Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* as a Critique of Contemporary Russian Society

Amelia Fay
Columbia University

No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

–Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan

In his 1651 treatise *Leviathan*, British philosopher Thomas Hobbes examines the relationship between the individual and the "sovereign." Man's natural state, he argues, is one devoid of culture and marked by violence—a "nasty, brutish, and short" existence. Individuals may transcend this suffering through obedience to a sovereign, who in return provides security and stability. This social contract between state and citizens is a central theme of Andrey Zvyagintsev's 2014 film *Leviathan*, which grapples with the concept's application in modern Russian society.

Hobbes is explaining the challenges of life outside the social contract, but his words are eerily relevant to the reality portrayed in Zvyagintsev's film. *Leviathan* follows Nikolai "Kolya" Sergeiev, a local mechanic attempting to combat the government's seizure of his ancestral land. During the appeal process, Kolya is confronted with corruption, violence, and betrayal. The authorities repeatedly remind Kolya that he is required to submit to them and that he is foolish to resist their demands. Kolya's life—and the lives of other citizens—is certainly "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," marked by "continual fear, and danger of violent death." Through this bleak portrayal of life in modern Russia, Zvyagintsev argues that the social contract is fundamentally broken; the state demands submission, yet fails to provide stability.

This paper is an analysis of Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* as a critique of contemporary Russian society,

specifically a criticism of the state's failure to uphold its end of the social contract. We will first review the circumstances under which the modern social contract was born, to understand its continual deterioration up until the time of the film's release (the early 2010s). We will then examine the various societal ills portrayed in *Leviathan*, namely corruption and a lack of empathy. Finally, we will analyze viewers' split responses to *Leviathan*, specifically accusations that the film acts as anti-Russian propaganda.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To fully appreciate *Leviathan*, we must analyze Putin's journey to the presidency and the political climate in which the film was born. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian society fell into complete disarray. The Boris Yeltsin presidency, from 1991 to 1999, was defined by high crime rates, economic depression, and overall chaos. That Putin became president amid this turbulence is critical, because these circumstances allowed him to portray himself as the guarantor of order—a role he plays to this day.

Leading up to and throughout his time in power, Putin has exploited numerous conflicts to position himself as the sovereign, encouraging citizens to surrender their individual rights for the security he provides. In September 1999, several months before the presidential election, a series of bombs detonated in apartment buildings across Russia. Despite a lack of evidence suggesting the perpetrators were Chechens, Putin pinned the attacks on Chechnya, using them as a justification for the Second Chechen War. (It is important to note that these attacks may actually have been committed by the Federal Security Service (FSB), reflecting the lengths to which Putin will go to portray himself as a capable sovereign.) By generating an external conflict, Putin successfully rallied the Russian public behind him and increased his approval rating from two percent to 45 percent. It goes without saying that Putin's response to the bombings—in addition to his influence over the media and election interference—was instrumental in his rise to president.

During his time in power, Putin has leveraged various conflicts to justify the further concentration of state power or limitations on civil rights. During Putin's first two terms, these violations were mostly tolerated by the public, because living conditions had significantly improved since he took office. Economic growth, the victory in Chechnya, and rising oil and gas prices boosted morale. At this time, both the state and the public fulfilled their obligations under the unspoken social contract: stability in exchange for submission.

The social contract, however, began to disintegrate with Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. Triggered by financial difficulties—lingering instability due to the 2008 financial crisis—and a blatantly stolen election, large-scale protests erupted across the country. The state, unable to provide the security demanded by the social contract, had "disregard[ed] the choices of citizens while expecting them to take part in future rituals of

support." Thus was realized Hobbes's prediction: if the state violates its unspoken agreement with the people, the people will rebel.

When analyzing *Leviathan*, it is essential to understand the political situation at the time. These protests broke out less than a year before Zvyagintsev began production and they undoubtedly influenced the story. The original script, written in 2010, was inspired by a land dispute in Colorado, in which a local mechanic demolished multiple government buildings before taking his own life. However, the script was reworked in 2012—as anti-Putin discourse grew—to be a sweeping criticism of modern Russian society, incorporating references to Job and Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* is a reflection of the political circumstances in which it was made--namely, the public's realization that the state demands steadfast obedience yet fails to provide security.

LEVIATHAN'S PORTRAYAL OF RUSSIAN SOCIETY

Leviathan differs from many "individual versus the system" films in that it refuses to glorify its protagonists. Zvyagintsev himself has admitted to a frustration with simplistic approaches to such stories, which portray the protagonist as a hero opposing an evil government. Zvyagintsev, however, has explicitly stated that *Leviathan* aims to avoid such simplification. This nuanced approach is apparent in that not just the authorities, but also average citizens, are corrupt and morally transgressive.

To be clear, *Leviathan* is damning in its portrayal of the Russian authorities. Throughout the film, both the state and Orthodox Church abuse their positions to accrue personal wealth and political power. They are "hierarchical, violent, corrupt, unjust, and opaque [...] behav[ing] as if they are entitled to power." The authorities act superior to their subjects because they truly believe that to be the case; in the words of the Bishop, "All power comes from God." This divine authority—or, rather, the belief in its existence—empowers the authorities to "solve issues [by] might," to essentially beat citizens into submission.

Throughout the film, the state leverages both its physical might and its influence to discourage citizens from exercising their civil rights. The first major interaction between state and citizens occurs when the mayor and his men visit Kolya's home one night. Gesturing to the land, the mayor claims "all of this" belongs to him, before belittling Kolya and his lawyer, Dmitry. The mayor's use of animalistic terminology – "insects," "courtroom rat" – shows he does not even view the men as human, but mere scum. He continues, screaming, "You've never had any fucking rights and never will!" From the mayor's perspective, citizens must bow to state power, or else they cause themselves to "drown[ ] in shit" when they "make things difficult."

Later, the state uses violence to force Dmitry away from Kolya's case. The mayor and his men drive Dmitry to an isolated area, where they stage a mock execution before abandoning him. It is critical that the mayor himself fires the gun; he does not delegate this task and seems comfortable with

it as if this is a normal part of his job. Leaving Dmitry bound and crumpled on the ground, the mayor, unphased, immediately gets on the phone with the Bishop to discuss building plans for Kolya's land. (That the Bishop is on the other end of this call is only revealed to the audience in the film's final scene.) It is interesting that on this call, the mayor speaks of a "public-private partnership" and refers to the Church as a "brand." It goes without saying that in most societies, this language represents a flawed understanding of the Church's role. Zvyagintsev shows that in Russia, however, the Church is not just a business – with a reputation to be curated and protected – but also a client of the state.

It is not merely the authorities, however, who are corrupt. Zvyagintsev "blur[s] the lines between 'good' and 'bad,'" creating a world with "no recognizable heroes" where every character is flawed. The clearest example of this nuance is Kolya. It is purely the injustice of Kolya's situation, rather than any innate goodness or likability, that makes him sympathetic. In fact, Kolya is quite repulsive; he is violent, cruel, and an alcoholic. In contrast, Dmitry is idealistic—although somewhat naive—and dedicated to Kolya's case. But Dmitry, too, hurts those around him, most notably through his affair with Kolya's wife, Lilya, and his early return to Moscow. This is a trend in *Leviathan*, where all characters transgress moral boundaries and fail to "see the other and love the other." Characters repeatedly disappoint viewers with their selfishness and cruelty.

This lack of empathy – rooted in a lack of communication and overall dissatisfaction—causes characters to resort to physical forms of expression, such as sex and violence. Lilya, in particular, suffers from this lack of communication, in that her relationships with Kolya and Dmitry are primarily physical. Both men sleep with Lilya—at one point, Kolya even forces himself on her—yet they rarely engage her in substantive conversation. Although Lilya does not express herself verbally, it is clear she is deeply unhappy and hurt by the disdain with which Kolya and his son, Roma, treat her.

The problem with this physical method of expression becomes particularly evident with the exposure of Lilya and Dmitry's affair. Having learned of Dmitry's betrayal, Kolya attacks him and Lilya subsequently returns to the hotel with Dmitry. Dmitry briefly consoles Lilya, saying everyone is guilty and therefore she should not be overly critical of herself. Naturally, the viewer expects the conversation to continue with Dmitry and Lilya working through recent events or even simply connecting on a personal level. Instead, Dmitry goes on to curtly respond to Lilya's questions about his beliefs and reject her embrace. This interaction reveals that sex is the primary factor uniting Dmitry and Lilya; once their sexual relationship becomes impossi-

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ble—or at the very least dangerous—the two are left exchanging empty words. Dmitry speaks as if he cares for Lilya yet literally pushes her away while she is suffering. This atmosphere of physical exploitation and emotional coldness bleeds into Lilya's relationship with Kolya, who beats her when she returns later that night.

Overall, *Leviathan* paints a bleak picture of Russian society. Yes, the authorities are corrupt and brutal in their dealings with citizens. But Zvyagintsev also refuses to portray the citizens as martyrs, instead showing them to be egocentric, violent, and at times unfeeling. The characters all encounter some form of cruelty and suffer as a result, yet they perpetuate that same cruelty against others. Ultimately, Zvyagintsev argues that in today's Russia, corruption is a "process of degeneration affecting all levels of human existence [...] [a] state of being." In other words, the corruption, violence, and chaos that defined Russia in the 1990s have not been cleansed – but cemented – by the Putin regime.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTHORITIES AND LAND

Another aspect of *Leviathan*'s critique focuses on the citizens' and authorities' differing relations with the natural landscape. The film's main characters are consistently portrayed against the backdrop of the town's sweeping seaside scenery, often seeking refuge in the outdoors. Lilya, for instance, retreats to the sea when processing the breakdown of her marriage, ultimately choosing to drown herself in that location. Shortly after, Kolya sits outside watching videos of Lilya as he comes to terms with her absence. These are only two of the numerous portrayals of citizens seeking solitude in the natural landscape while grappling with *P*sychologically difficult situations.

The natural world, however, is not merely a space for mourning, but also a venue for relaxation and camaraderie. The most significant example of this is Ivan Stepanich's birthday party, for which Kolya's family and Dmitry join friends in the countryside. The men drink and shoot, appearing at ease now that they have distanced themselves from the authorities. (It is important to note that Stepanich is a police officer who at times leverages his position to earn favors from Kolya. However, he is not portrayed in connection to central authority—the mayor and the Bishop—and even encourages the others to deface portraits of Soviet leaders.) To citizens, the landscape represents a certain degree of freedom, a space in which they can speak freely and temporarily distract themselves from their bleak existence.

In contrast, Zvyagintsev portrays authorities in "social, constricted, man-made spaces," usually formal offices. The relationship between the mayor and the Bishop, in particular, follows this pattern; these characters are shown together three times, yet each scene takes place indoors. Specifically, the mayor and Bishop exclusively meet in religious venues: a church dining room, the Bishop's office, and, finally, the new church on Kolya's land. In addition, the mayor is repeatedly depicted in his personal office. These spaces are

uninviting, impersonal, and totally cut off from the outside world; the walls are covered in confining wood paneling and the windows are not shown. (On the other hand, Kolya's house is wrapped in large windows which seamlessly integrate it into the natural landscape.) These stylistic choices underscore how the authorities value land for neither its beauty nor history; in fact, they refuse to substantively interact with the landscape. To them, land is purely another vector of political power and a way to demonstrate status; the authorities do not even attempt to utilize the beauty of Kolya's land, instead building another closed-off structure: the church.

Although depicted outdoors on several occasions, authorities only venture outside their natural habitat to intimidate citizens. The first altercation between Kolya, Dmitry, and the mayor occurs outside Kolya's home. The mayor, clearly unwelcome, is flanked by multiple men and tells Kolya of his plans to seize the land. Later in the film, the mayor travels to a remote area to to abuse Dmitry. In short, there are no moments in which a significant authority figure retreats into the landscape for solitude, or even just to appreciate its beauty.

Through its vastly contrasting visuals, *Leviathan* questions not only the power the state wields over its citizens but also the state's manipulation of land and nature. For citizens, land represents not only a financial asset, but one's family history, community, and right to privacy. Zvyagintsev validates citizens' claim to the land and argues that the authorities' attempts to manipulate and control the land transcend the laws of nature. This is yet another way in which *Leviathan* problematizes the social contract, suggesting that the extent of state control in modern Russian society unnaturally severs citizens from the resources and the land to which they have a claim.

CONCLUSION

The reality depicted in *Leviathan* is undoubtedly bleak; characters exploit each other in different ways and regularly resort to violence instead of civil communication. For all but the central authorities, this existence is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Thus, *Leviathan* prompts viewers to ask themselves not only, "Why do we tolerate this abuse?" but, more importantly, "Why do we perpetuate it?" As Dmitry says, "Each of us is guilty of our own faults. Everything is everyone's fault"; there is a sickness at the core of modern Russia.

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Ultimately, by depicting life as miserable, dangerous, and turbulent, Zvyagintsev challenges the origin myth of modern Russia. Putin did not cleanse Russian society but rather created conditions in which corruption and cruelty still thrive. Therefore, the social contract has been broken and citizens are surrendering their freedom in return for nothing.

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