

Russian *Leviathan*: Power, Landscape, Memory

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Volume 42, Issue 1, March 2018

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.101>
[\[http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.101\]](http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.101)

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the recent Russian cinematic sensation, Andrei Zvyagintsev's fourth feature, Leviathan (2014). While earlier discussions of the film have focused on its thematic concerns, often ignoring its style and privileging narrative over image, this article foregrounds the aesthetics of the film drawing on Jaques Rancière's recent discussion of the regimes of arts.

Heralded as Russia's greatest cinematic accomplishment in recent years, Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* attracted unprecedented – for recent Russian films – attention both nationally and internationally upon its release. The initial, highly politicized reception of the film, in which Western critics applauded its anti-corruption critique while the Russian press lamented its alleged betrayal of national interests, focused almost exclusively on the story of a “little post-Soviet man's” fight against corruption that *Leviathan* tells. I anchor my analysis in the reappraisal of the relation between narrative and image in the film and specifically focus on the categories of place, space, and scale. I argue that it is through the use of images of nature and references to the presence of non-human otherness that Zvyagintsev achieves a fine-tuned reframing of the social and psychological drama at the centre of the film – changing its scale, moral and ethical implications, and overall meaning – and that it is at this level that the critical potential of *Leviathan* emerges fully.

Prior to *Leviathan*, Zvyagintsev had made only three feature films, the first of which, *The Return* (2003), placed him among the most distinctive contemporary Russian and international directors. *The Banishment* followed in 2007 and *Elena* in 2011, [further solidifying Zvyagintsev's reputation as an auteur interested in issues of moral responsibility and ethical choice.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Cannes_Film_Festival)
[\[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Cannes_Film_Festival\]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Cannes_Film_Festival)

Zvyagintsev's thematic focus and his determined ethical stand were announced even earlier in his first trilogy of short films, *Busido*, *Obscure*, and *The Choice* (2000), which he made as a student. The trilogy established the family as a key locus of Zvyagintsev's socio-ethical analyses and revealed his interest in the issue of trust, betrayal, and responsibility. Zvyagintsev's first feature, *The Return*, similarly focused on the unfolding of a family crisis while bringing another important motif of Zvyagintsev's work into focus: the position and perspectives of children within the family drama. *The Return* tells the story of two Russian boys living with their mother until their father's sudden return home after a 12-year absence. When the father takes the boys on a voyage to a remote island on a lake, the journey turns into a reckoning with lost time and possibilities during the boys' thwarted childhood and a power struggle anticipating their entry into adulthood.

With the release of *The Return*, Zvyagintsev was immediately compared to Tarkovsky, not only because the film exhibited thematic similarities with Tarkovsky's key work, *The Mirror*, which focuses on a mother and her two sons, but also because the film exhibited stylistic similarities. Like Tarkovsky, Zvyagintsev had opted for slow cinema, rejecting rapid editing in favor of long, unbroken takes and tracking shots. As Naum Kleiman remarks, *The Return* also resembles Tarkovsky in its meticulous attention to texture – the details of the characters' surroundings both indoors and under the sky, the palpable presence of the elemental, the materiality and weight of surfaces: “clouds, paddles, gravel, wet cement, polished surfaces giving distorting reflections – mirror or metal, reflecting the forest.” ^[1]

[#N1] Most importantly, though, it was the director's intense focus on ethical issues, their deliberate placing of characters in limit situations, their presentations of heightened subjectivity, and an abundance of religious references that warranted such comparisons.

Zvyagintsev's second feature, *The Banishment*, continued to develop the same genre as *The Return*, the genre of what could be described as the philosophical fable. Its protagonist, played by the same actor as played the father in *The Return* (Konstantin Lavronenko), is tortured by his wife's suspected infidelity while, for her, the family crisis opens up a painful existential and spiritual quest. Significantly, both films were concerned with universals rather than with social particulars, addressing existential conditions and featuring one of the great inventions of modernist cinema: the alienated, socially abstracted, and indeterminate individual. As Zvyagintsev's artistic director comments: "At the centre of the film were people who were not too burdened with unnecessary social attributes – profession, nationality, citizenship." [2].[#N2]

Zvyagintsev's next feature, *Elena*, signaled a marked change in Zvyagintsev's directorial approach. While the film focused on a family drama, as had his previous two features, it was set in a precisely delineated post-perestroika Russia, registering social, political, and economic changes: the appearance of new classes of super-rich and desperately poor, the separation in towns between luxury quarters and the ghetto-like remnants of Soviet urban policies, the presence of migrant workers from former Soviet republics, and the threat of slowly burning military conflicts on the fringes of the Russian state. While at the centre of the film's driving conflict was still an ethical choice, its urgency was accentuated by a harsh disparity between those who have money and privileges and those who lack both in today's Russia.

Leviathan was released in 2014 and became a sensation immediately upon its entry into competitions and festival circuits, in Russia and abroad. Prior to its nomination for the Academy Award, it won Best Screenplay at 2015 Cannes Film Festival, Best Film at the London Film Festival, a Golden Globe for Best Foreign-Language Film (the first Russian movie to win since 1969), and was expected to win Oscar Best Foreign Language award. However, as the release of the film coincided with the worst period in the relationship between Russia and the West since the end of cold war, the critical reception of the film has been heavily politicised. [3].[#N3] Zvyagintsev's anti-corruption critique of Putin's Russia was praised internationally but divided audiences and critics in his homeland, where Russian politicians and pundits lamented *Leviathan*'s dehumanizing and demoralizing depiction of the Russian people. Nancy Condee observes that the vicious circle of this politicized appraisal was broken with *Leviathan*'s Oscar loss: "After February 2015, as in an amicable divorce, international politics went its own way, while *Leviathan* was free to be judged on its own terms rather than as a widget in the Cold War Reloaded." [4].[#N4]

Leviathan's action takes place in Russia's desolate north, in a small town by the Barents Sea and focuses on Nikolai, an auto mechanic, who lives and works in his ancestral home on the foreshore. His house's prominent position attracts the attention of the local Mayor Vadim who decides to take over the property and build a church there. When Nicolai tries to oppose this illegal appropriation, the Mayor unleashes the full force of the corrupt local civil and judicial authorities against him, eventually destroying Nicolai morally, legally, and financially. In the end, Nicolai not only loses his house, his land, and his wife (who dies in mysterious circumstances), but ends up being accused of her murder and sentenced to 15 years in jail.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.101-00000001.jpg\]](#)

Figure 1: Nicolai's house—the visual nod of the story.

Zvyagintsev treats the small world of a far north Russian town as a microcosm of the Russian national reality. The figure of Mayor Vadim is a masterful portrait of the corruption of Russian state power. He is positioned as a node in what is commonly described as the “power vertical” constructed by President Putin, a top-down governing structure that re-centralises the power of the presidency and the federal center and thrives on the appointment of unelected administrators loyal to the state. The Mayor has almost unrestricted control over the local civic authorities, the police, and the judicial system. In turn, the Mayor is answerable to the Governor controlling the region, and he also frequently visits the Bishop (Vladyka) from whom he seeks advice and reassurance that his actions are morally and ethically permissible; the Bishop also emboldens the Mayor to be strong and ruthless toward his enemies. The Mayor repays this spiritual protection from needing to answer for his morally-suspect actions with tangible, earthly benefits to the local church: a gift of highly-prized land and a new church building. The monstrous fusion of these forces – state and church, temporal and spiritual powers – and their juxtaposition with the world of ordinary people, who are positioned as victims, creates a cosmically bleak vision of unchangeable societal inequality.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.101-00000002.jpg\]](#)

Figure 2: Mayor Vadim and Vladyka: the corrupt merger of the Orthodox Church and state power.

The afflicted power at the center of this system is the core from which the sickness radiates outward to other layers of Russian society, as every character in *Leviathan* displays acute moral shortcomings: Nicolai's wife Lilya betrays him by having an affair; Vadim, with whom she is having the affair and who is supposed to defend Nicolai in court, abandons him before the trial; Nicolai's neighbours falsely testify against him, facilitating an unjust verdict of manslaughter.

Zvyagintsev stated that he aimed to create a film that would provide a mirror for contemporary Russia, in which “its citizens could see their truthful reflections and which will, at the end, awake them from their sleep and shake them from their complacency.” [5]. [N5]. The more active political agenda of *Leviathan* was paralleled by a stylistic shift. As Julian Graffy observes while Zvyagintsev's earlier films “were reticent, allusive, abstract, enigmatic, he now forsakes this approach for a new aesthetic of explicitness, social detail, and historical relevance.” [6]. [N6]. With *Leviathan* Zvyagintsev moves away from his earlier aesthetic of high modernism towards an aesthetic of realism, based on observation and accurate representation. While initial analyses on the film focused on *Leviathan's* realistic portrayal of Russia's traditional ills – political and bureaucratic corruption, alcoholism and depression – broader critique engaged with its philosophical, religious, and literary allusions, which added weight and complexity to the film's treatment of thematic issues. [7]. [N7]

Among such allusions, the attention was directed in the first instance to the title that Zvyagintsev derived from the Old Testament. Zvyagintsev stated that the Book of Job casts a deep shadow over the hero of the film. He further described the title as “a challenge” and stated that he felt that, despite the every-day nature of the plot, “the emotional intensity (pathos) and scale of this title would be justified”. [8]. [N8]. The traditional iconography associated with the Christian image of Leviathan mobilized by Zvyagintsev in the film – as a sea monster or a giant whale – as well as direct quotations from the Old Testament have been interpreted as invoking the idea of God's power, which is greater than the power of man and nature.

Graffy suggests that in *Leviathan* Zvyagintsev manages to achieve “the decoupling of faith and religious power” and that this represents the most innovative aspect of the film. [9]. [N9]. However, the film also mounts the challenge to faith that is sustained through the repeated question, “Do you believe in God?” asked by different characters – a question to which they never give nor receive an answer. That seems to undermine the possibility of faith as well as organized religious practice in contemporary Russia, where the social malaise runs too deep. If the state robs ordinary citizens of their human rights, the Church is implicated in compromising their beliefs in God, robbing them of their faith.

Even more immediately, *Leviathan* shares its title with the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes's influential treatise of 1651 on the relationship of state, government, and society. Hobbes's *Leviathan or The Matter, Form and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* argued for the necessity of a social contract that would ensure that power is given to the ruling entity to protect society against a return to the state of nature, typified by chaos and violence. Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* is seen in this context as problematizing Hobbes's political vision and questioning the limits and excesses of power.

Another important intertextual reference for the film is provided by one of the key works of the romantic period, Heinrich von Kleist's novella “Michael Kohlhaas,” written in 1810. Set in the sixteenth century, Kleist's novella is concerned with issues of illegality, retribution, violence, and power, depicting a desperate search for justice by its protagonist, Michael Kohlhaas. Zvyagintsev appropriates many narrative collisions and moves from the novella as well as its vision of an inhuman legal system pitted against a single, powerless individual. However, whereas Kleist constructs his story as a tragedy in which the hero rebels against the system and dies but restores the law, Zvyagintsev resorts to a different and, in his words, “more terrifying” ending: a vision of the slow destruction of the protagonist and of everyone who was dear to him, by power.

As this brief recourse demonstrates, earlier discussions of *Leviathan* focused on its thematic concerns, often ignoring its aesthetics and style and privileging narrative over image. I aim to correct this

imbalance by bringing into consideration the aesthetic dimensions of the film as well as its subject matter.

A useful way of approaching the relationship between image and fabulation in *Leviathan* is provided by Jacques Rancière's work. Rancière argues that the problematic relationship between *mise en scène* and screenplay, or expressive and representational functions in mainstream cinema (in which narrative tends to dominate image), accounts for what he calls the “thwarted cinematic fable” – thwarted in the sense of not being able to fulfill the expressive potential of the cinematic medium inherent in the image. [10],[#N10] The autonomy of the image is also at stake in Rancière's delineation of different regimes of the arts, which establish parameters for his understanding of cinema and its political potential – since regimes of the arts imply a certain distribution of what is deemed and made visible or rendered invisible. The regimes of the arts define certain relationships between the world, thought, and representation; they also presuppose a particular community to which the work of art is addressed.

According to Rancière, as artistic practices and understandings of art and art forms change historically, we can differentiate three broad frameworks: the ethical regime, the poetic or representative regime, and the aesthetic regime of the arts. In the ethical regime, art objects are judged by their ability to accurately represent an ideal model and according to their moral and political tendencies. The representative regime is encompassed by the primacy of speech over image – or the discursive articulation of meaning over the forms created by artistic practice, forms that may include verbal images. Here, in the representative regime, art-works are judged not by their closeness to an ideal model, as in the ethical regime, but by their ability to name and explain, to “make visible” what at first sight is invisible, hidden, or inaccessible. This requires the construction of a cause-and-effect narrative that can account for all crucial relations; hence, in this regime, the logic of action takes precedence. [11],[#N11]

The aesthetic regime emerges during modernity, alongside the political revolutions of the modern era signaling the potential of democratic organization of society. The rise of democracy challenges the hierarchical construction of the world characteristic of the previous era within both the social and the aesthetic realms. The representative regime of the arts is superseded now by the aesthetic regime, which treats language and image not as transparent means to an end – the end of representing reality – but as processes and forms valuable in themselves.

The effectiveness of art arises now not from the narrative reorganization of actions, but from the power of the symbolic medium itself. This reconfiguration is brought about in the first instance during the romantic period by a more fundamental shift in the way modernity construes the relationship between meaning and world. As Deranty notes, “In the aesthetic regime, the world itself, at all levels, including the material ones, is seen to entail meaning. Even the pre-human is symbolic.” [12],[#N12] For Rancière, the aesthetic regime has the greatest political potential because it challenges and subverts the hierarchy within the realm of the aesthetic itself. If, in the ethical regime, images and stories are subordinated to moral judgment, and, in the representational regime, images are subordinated to narrative, in the aesthetic regime, ideas, images, and narrative are given equal weight, allowing for a redistribution of the sensible.

However, the rules defining a given regime do not evaporate completely with the transition to a new regime: rather, they continue to exert a diminished influence, an influence that leads to inevitable contradictions. Thus, cinema, the modern art *par excellence*, capable of fully operating within the aesthetic regime beyond “the determination of narrative, cognition and ideology,” [13],[#N13] often reverts to the representative and even the ethical regimes, giving in to the impulse to explain and to judge.

These contradictions can be seen clearly in Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* and bear significantly on critical, political, and aesthetic assessments of the film. For a director who clearly privileged the enigmatic image over narrative in his early works, *Leviathan* seems to adopt the logic of explicit storytelling with the purpose of enlightening and passing a judgement. Nonetheless, as I shall argue, it also has powerful affinities with the aesthetic regime. These are evident in the film's latent symbolism and

visual excess – its technique of cut-away shots simultaneously foregrounding filmic devices and interrupting the narrative flow by privileging certain textures, vistas, and lights, as well as the powerful role it gives to landscape.

This corresponds to one of the central impulses of the aesthetic regime, which it inherited from romanticism, the desire to rearticulate through a human medium of expression the meaning that is already present in the non-human entities that surround us – our built environment of bricks and mortar, natural features of the landscape and forces of nature. Romanticism views the world as already encompassed by discursivity and the purpose of art as to articulate this discursivity.

I propose that *Leviathan's* most radical potential resides on this plane of the film where the human world, devoid of grace and salvation, enters into dialogue with its non-human other. While it has been noted that the film is filled with “stirring shots of the natural world,” these shots are treated simply as a backdrop intended to give emotional resonance to Zvyagintsev's “cinematography of despair.” I suggest that landscape acquires far greater significance in *Leviathan*, deserving a more precise analysis.

The significance of the setting within the diegesis of the film has been highlighted in the first instance by Zvyagintsev's DP, Mikail Krichman, who commented: “For this film, I really wanted the characters to live in that universe and allow the audience to appreciate it in every scene, not leave it in a blur...” [14]. It took Zvyagintsev and Krichman four months to find the ideal location – having started in the countryside close to Moscow, they visited 75 small Russian towns before deciding on the small village of Teriberka on the Kolsky peninsula, and reworking the original script accordingly.

In Russian cultural memory, the Kolsky peninsula is indissolubly linked with the legacy of Stalin's terror; it was one of the locations of his labour camps, notorious for its particularly brutal regime and its deadly conditions due to the harsh climate. The historical map of camps and penile colonies on the Kolsky peninsula provided by the society called Memorial lists 42 specific locations in which thousands of people were worked, starved, and tortured to death between the 1920s and the 1950s. Among them, Teriberka is listed as follows: number of inmates: 6200; activities: building of roads, fishery, forest clearing. Memorial's website further directs us to a unique extant documentary reel that was shot to justify the creation and expansion of the GULAG in Russia, depicting a cod-fishing expedition by Teriberka's inmates in 1928. [16].

500 Internal Server Error

Sorry, something went wrong.

A team of highly trained monkeys has been dispatched to deal with this situation.

If you see them, send them this information as text (screenshots frighten them):

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APkpgMXa3nZjVfqZINAsUxrIg98GL2ad0ICP14w0t3uXor9UW6u9f-h
qZzjLk4mLpuCA6Y00090PYq3oBoY2BhwNMY64ZKppGRFEP5E3HDAZobE
zQzbayWxyKs1krVYMD9bx87ifbK5HDB8nNtNK_r-V4yua4s_KKjTb7y-
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xPW-PAupHBR1Lhe56ep-oM7wKizPKe-EjYeL87o6IIobdqRcPq2ifuD
NGoRQ26W0mSoZbDny0zFH1y11qvEKk2e3KG1680FxfYdH-zA1BcQx0G4
pf0L_90oi8yM7E8VuGRm8IEKP_XAGnyRnLDPEjFSai8ExBi92p5TPA9D
D7CPU3NeyaVgbZwah-d6ZcXsSpSunkko2M-qYLBd6kpZ01Ura5wyCwrJ
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MhV-JAtKQZHz1XxmeF00hwE5pxXYbyMZ0_bF9YJRWKLv19nHJnIIKbA
EGM-eQQgR2zb4N1bT3WvADPQmDj3cnbAA8Wf_BP1ovr50NiNaR0Kngn
z1yqCBAihaE9eK-1_7r8qfLJkKDP3qvSW7KyKNI185M-1g3ZSuGVoZJc
Xwx-iSw+1 Nn8s0kCnB7mt6n778iTHEh11PYdXpauwa7cht0FXTII-wdTO
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The reel shows a multitude of convicts working as fishermen, and sea-faring vessels swirling in Teriberka's port and surrounding bay. The husks of these vessels are what we see in abundance along

the water's edge in *Leviathan*; and in this way, not only the materiality of place, but also the materiality of history enters the film, in which the image, to use Janet Harbord's words, "acts as a type of sensory prosthesis, interacting with the lived body of memory." [17].[#N17] The cleaning of the freshly caught fish by the camp inmates recorded in the documentary uncannily anticipates Lilya's job at the fish processing factory, where the conversion of living animal bodies into flesh is depicted almost identically in Zvyagintsev's fiction as in the documentary footage, imbuing the film's iconography with complex overtones concerning both social and environmental justice, and broader bio-political issues. The legacy of Teriberka thus provides a resonant historical counterpoint for the film, yet it is not clear whether it was a decisive factor for the director.

In the first instance, Zvyagintsev seemed to be attracted to the location by its visual characteristics: the seascape beside a half-deserted village (the current population of Teriberka is less than one thousand), the opposition of water and rock, the unique muted lighting conditions created by the low arctic sun and highly unstable weather. While remote locations and images of unspoiled nature in the Russian far north have started to attract increasing attention from Russian directors in recent times, featuring prominently in such critically acclaimed films as *Silent Souls* (Alexei Fedorchenko, 2010), *How I Ended this Summer* (Alexei Popogrebski, 2010) and *The Geographer Drank His Globe Away* (Alexander Veleinsky, 2013) (which also stars Elena Liadova, cast as Nicolai's wife in Zvyagintsev's film), they are mobilized in a different way in *Leviathan*.

Kleiman has insightfully noted that in Zvyagintsev's earlier films, we witnessed a return of the horizon – as both a stylistic and philosophical component of film – which had been absent in Russian cinema for a long time. [18].[#N18] With *Leviathan* the horizon acquires an even more forceful presence, featuring frequently in wide shots, where it separates two boundless entities – the ocean and the sky (the distance to the horizon is accentuated by the rays of light from the low arctic sun). The immensity of the scale distinguishes *Leviathan's* landscape from Zvyagintsev's previous treatments of nature and from other recent Russian films. Moreover, in accordance with Mary Anne Doane's valorization of the political significance of scale for the modern cinematic project, [19].[#N19] the scale – as the nexus of geographic arrangements, social relationships, and medium-specific representational logic – emerges as the key aesthetic device and a philosophical category of *Leviathan*.

In one of the film's most memorable scenes, Nicolai joins his friend, Stepanych, a police lieutenant, for a picnic in the countryside: a lot of drinking and shooting. After the men destroy all of the empty bottles they used for target shooting, Stepanych produces an alternative set of targets – portraits of Soviet leaders from Lenin through Gorbachev. Asked if he has any of the subsequent Russian leaders, he jokes, "It's too early for the current ones – not enough distance on a historical scale." The scene is often commented upon by critics as a rare moment of comic relief, yet it also underscores the significance of the category of scale in creating multiple levels of the film's meaning.

The mobilization of scale is evident most prominently in the choice of a remote setting with monumental surroundings, where the sheer size of the ocean waves and rock formations dwarfs the human figures. However, the setting also calls into question the proximity and reach of power, and its ability to put human subjects in place. Having chosen a place "at the end of the world," where the land mass ends and the ocean stretches toward the horizon before turning into the icy desert of the Arctic – the roof of the world, a no-man's land, the space where national states relinquish their authority – Zvyagintsev mobilizes spatial distance to reframe the issue of power and social relationships. Both Arctic and Antarctic regions have been recently capturing artists' imaginations precisely in this sense [20].[#N20] – as regions capable of providing new political and aesthetic paradigms due to their unique geopolitical positions and status beyond national divisions, which can be described, in Rancière's words, as "topography that does not presuppose [a] position of mastery." [21].[#N21]

But the setting and its elements also gesture towards the infinity of time, which the geological history of the land, evident in coastal degradation in the presence of the rocks of variable color and the textures that have been denuded by the pressure of water and ice, indicates. Like fossils, the whale skeleton – one of the central images of the film – signifies the deep time of the past. These images

profit from the depths of space visible from lofty camera positions, subtle color nuances recorded on celluloid film and anamorphic frame of 2.35:1, the aspect ratio which, as Doane observes, conveys “plenitude and the negation of all loss” and facilitates “the transformation of time and history into space”. [22],[#N22]



[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.101-00000003.jpg]

Figure 3: Lilya, looking at the ocean moments before her death.

Furthermore, the non-human presence – the ocean waves, the changeable weather, the whales lurking in the ocean – serve as indexes of contingency, of everything that is transient and elusive in the flow of life, creating what Siegfried Kracauer defined as “a fringe of indeterminable visible meaning.” [23],[#N23] Elaborating on Kracauer's insight, Harbor notes that “The fortuitous and accidental cast doubt on intentionality and individual agency” [24],[#N24]. This includes, I would suggest in the case of *Leviathan*, the agency of the most powerful social players, asserting that life remains in flux despite the most desperate attempts of social agents to fix it, to impose systematic order and total control. This opens up the film not only towards the past but also towards the future, beyond the era of Vladimir Putin, whose portrait is also suggestively incorporated in the background of another scene in the film.

The project of rescaling is poignantly foregrounded in the opening and closing sequences featuring distant views of the ocean shore and clouds stretching towards the horizon, creating an effect of seemingly infinite remoteness of space. Starting with extra-long takes of the natural environment, Zvyagintsev cuts to closer shots that gradually start to register human presence – an electric cable, a road, and, finally, Nicolai's house – the visual nod of a story.

The ending reverses the logic of the opening sequence: here, Zvyagintsev zooms away from the depiction of the people attending a service in the newly inaugurated church, registering several planes around the church building until, in the final shot, he returns to the same distant vista as in the beginning. This structure – of framing the historically and socially specific drama with surroundings that predated the human presence and thus indicate deep historical, geological, and evolutionary time – nods back to Zvyagintsev's characteristic interest in the dialectic of the particular and the universal, which underpinned his early films.

Significantly, the opening and closing sequences are set to music from Philip Glass's opera, “Akhnaten,” dedicated to one of the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt – the bearer of great, albeit transient, power. [25],[#N25] Glass's music, which is often described as the antithesis of programmed music – being disruptive rather than descriptive – underscores the importance of landscape as an independent force in the film. It also introduces an intertextual allusion to the brutal institution of the ancient Egyptian

state of the pharaohs who were brought down by, among other factors, the forces of nature. [26][#N26] The themes of power and nature thus become intertwined in *Leviathan* from the outset.

In the body of the film, the landscape asserts its presence most prominently at the moments when the human protagonists are faced with critical impasses in their lives: when Lilya stands at the end of the cliff, facing the crushing waves and contemplating the enormity of her family crisis moments before her death; when Nicolai's son runs to the giant whale's skeleton, feeling betrayed by his parents, and stares at the departing water during low tide; when Nicolai is beginning to comprehend that he has lost his wife. In each of these scenes Zvyagintsev follows the shot of his characters with a cut to a wide shot depicting the boundless vistas of the far north in a long, unbroken take and deep focus. These shots do much more than provide an emotional background for the story or a measure for the character, as in some other genres, such as the western, which juxtapose individuals and their surroundings.



[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.101-00000004.jpg]

Figure 4: Roman after running away from home.

A helpful way of characterizing this difference is by means of Martin Lefebvre's distinction between “setting” and “landscape”: Lefebvre suggests that “as long as natural space in a work is subservient to characters, events and actions, as long as its function is to provide space for them, the work is not properly speaking a landscape.” [27][#N27] He elaborates another possibility for the deployment of nature shots in a feature film: moments when such shots resist “narrative subservience,” start to insist on their own “contemplative autonomy,” and enter into relations of tension or conflict with narrative threads. In terms of Lefebvre's distinction, Zvyagintsev tends to treat natural surroundings as landscape rather than as setting; his nature shots, as well as his frequent cut-away shots in the film, interrupt and sometimes arrest narrative development.

Lefebvre also notes that “to make the landscape emerge means to relate the image to certain historical conventions of landscape painting that the spectator must know beforehand.” [28][#N28] Zvyagintsev frequently uses paintings as a departure point for his creation of cinematic landscapes. For example, the farmhouse on the hill, the main setting for the family drama in *The Banishment*, is modeled closely on Andrew Wyeth's work, “Christina's World.” *Leviathan's* nature shots correspond to another important tradition in visual art, dedicated to the creation of the sense of the sublime as the mode associated with vastness, infinity, and transcendence. The horizontal composition of the images in wide shots, creating a sense of boundlessness; their subject matter, such as the onwards rolling of the ocean and the relentless masses of water welling up; and the specific device of inserting a small human figure, seen from behind, gazing upon the landscape, reinforcing a sense of perceiving

something limitless, reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings – all these invoke the visual vocabulary of the sublime.

The concept of the sublime gained strong currency in aesthetic theory during the eighteenth century and had a major impact on the later formation of romanticism. Edmund Burke defined the sublime as a sensation or emotion caused by power, darkness, obscurity, privation, infinity, difficulty, and magnificence – arising from the encounter with forces of nature or with monstrous creatures (among which Burke listed the Leviathan). Soon after, Kant reinterpreted the concept of the sublime as a challenge to reason inherent in the boundless or infinite, signaling reluctance to accept theological understandings of nature. During the postmodern period, Jean-François Lyotard revisited the Kantian sublime and argued that the heuristic function of the sublime is inherent in its ability to expose an irresolvable doubt or impasse in human reason, pointing to the multiplicity and fluidity of the postmodern world. Furthermore, glossing Lyotard's engagement with the sublime, Thomas Huhn has argued that “the sublime ... is the uncanny attempt by subjectivity to feel something other than itself.”

[29].[#N29]

The mobilization of the sublime in *Leviathan* can thus be seen as serving several functions. The landscape shots serve to interrupt the narrative flow and provide not only a space for contemplation for the characters, but also an interval for critical reflection by audiences, encouraging them to acknowledge the existence of, and engagement with, the powerful presence of non-human otherness in the universe of the film.

Yet, the representation of nature in *Leviathan* might deconstruct the dichotomy of landscape and setting: while nature shots function as landscape, interrupting rather than illustrating the psycho-social drama, they can also absorb the human into their otherness, becoming a realm of self-transcendence or ex-stasis for the human. Thus, it can be argued that nature shots also function in accordance with the role of space outlined by Henri Lefebvre and highlighted by Doane: to “transform the body by transporting it outside itself.” [30].[#N30]. The realm of the ocean, sky, and light represent the only outside to the suffocating social world depicted in the film and the only manifestation of “excess” in the film, in a sense elaborated by Kristin Thompson. They present a weighty counterpoint to the tightly arranged narrative construction in the film and offer precious occasions to transcend the given. The use of nature in the film can be seen thus as fulfilling the principle of ex-stasis formulated by Eisenstein. Eisenstein argued that the key function of cinematic mechanic is to force the spectator at some ultimate moments of the film to “leave himself behind,” “transcend himself,” or “lose himself.” In these moments, the subject will experience the unity with nature and the universe: “The perceiver feels organically tied, merged, and united with a work of this type, just as he feels himself one with and merged with the organic environment and nature surrounding him.” [31].[#N31]. These considerations, in turn, have implications for the interpretation of the central issue of the film – that of power.

Most critical readings of *Leviathan* focus on its treatment of the relationship between state power and the individual, overshadowing the importance of the land. Yet, land is a central issue in the film. It is Nicolai's land that functions as a motor of the story; its prized position on the edge of the cape is what sparks the Mayor's desire to acquire it, and it is Nicolai's ancestral connection to the land that drives him into a self-destructive opposition to state power. The central question of *Leviathan* can thus be read not only as, “How much power should the state have over the individual?” but also how much power it has over land and nature. The destruction of Nicolai's house and its replacement by a new church serves as the key visual metaphor of the film; Nicolai's organic bond to his natural surroundings is destroyed in a methodical act of house-demolition, paralleling the moral, judicial, and psychological destruction of its owner. However, as Simon Schama suggests, landscape, in contrast to nature, is constructed by the mind and pervaded by memory. [32].[#N32]. The church that takes the place of Nicolai's house by the end of the film looks like it doesn't belong there – precisely because this space is haunted by memory. The central visual metaphor of the film thus highlights both the deep connection to the environment through habitation and the fragility of such a connection. This, in turn, evokes the Heideggerian notion of dwelling as a key dimension of the ontology of Dasein.



[\[/f/fc/images/13761232.0042.101-00000005.jpg\]](#)

Figure 5: The newly built church that took the place of Nicolai's house.

The category of dwelling, for Heidegger, highlights the fact that Dasein – our being in the world – is characterized not only by temporal duration, but also by its situatedness, its embeddedness in a particular place to which we are not indifferent but deeply connected through the attitude of care: “the world at hand [is] where Dasein dwells in taking care.” [33].^[#N33] Heidegger's “structure of dwelling” entails the sky, the earth, the gods, and the mortals. The earth implies the particularity, variability, and diversity of space. The sky, by contrast, provides the experience of permanence. This permanence is inherent in the sky's quality of covering all the variable places in the world, in allowing for repetition of the natural cycle, and in embodying the forces beyond human control. The presence of the divine in the structure of dwelling implies that, when we dwell, we have access to something transcendent, while the emphasis on our mortality alerts us to the necessity to “dwell properly.” [34].^[#N34] While Heidegger argues that we always “dwell imperfectly” – we have almost forgotten how to dwell – to dwell properly would mean to spare and preserve the earth and, thus, to free things to be what they are, to allow for their own “presencing,” enabling the world to be what it is. To dwell properly also means to know our limits – realizing that we couldn't change the sky.

Leviathan's protagonists are deeply rooted in specific ecologies: Nicolai, through his connection to the home and the land that provide him livelihood; Lilya, through her job at the cannery, which, despite its complex overtones, connects the inhabitants of this place to their source of sustenance; and Roma, who seems to be more at home outside, on the shore next to the whale skeleton, or in a deserted old church. While Nicolai's and his family's dwellings are “imperfect,” he is the true custodian of this land, in contrast to the figures of power eager to take possession of the land and exploit it for political ends by building on it a church that is no more than a hollow symbol of faith. And even though the connection between Nicolai, Lilya, Roma, and the land is all but destroyed at the narrative level by the end of the film, this connection is reinstated at the level of images; the land as the space of dwelling for the three central characters and for ordinary people more generally is something that the film consistently celebrates visually, contrasting such ordinary folk with the figures of authority who are only seen in social, constricted, man-made spaces.

But images of nature, as has been already discussed, are connected not only to bodies and characters but also speak to the larger forces beyond human control, deploying the iconography of the sublime. These sublime images foreground the immensity of both time and space, and thus rescale the human story at the center of *Leviathan*. While the excess of power finds no boundaries and no resistance in the social universe of the film, this power is still not absolute – as it runs against temporal and spatial constraints beyond which it loses its significance. The critical potential of *Leviathan* is thus to be found in the dialectics connecting human subject, the cinematic body, and the space that it inhabits. As Doane argues: “to the extent that the cinema is inevitably about scale in relation to a body...that body is never lost, never truly eliminated. It is simply led to find another way of finding its way.” [35]

[#N35]. This is the challenge and the hope that *Leviathan* offers: to find a proper place for the human body. This, in turn, would require a rethinking of the possibility of power beyond the hierarchy of human relationships and the possibility of starting to dwell properly, by taking care of the world where we live and, thus, setting it free.

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Notes

1. Naum Kleiman, "Algebra and metaphysics: on Andrei Zvyagintsev's cinema," in *Breath of the Stone: The Universe of Andrei Zvyagintsev's Films*, (Moscow: NLO, 2014), 441. My translation. ♣[#N1-ptri]
2. Interview with Andrei Ponkratov, in *Breath of the Stone: The Universe of Andrei Zvyagintsev's Films*, (Moscow: NLO, 2014), 283. My translation. ♣[#N2-ptri]
3. Neil MacFarquhar, "Russian Movie *Leviathan* Gets Applause in Hollywood but Scorn at Home," *New York Times*, January 27, 2015. ETC. ♣[#N3-ptri]
4. Nancy Condee, "Cold Snap (Part I): Russian Film after *Leviathan*," (<http://jordanrussiacycenter.org/news/cold-snap-part-russian-film-leviathan/#.WH73FEeUdDA> [<http://jordanrussiacycenter.org/news/cold-snap-part-russian-film-leviathan/#.WH73FEeUdDA>]), accessed 10 August 2017. ♣[#N4-ptri]
5. Andrei Zviagintsev, "Sobchak zhiv'em: Andrei Zviagintsev," interview with Kseniia Sobchak, 14 January 2015, *Telekanal Dozhd*. ♣[#N5-ptri]
6. Julian Graffy, "Andrei Zvyagintsev: *Leviathan* (*Leviafan*, 2014)," *KinoKultura*, Issue 48 (2015), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2015/48r-leviafan.shtml> [<http://www.kinokultura.com/2015/48r-leviafan.shtml>], accessed 14 March 2017. ♣[#N6-ptri]
7. Anton Dolin, "The Three Wales," *Iskusstvo Kino*, 2014, no 7; Julian Graffy, "Andrei Zvyagintsev: *Leviathan* (2014)," *KinoKultura*, Issue 48 (2015), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2015/48r-leviafan.shtml> [<http://www.kinokultura.com/2015/48r-leviafan.shtml>], accessed 14 March 2017; Ian Christie, "Here Be Monsters," *Sight and Sound* 24, no 12, December 2014; Greg Dolgoplov, (2015). "Reeling in the beast: The anti-Russian, Russian *Leviathan*," *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine*, (185). ♣[#N7-ptri]
8. Andrei Zvyagintsev, "Sobchak zhiv'em: Andrei Zvyagintsev." ♣[#N8-ptri]
9. Graffy. ♣[#N9-ptri]
10. Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford & New York: Berg Publishers, 2006). ♣[#N10-ptri]
11. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. [Gabriel Rockhill](#) [<http://www.bloomsbury.com/au/author/gabriel-rockhill>]. (London: Bloomsbury, 2006). ♣[#N11-ptri]
12. Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Regimes of the arts," in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 125. ♣[#N12-ptri]
13. Hassan Melhy, "The film fable," in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 170. ♣[#N13-ptri]
14. Cinematographer Mikhail Krichman discusses his work on *Leviathan* by Andrei Zvyagintsev.

- <http://www.afcinema.com/Cinematographer-Mikhail-Krichman-RGC-discusses-his-work-on-Leviathan-by-Andrei-Zvyagintsev.html?lang=fr> [<http://www.afcinema.com/Cinematographer-Mikhail-Krichman-RGC-discusses-his-work-on-Leviathan-by-Andrei-Zvyagintsev.html?lang=fr>], accessed 7 August 2017. ♣ [#N14-ptr1]
15. Location number three belonged to the 11th department of USLON – “Upravlenie Severnykh Lagerey Osobogo Naznacheniya”, Directorate of Northern Special-Significance Camps, (<http://kolamap.ru/library/murlag.htm> [<http://kolamap.ru/library/murlag.htm>]), accessed 18 March 2017. ♣ [#N15-ptr1]
 16. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqF_xLt6hZI [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqF_xLt6hZI]), accessed 18 August 2017. ♣ [#N16-ptr1]
 17. Janet Harbord, “Contingency's work: Kracauer's Theory of Film and the trope of the accidental”, *New Formations*, 61 (2007), 92. ♣ [#N17-ptr1]
 18. Kleiman. ♣ [#N18-ptr1]
 19. Mary Anne Doane, “Scale and the negotiation of real and unreal space in the cinema,” eds. Lucia Nagib and Cecilia Mello, *Realism and the Audiovisual Media* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). ♣ [#N19-ptr1]
 20. As evident, for example, from the organization of the First Antarctic Biennale in 2017. ♣ [#N20-ptr1]
 21. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 49. ♣ [#N21-ptr1]
 22. Doane, 74. ♣ [#N22-ptr1]
 23. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: the Redemption of Physical Reality*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 303. ♣ [#N23-ptr1]
 24. Harbord, 90. ♣ [#N24-ptr1]
 25. Akhnaten is regarded as a simultaneously visionary and damaging figure in Egyptian history; having implemented an unprecedented centralization of power and introduced monotheism as a state religion, he also created favorable conditions for corruption and weakened Egypt internationally. ♣ [#N25-ptr1]
 26. These included a global climatic cooling, which reduced the amount of rainfall in East Africa and, in combination with the artificial irrigation system, led to the catastrophic reduction in the Nile floods over two or three decades, resulting in famine that gripped the country and paralyzed the political institutions. All of this contributed to the eventual demise of the Old Kingdom. Fekri Hassan, “[Droughts, Famine and the Collapse of the Old Kingdom; Re-Reading Ipuwer](https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/publication/75626/1)” in [<https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/publication/75626/1>], eds. Janet Richards and Zahi A. Hawass, *Volume in Honour of David O'Connor* (Cairo: Supreme Council of Antiquities, 2007). ♣ [#N26-ptr1]
 27. Martin Lefebvre, “On landscape in narrative cinema,” *Revue Canadienne D'Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 20, no. 1 (2011), 64. ♣ [#N27-ptr1]
 28. Martin Lefebvre, “Between setting and landscape in the cinema,” in *Landscape and film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), 30. ♣ [#N28-ptr1]
 29. Thomas Huhn, “Review of Lyotard's Lessons,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, (Winter 1995), 91. ♣ [#N29-ptr1]
 30. [Henri Lefebvre](http://au.wiley.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/WileyCDA/Section/id-370022.html?query=Henri+Lefebvre) [<http://au.wiley.com.ezproxy.lib.monash.edu.au/WileyCDA/Section/id-370022.html?query=Henri+Lefebvre>], *The Production of Space* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 309, quoted in Doane, 77. ♣ [#N30-ptr1]
 31. Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1987), 12. ♣ [#N31-ptr1]
 32. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1996). ♣ [#N32-ptr1]
 33. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 119. ♣ [#N33-ptr1]

34. Martin Heidegger, “Building. Dwelling. Thinking” in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, trans. David Farrell Krell (Harper San Francisco, 1993).
♣ [\[#N34-ptri\]](#)
 35. Doane, “Scale and the Negotiation of Real and Unreal Space in the Cinema,” 80.♣ [\[#N35-ptri\]](#)
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Print ISSN: 0163-5069 • Online ISSN: 2471-4364