



Leviathan

Director: Andrei Zvyagintsev

Country: Russia

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An article from The Economist:

TO THOSE in the know, there are two Russian trailers for “Leviathan”, Andrei Zvyagintsev’s new film, which opened in Moscow earlier this month. The official version nods at the praise that has already been showered on the film at the Cannes film festival and the Golden Globes, as well as its nomination for an Academy Award. It intersperses scenes from the film with tributes and endorsements. “One of the few films that will stay in the history of cinema,” sang Kommersant, a Russian daily. “A masterpiece”, declared Le Figaro, a French one. “Zvyagintsev is one of the great directors of our time,” opined the Irish Times.

The second trailer, posted on YouTube, is a spoof. The rolling credits state: “The Zionist Occupation Government, US State Department, CIA and the world anti-Russian alliance present...” “A film made according to the principle of ‘shitsky-rusky’,” says Vladimir Medinsky, the Russian minister of culture. A “film made for the Western elites,” preaches Father Vsevolod Chaplin. “This film is dangerous to show to the Russians,” rules Irina Yarovaya, a deputy in the Russian parliament, the Duma.



“Leviathan” may not break new artistic ground, but it has a lot to say about the Putin era. Rarely since Soviet times has an art film evoked such fierce debate. It has been denigrated as heresy and slander by supporters of the state and the church, and praised by liberals who recognise its truths.

The film is set in Russia’s desolate north. The main character, Nikolai, is a soulful car mechanic who lives in a wooden house by the Barents Sea with his frustrated wife and a depressed teenage son from an earlier marriage. His house and land are being taken from him by the state, represented here by a drunken and corrupt mayor who is closely advised by an Orthodox priest. Nikolai’s friend, a lawyer, travels from Moscow to help him fight the mayor. But that only leads to more disasters. In the end, Nikolai loses his wife, his freedom and his house, which, in a final twist, is bulldozed to make space for a new church that is inaugurated by the mayor and the priest, who preaches about patriotism and love for the Russian state.

Laden with biblical metaphor, drawn especially from the Book of Job, “Leviathan” is a hyperrealistic portrayal of modern Russia. One can almost feel the sweaty mayor’s breath, with its reek of vodka and onion. To the film-makers, corruption is a process of decay and erosion. Boats are shown rusting in the sea; a giant whale’s skeleton rots on the beach. Life, faith and the state are all steeped in corrosion.

Russia is as politicised as it was at the end of Soviet rule. Had “Leviathan” been made then, the mayor would have been a local party boss, the new church a Palace of Culture and the priest a KGB general. It would have been an anti-Soviet picture; today, it is an anticlerical one. The Soviet Union may have gone, but the reverence for the state as an almost sacred force in Russia remains. The role played by communist ideology has been largely replaced by that of the Orthodox church, which, like the state itself, has turned into something of a monster.

This metamorphosis of religion into ideology is one of the most striking themes both of “Leviathan” and of contemporary Russian life. The transformation should not be such a surprise. The Bolsheviks destroyed churches and shot priests, but they also adopted



Orthodox Christianity, borrowing its imagery and language to sanctify their rule. Josef Stalin, who trained as a cleric, appealed to the nation when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union using the biblical “brothers and sisters” and enlisted the church as an ally during the war. Many priests maintained a close relationship with the KGB. That interaction left its mark.

Like the KGB—the Committee for State Security—the church has adopted the role of guardian of the state. Just as the communists’ ideology became a form of religion, religion has become an ideology, used by the godless state to justify both its sacred status and its right to break its own laws. The priest in “Leviathan” tells the mayor who faces elections that “all power is from God”. All the mayor needs to do, he says, is to show authority and force, crushing an individual like Nikolai.

A few days before the film was released in Russia, Kirill, the patriarch of the Orthodox church, took to the floor of the Duma. He praised the Soviet era for breeding “solidarity” in people and lashed out at the depravity of the West. Neither Western freedoms nor laws, he argued, can bring good by themselves without the fundamental values generated by the state—whether the Soviet Union or Russia.

“Leviathan” shines a light on the entanglement of church and state. Kirill was one of the first to call for Pussy Riot to be punished three years ago after the punk band staged an anticlerical performance in a Moscow cathedral, which is referred to in the film. That same cathedral had once been blown up by the Bolsheviks. It was rebuilt by the former mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov, who also gave a flat to Kirill in the House on the Embankment, which was originally built for the Bolshevik leaders.

Thomas Hobbes himself could barely imagine what a monster church and state have become. One Russian liberal essayist wrote that “Leviathan” depicts a people who have fallen from God. In today’s Russia it is not the people, but the church itself, the film concludes, that has fallen.

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