviathan,” a quintessentially Russian tragedy suffused with political and religious overtones.

“It was what this guy did, protesting against injustice, that impressed me most of all,” Mr. Zvyagintsev (pronounced ZVYA-ghin-tsev) said in an interview while in New York last month to promote “Leviathan,” which opens on Christmas Day. “My first feeling was, ‘Wow, what an amazing story, I absolutely need to do something with this.’ ”

His screenwriting partner, Oleg Negin, initially resisted, arguing, as Mr. Zvyagintsev recalled, that “this is an American story, why would we want this?” But as other influences drawn from the director’s reading made themselves felt — Heinrich von Kleist’s novella “Michael Kohlhaas,” the biblical Book of Job and, after the film already had its name, Hobbes’s treatise on the nature of the social contract — the specifically Russian characteristics of the movie’s story began to emerge.

The main character in “Leviathan” is Nikolai, who runs an auto-repair shop next to the house where he lives with his young wife and teenage son in a dead-end fishing village on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. The mayor wants that land and uses his power to try to force the family out, and when Nikolai resists, the resulting series of events crushes him and those trying to help him.

Diverse as their origins may be, all of Mr. Zvyagintsev’s source materials share a common theme: the resistance of the individual to some arbitrary exercise of authority. That power may be corporate, political or even divine, but in each case, there is “a collision between a little person and a vast structure, the Leviathan,” Mr. Zvyagintsev explained.

“In a country like Russia, all the security, all the protection a member of society gets is from the establishment, police, army, health providers,” he said. “In exchange, people have to give back their freedom. I was overwhelmed with this idea. I saw it as a deal a human being might make with the Devil. Freedom is the main value a human being has, but sometimes, people don’t even notice it is being taken, because they are following the guarantees they were given.”

“Leviathan” thus appears to be an indictment of corruption and cynicism in Vladimir Putin’s increasingly authoritarian Russia. One scene, a brutal shakedown, takes place in the mayor’s office as a portrait of Mr. Putin looks on, and in another, two characters on a picnic excursion shoot up portraits of Soviet leaders from Lenin to Gorbachev and joke about when those now in power might be added to the garbage heap.

“This is how a Russian person treats power, with irony and contempt,” Mr. Zvyagintsev said when asked about that scene’s significance. “If people hold high positions, they should expect to be treated like that, if they have common sense, if they have self-irony.”

It was suggested to him that Mr. Putin lacked both a sense of humor and self-irony. “Yes, it’s a very hard job,” he replied, deadpan, declining to say anything further on the subject.

“Leviathan” has made a splash internationally. It won an award for best screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival last spring, was nominated this month for a Golden Globe for best foreign language film, and, to the surprise of those who thought its audacious subject matter would doom its chances, it is also Russia’s submission for the Oscar in that category. A. O. Scott of The New York Times named it one of the 10 best films of 2014.

Within Russia, “Leviathan,” which was partly financed by a government fund for filmmaking, has been controversial. “It’s talented,” the country’s minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, said last summer. For a while, until Mr. Zvyagintsev agreed to bleep offending words, it even appeared that the film would fall afoul of a new law that went into effect in July prohibiting obscene language in cultural projects.

But “Leviathan” is not exclusively — or even primarily, if Mr. Zvyagintsev is to be believed — about politics in today’s Russia. As reflected in his three earlier films, including “Elena,” released in the United States in 2012, he is deeply interested in moral and even overtly religious questions and describes Nikolai as “a righteous sufferer, the subject of an experiment.”
Nancy Condee, author of “The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema” and a specialist in Russian and Soviet cultural politics at the University of Pittsburgh, described Mr. Zvyagintsev as a director “actively and intensely engaged with spiritual issues in an allegorical biblical framework. “He is clearly a deep believer, in a noninstitutional sense,” she continued, and his films are full of “arrows pointing up to the sky, pitching you upward, away from a reality that is debased.”

In the scene that gives the movie its title, Nikolai, drunk and depressed, encounters a Russian Orthodox priest and questions the fate that has befallen him. The priest, a confidant of the mayor, responds by quoting from the Book of Job: “Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down his tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in his nose, or pierce his jaw with a hook? Will he make many supplications to you? Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you?”

The Russian actor Aleksey Serebryakov, who plays Nikolai, said by telephone this month that “the most complex thing in this role, in my character’s life, is this question: ‘Where are you, merciless God?’”

For all its grim subject matter, “Leviathan” is beautiful visually, with one long shot after another conferring a stark beauty on a harsh and barren landscape. In an email, Sitora Alieva, program director of the Kinotavr Open Russian Film Festival in Sochi, said that Mr. Zvyagintsev brings a “unique poetic taste to cinema” and describes him as the most famous Russian film director working today.

But early in his career, Mr. Zvyagintsev, now 50, did not seem a likely candidate for such distinctions. He was born well outside the Moscow-St. Petersburg axis that dominates Russian culture, in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, and after moving to Moscow struggled for years to find a niche, first as an actor and then as a director. Among his early efforts was a commercial for a furniture store.

“He comes from the provinces, and that is something important to take into consideration,” said Peter Rollberg, the author of “The A to Z of Russian and Soviet Cinema” and a professor of Slavic languages and film studies at George Washington University. “Coming from far away, he brings a freshness of perception.”

Asked about growing pressures on free expression, Mr. Zvyagintsev said that given that he was born in Russia and had lived there his entire life, he hoped to be able to continue making films in his homeland. But Mr. Serebryakov moved his family to Canada three years ago, saying then that he would “like my children to grow up under a fundamentally different ideology” than the system of “coarse intolerance and aggressive behavior” he saw prevailing in Russia. He now returns home only for work on projects like “Leviathan.”

“To tell you the truth, I’d rather speak about the movie,” he said in response to a request to elaborate on those earlier remarks. “I’m not inclined to speak about politics. Yes, it’s a rather complex situation in Russia today, but I really hope it will change.”

Shaun Walker, “Leviathan director Andrei Zvyagintsev: ‘Living in Russia is like being in a minefield’” (The Guardian, 6 November 2014)

Andrei Zvyagintsev has a reputation for being polite but tight-lipped. Understandably. At Cannes this year, he won an award for the most searing attack on the current Russian political system ever shot. Yet, he said at the time, his aim was “certainly not to confront power”. Yes, Leviathan shows ordinary Russians crushed beneath a fiendishly corrupt bureaucracy. But it was inspired by a case in the US, he said, and is intended as a universal parable.

I arrive on a chilly autumn afternoon at the sleek Moscow offices of his producer, expecting more of the same mild-mannered obfuscation. An expression of faint alarm greets me as I’m introduced as the Guardian’s Moscow correspondent.

“Oh, so you mainly write about politics?” he asks, somewhat nervously.

But as soon as we start to speak, it’s as if a dam has broken. Carefully measured allegory is swapped for blunt straight-talking. He pauses only once in 90 minutes – to take a phone call from a friend whose wife is ill. He uses an iPhone 4, which, by the standards of the Moscow beau monde, is the equivalent of packing an old Nokia brick.

In the days before our meeting, the Russian film board had – to widespread amazement – nominated Leviathan was the national entry for the foreign language Oscar, despite its manifestly not promoting a patriotic agenda, as per government policy. Was he surprised by the move? A soliloquy follows about the difficulty of building a career in modern-day Russia. He speaks quietly, with consideration – and unmistakable anger.

“It’s like being in a minefield, this is the feeling you live with here. It’s very hard to build any kind of prospects – in life, in your profession, in your career – if you are not plugged in to the values of the system. It’s a stupid construction of society, and unfortunately the eternal curse of our territory. The ideas of the rule of law, of equal rights are hardly discussed here. There is discussion in society, but it’s pointless. I have a feeling of the absolute futility of pretending to the right to have a say in any situation. I’ve turned 50 and I’ve never voted in my life. Because I’m absolutely certain that in our system it’s a completely pointless step.”

He takes a breath. “So to answer your question: yes, I was pleasantly surprised.”

Leviathan is about what an individual can do faced with the might of a monstrous state. Aleksei Serebryakov is Nikolai, a rugged chap who looks like Stuart Pearce after 600 consecutive nights on the vodka. For generations, his family has lived in the same cottage overlooking the sea. The land on which it sits is
Leviathan is simply a film about the human condition. Nikolai suspects, wants to build a luxury mansion on the spot. Using his influence with the local police and courts, the mayor obtains an eviction order and pitifully small compensation payout.

The film opens as Nikolai’s appeal is overruled by a judge reading her lengthy verdict in a mindless rapid monotone, a Kafkaesque ritual familiar to anyone who’s spent time in a Russian courtroom. He enlists the help of an old Moscow friend, now a hotshot lawyer, and so begins an epic battle in which nobody’s motivation turns out to be 100% pure.

The film, which many reckoned to be the best at Cannes this year, is Zvyagintsev’s fourth. He spent most of his first 40 years determined to become an actor. Schooldays in Novosibirsk, a Siberian city right in the middle of Russia’s vast mass, were spent “dreaming of theatre, obsessed with it”. First came conscription in the Red Army theatre troupe, then he arrived in Moscow in 1986, aged 22, just as Soviet society was on the cusp of enormous change.

Work did not flood in. He spent years cleaning, sweeping leaves and shovelling snow as a dvornik – quintessential Moscow work now largely done by low-paid migrants from Central Asia – devouring books and films in his spare time. “I’d seen Al Pacino in Bobby Deerfield, and I went bonkers. In Russia, it was shown in black and white; when I saw the colour version it was a completely different effect. But I saw how he acted and was amazed, I couldn’t understand how he was able to do it.”

He began to pick up small parts in adverts or trashy soaps. A friend suggested he helped out with directing; his first film was a cheap ad for a furniture salon.

By the early 2000s, Zvyagintsev was still in front of the camera, but also more accomplished behind it. He cut his teeth shooting half-hour detective stories for a serial; a producer spotted his talent and in 2001 suggested he make a film.

The Return (2003), his debut feature, won Zvyagintsev the Golden Lion in Venice, international acclaim and inevitable comparisons to Andrei Tarkovsky, whose allegorical and enigmatic epics his work echoes. Then came The Banishment (2007), his only film not to be received ecstatically, then return-to-form Elena (2011), a brooding family drama set in contemporary Moscow, where both the haves and the have-nots make equally unappealing moral choices. The film shows Moscow as a soulless, interminable dystopia; the city has rarely looked so disgusting.

Yet with Elena, the case could plausibly be made that it is simply a film about the human condition that happens to take place in Russia. Surely he can’t really claim the same for Leviathan?

“The ideas at the heart of it are relevant everywhere,” he smiles. “But of course it’s a film about Russia. It’s a very Russian film.”

Indeed. Leviathan could not be more forthrightly Russian if a bear were to waltz through its opening credits playing a balalaika. Everything from the courthouses to the churches to the traffic cops are distinctively, quintessentially Russian. And lest we be in any doubt that this is the real, tangible Russia rather than some imaginary, parallel Russia, there are references to Pussy Riot and a portrait of Vladimir Putin hangs on the wall of the corrupt mayor’s office.

“Yet it is perhaps the church that comes in for Leviathan’s most sledgehammer satire. “We are reawakening the soul of the Russian people,” intones the film’s imperious bishop, voice shaking with righteous anger as he reels off a list of enemies who would undermine Russia. It is a voice that could come from the daily evening news bulletins on state-controlled television. This bishop, with his gold and mahogany office, contrasts with a local bedraggled priest who gives the distraught Nikolai an impromptu sermon on the tests that God might have in store. Zvyagintsev describes himself as secular, but a believer. When he was 28, he says, he decided he wanted to be christened, only to find out that his grandparents had done this secretly when he was two years old.

Leviathan’s portrayal of a venal, organised church, along with a sickeningly corrupt political system and a sloshed, atomised society, could not be further from the Russia that the authorities want to portray.

Leviathan even received partial funding from the Ministry of Culture, but new regulations imply that only patriotic films will do so in the future. “Nobody is against propaganda
films that would support the foundations of the state. But they also have to take care of all the others, or there will simply be a catastrophe. People will live like in North Korea, where they are hostages, and are certain that their path is the only correct one."

Zvyagintsev swims resolutely against the tide. One remark by Russia’s culture minister, Vladimir Medinsky, who, earlier this year, said openly that he did not like Leviathan, seems especially to irritate.

‘He said: ‘Let all the flowers grow, but we will only water the ones we like.’ After these words he should have been fired, because this is a direct violation of the constitution, a direct violation of human expression. You cannot impose rules on art. Everybody should be equal. Government help, without which art cannot function, should be equally spread between all participants.”

Leviathan dramatises one man’s dilemma of whether to try to stand up to the monster of the state. So what does Zvyagintsev, the despairing, firebrand non-voter, think?

“A lot of people think that you have to abide by the theory of small actions; that you should do whatever you can from your position. My position is that of a cinema director. I’m not politically active. But I can’t not react to what is happening around me.”

*Leviathan is on release in the UK now*

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**Jeff Meyers. “‘Leviathan' Offers Scathing Critique Of Russian Corruption” (San Antonio Current)**

"Everything is everyone's fault."

Of the five foreign language films nominated for an Oscar this year, *Leviathan* is a rarity, a movie fueled by angry condemnation and sardonic contempt rather than poetic uplift or mournful reminiscence. You want to root for its success simply because it’s a cinematic voice of rebellion, daring its host country, and the entire Academy, to consider the soul-crushing corruption that infects Russian culture — and, frankly, most of humanity. Whether it's the church, local bureaucrats, Putin's government, or the drunken, selfish masses, director Andrey Zvyagintsev points his damning finger at everyone.

With that kind of approach, it didn't have a chance in hell of taking home a coveted statue. Set in the breathtaking northwest coast of Russia, near the Finnish border, *Leviathan* follows the Job-like travails of Kolya (Aleksey Serebryakov), a hot-headed mechanic whose sprawling seaside home — built by ancestors generations ago — has become a target of acquisition for the town's tyrannical mayor, Vadim (Roman Madyanov), who sees it as the lynchpin in his crooked development schemes. With a belly full of pride (and lots of vodka), Kolya challenges the corrupt forces conspiring to steal his land, recruiting Dmitri, an old army buddy who has become a slick Moscow lawyer, to help. Unfortunately, the more Kolya resists, the harder and harsher Vadim becomes, sending both into a spiral of neurotically macho confrontations.

Further complicating things is that Kolya's young wife, Lila (Elena Lyadova), becomes attracted to Dmitri, while Roma (Sergey Pokhodaev), his disaffected teenage son from a previous marriage, seethes with resentment about his new family. With plenty of stupidity, betrayal, and petty cruelty to go around, *Leviathan* builds, as most Russian stories do, toward tragedy. But not without first indulging in some dark Chekhovian humor.

From the mayor’s thuggish, bantering cronies to the hypocrisies of church leaders, Zvyagintsev paints a scathingly acerbic portrait of small-time corruption.

*Leviathan's pace is slow — maybe too slow — but Zvyagintsev squeezes out a queasy form of suspense from the soul-crushing obstacles he keeps hurling at his righteous protagonist. For more than two hours, Kolya and those around him endure one misfortune after another, forcing you to wonder whether there will ever be any relief. Every time you think you know where the plot is heading, the characters blindsides you with an impulsively bad choice. Even the lovely Lila, who seems to notice so much of what the others miss, ends up undone. It's her fate that may ultimately disturb the most.*

*Leviathan* is outraged and cynical, the work of a talented filmmaker who is out to condemn a nation he clearly loves. There simply aren't enough filmmakers like this anymore, artists who know how to harness their rage into dramatically compelling, if emotionally exhausting, movies. Zvyagintsev's references may be uniquely Russian, but his exploration of how ordinary people get fucked by the powerful is universal.

Since 1947, when the Academy Awards first started including foreign language films (a formal competitive category was created in 1956), Russian films have been nominated 15 times (nine as the Soviet Union) and taken home the Oscar just four times. The last was more than 20 years ago with 1994's *Burnt by the Sun*.

This year, Siberian-born Andrey Zvyagintsev's scathingly bitter *Leviathan* was predicted to triumph over four strong nominees after taking home Best Foreign-Language Film at the Golden Globes. Pawe Pawlikowski's *Ida* ended up winning.

The soldier-turned-actor-turned-director has been on an upward trajectory since his 2003 debut *The Return* took home the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Zvyagintsev's 2011
film Elena made clear that he was willing to confront the corruption that has infected his country.

Social consciousness and critique fuel Zvyagintsev's work, which has won him no favors with officials back home. Though it paints a bleak portrait of Russian society, the film was actually inspired by Coloradan Marvin Heemeyer, who demolished several buildings then killed himself after losing a zoning dispute. Nevertheless, Leviathan was, at first, denied a formal release in its homeland, as conservatives condemned its views and even called for it to be banned. But after the Golden Globes win, and an estimated 1.5 million Russians downloaded it illegally, the film found its way onto nearly 700 screens. Still, things look far from rosy for the 51-year-old filmmaker who was once a street janitor. Leviathan received 35 percent of its budget from the Ministry Of Culture. When asked whether the ministry would help fund Zvyagintsev's next film, its current leader answered, "All flowers can grow, but we only water the ones we like."

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