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'Leviathan' Controversy Is a Storm in a Teacup

By Yury Saprykin

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It so happened that I became familiarized with the discussion surrounding Andrei Zvyagintsev's Oscar-nominated film ''Leviathan'' before I'd watched the film itself. There's been no getting away from ''Leviathan'' recently, not least due to its Golden Globe success; firing up YouTube, you've already got a good inkling of what you're about to encounter.

''Leviathan'' is chernukha — a film genre term that means something like "pitch-black grimness" — or an outright blackening of Russia. It's a brave denunciation of the Putin regime (or, alternatively, expedient Russophobic twaddle intended to please the West). It is a series of stereotypes about Russians intended for external consumption (or a painfully accurate portrait of today's Russia). It's an art-house flick unfathomable for mere mortals (or a commercially calculated product created for Western release).

It's a film about faith that's impossible to live without, a film that makes you want to hang yourself, a film about the very essence of Russia. Russian viewers immediately took up a position on either side of the barricades and launched themselves into a status war —

which, mind you, has been the case with all public discussions of late. As Facebook logic dictates, you've got to stand upon your digital soapbox and publicly declare your position (never mind that no one's asked to hear it).

I didn't discern anything particularly resembling chernukha in the film — in comparison to Yury Bykov's 2014 film ''The Fool,'' ''Leviathan'' is positively tactful and correct, even sterile, in a European kind of way.

I don't believe that Zvyagintsev has assembled a series of Russophobic stereotypes in the film. Those indignant at the fact that lead actor Alexei Serebryakov's character is shown necking vodka from the bottle need reminding precisely what circumstances he does this in — just try and argue it isn't theatrically justified. You might as well claim that certain swear words constantly on the characters' lips throughout the film — and not without good reason — represent some kind of Russophobic slur.

The gripes regarding the film's ''artificial'' dialogue and theatrical implausibility are, quite frankly, a joke: The story is tightly conceived and lucidly told (no loose threads left hanging, every seam where it should be), while its protagonists speak an absolutely recognizable language, not at all unlike what you might overhear on the metro on a daily basis.

I suspect that the charges leveled against ''Leviathan'' — the indictments of calculatedness and expediency, the allegations of directorial melodrama, the claims that Zvyagintsev feels no love for his own characters — are all ultimately connected to the idiosyncrasies of its cinematic language. And it is precisely these idiosyncrasies (rather than any anti-Russian climate) that have earned Zvyagintsev a Golden Globe and make him an Oscar contender.

''Leviathan'' is cold, rational, European filmmaking only in the sense that Michael Haneke or Bruno Dumont can be labelled rational and unfeeling, and it engages with roughly the same spectrum of themes that preoccupy the Cannes elite: humanity and the irresistible forces of destiny, humanity's incurable susceptibility to evil, humanity in a godforsaken world. As for suspicions that the accolades at the Golden Globes and Cannes are part of some anti-Russian crusade, with Zvyagintsev a willing participant — well, they're just outright absurd.

The folk who sit on these award committees will, I suspect, entertain thoughts of Putin approximately once a year. They'll know approximately nothing about the corruption endemic to every level of the power vertical, and less about its relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russia, no doubt, exists on the very periphery of their awareness of the global landscape; even minor political gestures apropos of that country would take them far beyond the bounds of their profession. You might as well claim that the accolades earned by ''Dogville'' were part of an orchestrated anti-Danish offensive, or that ''4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days'' was released worldwide to besmirch Romania.

''Leviathan,'' much like the films I've just mentioned, is of value to any notional Oscar committee only insofar as it tells an absolutely universal story in a language comprehensible from any vantage point of European Christian civilization. As for the recognizable locale and era into which this story has been implanted, they're fathomable only to us Russians, and capable of irritating us alone.

Yes, it's a film that seems to offer little hope — but not in the sense of suggesting that life in Russia is, and ever shall be, impossible: The world of ''Leviathan'' hardly spells out where this life actually does exist, and whether it has even existed at all.

Biblical metaphors persist here as figures of absence: fish rotting from the head down, beached, decaying ships. ''Leviathan'' itself — either the blind, non-negotiable forces of destiny and nature, as per the Bible, or, following Hobbes, the rational machine of the state, which serves to elevate its citizens above the natural condition of war of all against all — intrudes on our attention merely in the form of a weathered skeleton on the shore, and if we are in fact afforded brief glimpses of its mighty, glistening, living back, this is inevitably a distress call, an apparent sign of misfortune.

The hypocritical priests and corrupt officials prove tantamount not to some chthonic monster but rather to a serpent devouring its own tail: they wreak evil so as to attain legitimacy — which they require to wreak evil; they sanctify each other's abominable deeds — the purpose of which is to obtain further sanctifications.

This is not the distinguishing feature of the Russian political system, but something akin to the planet Melancholia, a blind force that destroys all life simply because it cannot do otherwise, and also because everyone is, a priori, guilty of everything — with the possible exception of children, but we've the state to take care of them.

''Leviathan'' is a commentary on the law and chernukha that restores the original Latin meaning to the word "corruption." Corruption here means decay, putrefaction; it entails the mutilation of human nature.

The calamities that befall the main protagonist are not trials sent from on high. Their point isn't to set him right or test him; impossible to counteract by tenacity or heroic deeds, they're simply links in an ill-starred chain consisting of minor corrupted wills. The law and religion are merely ways of giving this chain a requisite formal sheen.

In effect, ''Leviathan'' represents a (less heavily metaphorical) elaboration of the themes Zvyagintsev broached in ''The Return'': the Father has gone, vanished into the fog, while the Children have set about playing a dirty, shameful game where the losers are inevitably those who choose simply to stand off to the side and not do anyone any harm.

And the fact that today's Russia offers an apposite backdrop for such subject matter is certainly no fault of the Oscar committee.

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