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Friday February 19th, 7.30pm

Leviathan (Russia 2014. Cert 15)

dir: Andrey Zvyagintsev

starring: Aleksey Serebryakov, Elena Lyadova, Roman Madyanov

sponsors: Jonathan and Shuna Killin

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A journey by car in an Andrey Zvyagintsev film is typically something to be dreaded. His masterful 2003 debut *The Return* hinges on a long and traumatic road trip. Its 2007 follow-up *The Banishment* opens with a vehicle being driven in haste by a man who is in the process of losing an awful lot of blood. No-one could be blamed, then, for fearing the worst in his latest picture, *Leviathan*. After shots of waves lashing rocks under the gaze of a mountainous landscape, we see a man, Kolia, driving through the grey light to collect his friend Dmitri from the train station. Later there will indeed be a suspenseful car journey, but for now any tension is restricted to legal matters: Dmitri is a Moscow lawyer preparing to fight Kolia's corner against the corrupt mayor, Vadim. The latter is trying to snatch from Kolia the coastal plot on which he had built the house where he lives with his wife and child. Over the subsequent 140 minutes, the class tensions of Zvyagintsev's *Elena* (2011) combine with the domestic angst of *The Banishment* to produce a film that is more troubling and ambitiously scaled than either.

If the biblical connotations of the title suggest drama of the highfalutin variety, the perspective offers a worm's-eye view. From the grimly hilarious court appeal, in which the particulars are read by the judge in a one-take breakneck monotone that leaves no room for breath, let alone interjection, there is never any likelihood that Kolia will triumph against the system. (The movie may be bleak but it is also surprisingly abundant and nuanced in its use of humour). The title, after all, refers not only to the whales glimpsed in the Barents Sea - or to their cavernous skeletons, among which Kolia's son wanders. It applies also (as it does in Thomas Hobbes' 1651 book of the same name, alluded to in the film) to the monstrous forces of government against which men such as Kolia, compared specifically by the town priest to Job, can only offer stoical resignation.

The pleasure of the film lies in its forensic skill in unpicking the intersecting layers of government corruption and calumny that doom the working class from the outset. There would be no mistaking Zvyagintsev's hitherto opaque political allegiances, even if one only had the target practice scene to go on. Having exhausted their supply of empty beer bottles, a shooting party turns to framed portraits of Russian leaders. Vladimir Putin is conspicuous by his absence. "It's too early for the current ones," says the policeman leading the shoot. "Let them ripen on the walls." But a scene in which Putin's image watches sinisterly over an exchange between Vadim and Dmitri, not to mention a later glimpse on a television screen of the words "Pussy Riot", leaves no doubt as to the film-maker's sympathies.



Kolia may ask, pleadingly, "Why, Lord?" during a moment of suffering, but religion offers neither answers nor hope. Indeed, it is a priest who expressly persuades Vadim to stick to his guns in the land dispute and to regard his own power as synonymous with the divine one. Mapping this corroded moral structure in script form is something at which Zvyagintsev and his co-writer Oleg Negin excel. They may resort at times, both here, and in *The Banishment*, to the use of the wife figure as a repository for pain rather than a character in her own right. But it would be churlish to dispute the crushing logic, the symbiotic inevitability, that underpins every plot point, however minor.

Synopsis: Northern Russia, the present. Kolia is ordered to surrender to local mayor Vadim the seaside house he shares with his second wife Lilya and his son from his first marriage, Roma. He enlists his friend, Moscow lawyer Dmitri, to represent him. Dmitri has a dossier of information with which he blackmails Vadim into backing down. Hoping for re-election, Vadim is preparing to relent when he receives advice from a priest, who tells him that all power comes from God. With this in mind, Vadim arranges for Dmitri to be beaten up. Kolia has also had reason to turn against Dmitri, after discovering that he has been having an affair with Lilya. Kolia makes peace with her despite Roma's fearful protestations. But with Dmitri having returned to Moscow, Kolia's home is now once again vulnerable to Vadim. Kolia goes to pick up Lilya from her factory job, and finds that she has not attended work that day and that her phone number is unreachable. Lilya is found dead on the beach. Kolia rails against the local priest, who tells him the story of Job. Homicide detectives burst into Kolia's home to arrest him for Lilya's murder. He is found guilty and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment, leaving the way clear for the house to be knocked down and the land seized by Vadim. Roma is offered a home by friends of his father. Vadim attends a church service where he tells his son that God sees everything.

Credits

Kolia	Aleksey Serebryakov	Director	Andrey Zvyagintsev
Lilya	Elena Lyadova	Screenplay	Andrey Zvyagintsev, Oleg Negin
Dmitri	Vladimir Vdovichenkov	DoP	Mikhail Krichman
Vadim	Roman Madyanov	Editing	Anna Mass
Angela	Anna Ukolova	Sound	Andrey Dergachev
Pacha	Aleksey Rozin	Costume	Anna Bartuli
Roma	Sergey Pokodaev		
Bishop	Valeriy Grishko		
Stephanych	Sergey Bachurskiy		
Victor	Platon Kamenev		

Russia, 2014. 140 mins

Zvyagintsev's talents extend far beyond that. What makes him an artist rather than simply a craftsman is his ability to express in visual and aural terms the themes and tensions that drive the narrative. Philip Glass's music is imposing enough, even without knowing that it has been transplanted from his 1983 opera *Akhmaten*, which explores power and religion through the story of the pharaoh who pioneered monotheism. Coupled with the dusky cinematography of Mikhail Krichman, the effect is at once breathtaking and oppressive. The majority of the picture, whether interior or exterior, has been lit and shot to create pools of darkness in the foreground (in some scenes, the actors are reduced almost to silhouettes). Illumination does exist in this world - the mountains in the distance are often streaked with sunlight. In common with hope and comprehension, that illumination lies stranded forever in the distance, frustratingly beyond the reach of Kolia and his woebegone countrymen.

Another view (The Flickering Wall)

There is something relentless, inexorable, about director Andrei Zvyagintsev's latest missive from contemporary Russia - a new moral mousetrap laced with dark gallows humour about a man's futile struggle against the establishment in a decaying small town in the Barents sea.

Leviathan carries that singular sense of ominous Russian fatalism that can occasionally make it look far too much like a broadcast from a nihilist deity toying absent-mindedly with the frail hopes and dreams of human beings. Assuming, of course, that such a deity would exist - the darkness that runs through Mr. Zvyagintsev's fourth feature, where the Orthodox Church goes hand in hand with the corruption and pettiness of elected officials, seems to eject any sort of faith and hope, presenting instead a Promethean condemnation to eternal struggle.

Prometheus, here, is Kolya (Aleksei Serebryakov), who strives valiantly and beyond all reasonable expectations to hold on to his family's plot of prime-location real estate by the sea, even if it means losing his sullen teenage son and second wife in the process. The land is coveted by the local venal mayor Vadim (Roman Madianov), who, with church, government and justice in his pocket, has effectively all but expropriated it, and is just letting Kolya tire himself out before yanking it off him like a dog on a leash chasing a bone eternally out of reach.

Much has been made of Leviathan's apparent finger-pointing at the regime of Vladimir Putin, its undisguised despair and displeasure for corruption and subjugation fitting in with the horror stories propagated in the media about contemporary Russia. But in fact Mr. Zvyagintsev is not talking so much exclusively of modern-day Russia as he is channelling a complaint about a state of affairs that transcends one government and seems in-built or in-bred. At the film's midpoint, a sublimely edgy picnic-cum-target-practice-trip sees local friends pull out old framed pictures of Soviet rulers, from Lenin and Stalin to Gorbachev and Yeltsin, to serve as practice targets; one of them says there's "not enough historical perspective yet" to add the current crop. The suggestion is that Putin is only the latest (and maybe not even the last) in a series of absolute rulers absolutely corrupted by absolute power.

Certainly the issue is not exclusive to Russia and could be extended to all sorts of regimes all over the world, but when mixed with the peculiar dark, tempestuous melancholy of the "Russian soul", it

reaches new heights. Hence Leviathan's exquisitely oblique x-ray of a country that seems unable to overcome an inexorable slide into the abyss, the breathtaking beauty of the landscape surrounding Kolya's quicksand destiny suggesting an immutable nature where all men will eventually succumb to time and go the way of the derelict fishing boats and beached-whale skeletons dotting the shore.

*It's not even a particularly original theme for Russian cinema - Boris Khlebnikov's 'A Long and Happy Life' with a similar David vs Goliath plot, or Yuri Bykov's **The Fool**, come to mind - but there is indeed something extraordinarily universal about its tale of a man stubbornly, and hopelessly, battling the establishment. The thoughtfulness of Mr. Zvyagintsev's prior **Elena** is here augmented by an expansive yet daunting combination of formalist aesthetics and moral questioning, the scenes between the mayor and the local bishop (Valery Grichko) raising obliquely many of the film's central questions about morality and truth in a place where such words can be, and are, routinely manipulated.*

Nobody ever said Leviathan was an easy film to see, or even to love, and it does seem to revel a bit too much in its meticulous construction, but that is also part of what makes it such a towering, mesmerizing picture: it's about, to quote from Brecht and Weill, "what keeps mankind alive".

Programme Update

The 3 films chosen to fill the gaps left in April and May for new titles released after the programme went to press, are:-

April 22nd. The Lesson (Bulgaria/Greece, 2014)

Margita Gosheva is excellent as the initially uncompromising Nadezhda, a teacher in a small Bulgarian town who's troubled by petty thefts in her classroom and is trying her best to uncover the culprit. But financial woes are stacking up in her own life, after her unemployed and hapless husband spends money they don't have, and she must utilise all her energy to ensure that their house isn't repossessed.

May 6th: Tangerines (Estonia, 2013)

A deeply affecting anti-war movie, *Tangerines* takes a simple story and weaves it into a rich drama; deftly balancing pathos, black humour and a pacifist critique of unnecessary violence, Zaza Urushadze's assured direction is completed by the tremendous performance by Lembit Ulfsak, a veteran actor all too rarely seen on UK screens.

May 27th: The Wolfpack (USA, 2015)

In New York, the six Angulo brothers and their older sister live with their parents in a Lower East Side apartment that they are not allowed to leave because their parents feel the world beyond is unsafe. Home-schooled, they go outside only once or twice a year under strict supervision. Film is their shared passion and, unable to explore the world themselves, they do so via the medium of cinema, making endless lists of films & staging elaborate recreations of their favourites scenes Reminiscent of *Capturing the Friedmans* in its portrait of familial dysfunction, this astonishing, haunting and very moving documentary won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2015.

Our next screening: February 26th, 7.30pm Appropriate Behaviour (UK/USA 2014. Cert 15)

The female-fronted confessional comedy is given a Middle Eastern twist in writer/director Desiree Akhavan's sharply penned feature debut, in which she also stars. She's deliciously deadpan as a bisexual New Yorker who's unable to come out to her Iranian family. Akhavan has a drier style than her peers and a more apparent soulfulness. She's entertainingly chaotic and her misadventures are honest and idiosyncratic enough for this to feel like a fresh take on wobbling your way through your twenties.