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## Leviathan at the Movies: Andrey Zvyagintsev's Film in Biblical Perspective

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# Leviathan at the Movies: Andrey Zvyagintsev's Film in Biblical Perspective\*

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## Abstract

Der Leviatan des Alten Testaments ist eines jener auch im Alten Orient und im antiken Ägypten belegten mythischen Wesen, die als Monster die Gefährdung der Ordnung repräsentieren. Als solcher ist er breit rezipiert worden, z.B. in Literatur, Bild, Film, Videospielen und Comics. In dem Film „Leviathan“ (2014) des russischen Regisseurs Andrey Zvyagintsev ist Leviatan nicht als Verkörperung eines korrupten Staatssystems zu sehen, dessen Krakenarme bis in den letzten Winkel reichen. Vielmehr steht er – wie in der katholischen Tradition – für die Todsünde *invidia*, also für Neid, Eifersucht, Missgunst und Gier, denn sie sind das den Film beherrschende Thema.

## 1. A Russian Première

On 23 May 2014, the Russian film *Leviathan* (Левиафан) was presented for the first time at the Cannes Film Festival. This epic narrative directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev (\*1964, Novosibirsk) formed the Russian contribution to this annual festival. The movie immediately received great praise and appraisal. It became an international sensation: Zvyagintsev won the 'Best Screenplay' award at the 'Cannes International Film Festival' 2014, the 'Golden Globe' for the 'Best Foreign Language Film' and was nominated for an Academy Award for 'Best Foreign Language Film' in 2015.

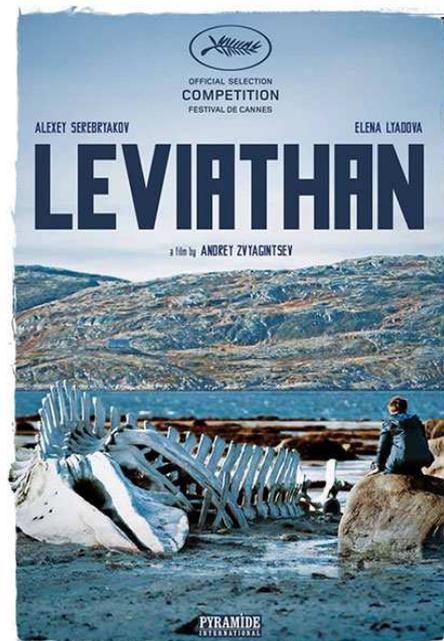


Fig. 1: Leviathan Poster.

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\* I would like to thank Lester L. Grabbe, Hull, for his suggestions to improve the English of this contribution.

*Leviathan* is the fourth movie directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev.<sup>1</sup> He was educated at the drama school in Novosibirsk. For many years he worked in that capacity for films and in the theatre. He slowly moved to a different role. In 2003, he directed his first movie: *The Return*, followed by *The Banishment* (2007) and *Elena* (2011). Although his earlier work was not unobserved, *Leviathan* marked his international breakthrough.

The film is based on the history of the American Marvin Heemeyer and the Biblical Book of Job. Heemeyer (1951–2004) was an American welder and owner of a company in which he adjusted mufflers and nozzles of cars. He came into conflict with the local authorities about the ownership of a strip of land. He gave vent to the – in his eyes – wrongful judicial verdict by driving with an armoured bulldozer into the town hall and the home of the former mayor. In the end, he put an end to his life.<sup>2</sup> The Biblical Book of Job is an ancient dialogic book on the question of theodicy: how can mankind believe in the goodness of God in the face of the suffering of the righteous? I will come back to this story below.

## 2. The Biblical Leviathan

In the Old Testament, the Leviathan occurs six times: twice in the Psalms, twice in the Book of Job, and twice in the prophecies of Isaiah.<sup>3</sup> Remarkably, the fabulous creature is only attested in poetic texts and never in a narrative context. The image of Leviathan as well as the symbolic meaning of the mythological animal is not constant or equal in the six passages. An unequivocal picture of the Biblical Leviathan cannot be drawn. Sometimes, he is a snake, sometimes a crocodile of gigantic proportions, and sometimes a dragon of the sea. It is intriguing to see that this multifaceted image of Leviathan has implications for the reception of the animal throughout history. At the various stages of human history, the monster plays a different role.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 2: The Hittite Sky God Teshub kills the dragon Illuyanka (relief from Malatya; 9. Jh. v. Chr.).

It should be noted that the Biblical Leviathan had precursors in Ancient Near Eastern mythology. Mesopotamian texts and iconography present the *mušmaḥḥu*, a seven-headed dragon. In a Hittite myth, the fierce and inimical snake Illuyanka

<sup>1</sup> On Zvyagintsev see, e.g., Kondyuk, Sensing, 82.

<sup>2</sup> See Best, Looking, 12; Dolgoplov, Reeling, 68.

<sup>3</sup> Ps 74:14; 104:26; Job 3:8; 40:25; Isa 27:1 (2x).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Becking, Zonder; and the essays in Bekkum / Dekker / Kamp / Peels (eds.), Playing.

is known who is pictured as a winding animal, just like Litanu / Lothan in the Ugaritic texts and Leviathan in Isaiah 27. In ancient Egyptian mythology, a snake-shaped demon Apophis was known. It was a symbol for the powers of the dark and hence a depiction of human fear for darkness and desolation.<sup>5</sup> In the Ugaritic Baal Epic, Litanu/Lothan is a helper of the god Yammu in his battle with Balu on the throne in the pantheon. Litanu/Lothan is killed and Yammu seeks revenge by denying Balu the entrance to the banquet of the gods:

Although you defeated Litanu/Lothan, the fleeing serpent  
Made an end to the coiling serpent  
The mighty one with the seven heads,  
You were uncovered, the heaven came loose,  
Like the girdle of your cloak.<sup>6</sup>

Evil does not go unnoticed. Litanu/Lothan is Ugaritic for Leviathan. In this passage he is depicted as a monster of chaos threatening the order in the community. The language used very much resembles Isaiah 27:1:

In that day YHWH will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent,  
with his fierce and great and mighty sword –  
even Leviathan the twisting serpent.  
He will kill the dragon who is in the sea.<sup>7</sup>

In the time between the Hebrew Bible and Zvyagintsev's movie, the Leviathan has played an important cultural-historical role. In all corners of the world and in all genres of art – literature, pictures, movies, video-games, popular comics to name but a few – the memory of the fascinating fabulous animal has been kept alive. In other words, his movie has a long prehistory.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Earlier Movies on Leviathan

Zvyagintsev's movie was not the first entitled or featuring Leviathan. I will mention a few at the risk of overlooking one.

#### 3.1. A novel made movie

In 1962 a film-adaptation of the novel *Léviathan* by Julian Green was produced by Léonard Keigel. In this dramatic black-and-white film, the line of Green's novel is followed. The impressive novel was published in 1929.<sup>9</sup> Green narrates a story on love and unfulfilled desire. The life of the main character,

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<sup>5</sup> See Hoffner, Commentary, 119–140; Morenz, Apophis, 201–205; Charlesworth, Good; Korpel / de Moor, Leviathan, 3–8.

<sup>6</sup> KTU 1.5 i 1–4 // i:28–30; see Korpel / de Moor, Leviathan, 3–8.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Dekker, God 24–28.

<sup>8</sup> I have given a survey in my book Becking, Zonder.

<sup>9</sup> Green, Léviathan.

Paul Guéret, has ended up in a dead-end street. His marriage did not bring him the happiness he hoped. He wastes his days as André's house teacher, the spoiled son of the well-off couple Grosgeorge. He falls in love with the young and handsome Angèle, who works in a laundry. His love remains unrequited. Then, Guéret discovers that Angèle is being abused by her aunt, Mrs. Londe. This faded beauty runs a restaurant for business travellers. She offers her niece for sexual pleasure for a small fee, purely and simply to satisfy her curiosity about her guests.

One night, Guéret no longer can control himself. He forces himself into the bedroom of Angèle, who is not at home. Shortly afterward, he meets her on a country road and hits her in anger, so hard that she is mutilated. In fury, Guéret kills an old man whom he thought he had seen his attack on Angèle. Angèle withdraws and does not show up anymore. She refuses to reveal the identity of her assailant, because she realizes that Guéret was the only man who really cared about her. The story ends tragically with her death and his disappearance.

Except for the title, the word Leviathan does not appear in this novel. The title could refer to Guéret's acts of violence, which he carried out as if driven by an inner demon. More likely, however, it is to establish a connection with Catholic theology. The author had converted to Catholicism in 1916. In the medieval doctrine of the seven deadly sins, Leviathan is the demon connected with *invidia*, envy, greed and avarice. According to pope Gregory I *invidia* is one of the seven cardinal sins.<sup>10</sup> The demon that accompanies this sin has been – since the list of 1589 of the German theologian and auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese of Trier, Peter Binsfeld (1545/46–1598) – the Leviathan. Desire in its three dimensions of envy, greed and avarice is a theme that runs like a thread through Green's novel. Guéret, Grosgeorge and the guest are all longing for Angèle. Eva Grosgeorge covets Guéret and Madam Londe is driven by her desire to know everything about her regular guests. The novel as well as the movie draws a sober and oppressive scenario to which desire can lead.



Fig. 3: *Invidia* by Jacob Matham (after Hendrik Goltzius; etching, 1593).

<sup>10</sup> See Wenzel, *Seven Deadly Sins*, 1–22; Bringle, *Envy*.

### 3.2. Horror

In 1989 *Leviathan* appeared, a science fiction film with horror features. The movie was directed by the Italian of Greek origin George Pan Cosmatos (1941–2005). The film tells the experiences of the geologist Steven Beck. He is sent by the directors of the Tri-Oceanic Corporation to make a silver mine at a depth of five kilometres. During a trip outside the working cabin, one of the expedition members, Sixpack, discovers the wreck of a Russian ship, the Leviathan. A safe from this ship is taken to the work booth of the expedition. In it they find a logbook that gives details of the deaths of several crew members of the Leviathan. On a video found in the vault, the captain of the ship tells about puzzling medical problems with his crew. Sixpack then finds a bottle of vodka that he shares with the expedition member Bowman.

Sixpack awakes seriously ill the next morning. The expedition doctor Doc finds injuries on the back of Sixpack, who dies a few hours later. When Bowman gets sick and dies too, panic breaks out. A violent storm makes a direct evacuation impossible. Out of fear the corpses are thrown outside. As they disappear into the sea, they mutate. At the same



Fig. 4: Leviathan scene in the Movie by Cosmatos.

time, Beck discovers that on board the Leviathan experiments were conducted with mutagens mixed with vodka. The body of Sixpack mutates into a gruesome and devastating monster that attacks the working cabin, destroys the computer systems and brings the expedition members to the brink of desperation. An expedition member, Jones, tries to calm down the monster with the sacrifice of his own life. However, that offer only succeeds when Beck detonates a destruction device in the mouth of the monster. Hence the film has a happy ending.

The film is spectacular, but not very original. The contrast between America and Russia is depicted in the black and white colours of the Cold War. Leviathan symbolizes the chaos that can break out when experiments with genetic manipulation get out of hand. It is of course good to warn against this.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3. Walt Disney: Atlantis

In the Disney movie *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), the Leviathan is a weapon of war in the hands of the Atlanteans. This tool is gigantic and frightening. It looks like a gigantic, mechanical lobster and is a hundred times the size

<sup>11</sup> See: Gardenour Walter, *Architecture*, 127–149.

of the largest ship ever made by humans. The Leviathan stands guard at the entrance to the land of Atlantis at the bottom of the ocean. In the opening scene of the film, the Leviathan is still a combat aircraft. After Atlantis has sunk, it becomes a sea creature. In the image of Leviathan in this film, different traditions are intertwined. The motif of the Leviathan as guardian of a treasure is already present in Greek mythology. The serpent *Ladôn* is depicted as a monstrous guardian. This son of Echidna and Typhon was a multiheaded animal. He was appointed by the goddess Hera to safeguard the tree with the golden apples.<sup>12</sup> In Joseph Roth's novel *Der Leviathan* the main character – Nissen Piczenik – is of the opinion that Leviathan is guarding the corals at the bottom of the ocean until the coming of the Messiah.<sup>13</sup> Throughout history, the Leviathan has been construed as a sea-monster. Even in recent times, ships were named after the monster, such as the aircraft-carrier HMS Leviathan. This ship from the Majestic-class served from 1945 up to its demolition in 1968.

### 3.4. Revealing Documentary

In 2012 the première of the American documentary *Leviathan*, made by Lucien Castaing-Taylor (\*1966, Liverpool) and Véréna Paravel (\*1971, Neuchâtel CH), took place. This is not a traditional informative or educational documentary. The filmmakers give a picture of commercial fishing in the North Atlantic waters without words or comments. Seeing the documentary is an oppressive and onerous experience. On the one hand, this is caused by the sound: the raw sound of metal on metal, of poorly oiled pulleys and monotonous engines alternates with hard rock and heavy metal, among others fragments of the album *Leviathan* of the formation Mastodon. In addition, the camera operation is unorthodox. The documentary is shot from the perspective of the fishermen and from in the midst of the fish. The viewer is thus in the middle of the process of catching and being caught, of processing and being processed. This immediate proximity to the gruesome is disturbing. The filmmakers do not moralize for a moment, although they do suggest that fish are creatures in the same way as humans. A judgment on the nature of this food industry is left to the viewer. The title of the documentary and the location in Massachusetts allude to Melville's novel *Moby Dick*.<sup>14</sup> What the Leviathan stands for, is not explained in the docu-

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<sup>12</sup> On possible connections between the Greek serpent *Ladôn* and west Semitic traditions about Litanu/Lothan (Ugaritic the Baal epic KTU 1.3 iii 38–42; 1.5 i 1–4 // i:28–30) and Leviathan (Hebrew Bible), see Astour, *Greek Names*, 193–201; Wyatt, *Religious Texts*; Korpel / de Moor, *Adam, Eve, and the Devil*; Korpel / de Moor, *Leviathan*, 9–13.

<sup>13</sup> Roth, *Leviathan*; see Starck-Adler, *The Leviathan of Joseph Roth*, 423–439; Hasan-Rokem, *Joban Transformations*, 147–171.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Melville, *Moby-Dick*.

mentary. My guess is that this name refers to the massive and devouring nature of the fish processing industry.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.5. Pirate Movie

At the crossroads of two genres – horror and pirate stories – Steve Rudzinski (\*1987) produced the low budgeted movie *Captain Z & the Terror of Leviathan* that was released in 2014. The story of the movie starts in 1714. A handful of local people are possessed with an evil spirit. They have become the owner of a very powerful amulet. They are about to use this amulet in performing a ritual that involves a girl with crimson hair and by which – they believe – they could resurrect the evil Leviathan. Just in time Captain Z arrives. He is an adventurous pirate. Supported by his trusted chicken Rosa, he is able to prevent the resurrection of the Leviathan. This act, however, causes a maelstrom in a local river. The heroic pirate together with the possessed locals disappears into the deep waters.

300 years later the memory of Captain Z is still conserved in a local museum. Inspired by the tales and intrigued by the legend, a paranormal person – Glen Stewart – starts a search for the amulet. A father and son couple, however, had found the amulet just before him. As a result of their find, the vortex is unlocked and surprisingly Captain Z and the locals are still alive. They once more want to use the amulet to revive Leviathan. Glen accompanied by the museum curator and a lovely girl, Heather, tries to prevent the unleashing. Will they be there in time?

In this movie, Leviathan is the primordial monster that when resurrected to live could cause all sorts of damage. He is cast in the role of a horrific monster.

## 4. Story and Plot of Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan*

In comparison with these other movies, the film conducted by Zvyagintsev has much more content and depth. Before discussing the connection between this movie and the biblical Leviathan – with its cultural heritage – I will give a résumé of the movie.<sup>16</sup>

The film narrates the story of Kolja, his wife Lilya, and Roman, Kolja's son from a previous marriage. Kolja operates a motorcar-garage in a northern corner of Russia. In a backward and desolate corner of the world, he struggles to build his life. His existence – already constantly threatened – is made more difficult and complicated by the local mayor who wants to buy the land of Kolja to

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<sup>15</sup> See: Stevenson / Kohn, *Leviathan*, 49–53.

<sup>16</sup> See also Bekkering, *Leviathan*, 45; Kondyuk, *Sensing*, 3.2.

build a palace there.<sup>17</sup> Although he is in the right, Kolja loses the lawsuit, because the corrupt mayor is in league with the regional court. The assistance of an old friend, now a lawyer in Moscow, cannot help either. The tragedy of the story is sharply portrayed. The pride of Kolja and Lilya slowly fades and turns into brokenness. This peeling off of happiness is underscored in three features. First of all, it is striking that Kolja and Lilya cannot talk about their grief. They are unable to find ways of communicating or sharing, which deepens the misery. Then each chooses his / her own way out of the misery. Kolja seeks consolation in vodka, ruining his life even further. Lilya seeks consolation in the arms of the friend from Moscow. This consolation, however, is so shallow that she later ends her life. It remains unclear whether this suicide was caused by her misery or by shame with regard to the adultery. The friend, meanwhile, turned out to be more opportunistic than he first presented himself. Roman, the son, is looking for his own way and joins a faint and fuzzy group of young people meeting at the edge of the community. All this takes place in a vast and magnificent landscape that nevertheless has an irksome effect both on the characters in the movie and on the viewers of the film. The melancholic gravity of the film can be endured because Zvyagintsev interlaces the story with unexpected comic moments. A humorous highlight is the target practice during a birthday party where portraits of leaders of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation are shot at. The story ends sadly with a scene in which Kolja's house is demolished by bulldozers.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. Three Symbolic Leviathans

The title of the movie is clarified by three elements. I shall discuss these three references to the Leviathan: the whale, Thomas Hobbes, and the biblical story of Job.

### 5.1. Leviathan as a Whale

The identification of the Leviathan with a whale has ancient roots. The Vulgate translated Hebrew *tannîn*, 'seefish / tuna', with *cetus*, 'whale'. This is of course not a convincing piece of evidence. In Isaiah 27:1, the monstrous *tannîn*, 'dragon of the sea', stands in parallelism with the Leviathan. *tannîn* is rendered in this verse in the Vulgate with *cetum qui in mari est*, 'the whale that is in the sea'. This too, is no full proof of an early identification of the Leviathan with the whale. It, nevertheless, shows that in antiquity the whale was already known as a fierce animal of the sea.

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<sup>17</sup> I could not resist thinking of the history of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21). Naboth, too, suffered from a change in economic parameters, see Becking, *Grapes*, 123–141.

<sup>18</sup> Clearly a mirror image of the story of Marvin Heemeyer mentioned earlier.

In the translation of the Bible that Luther made during his stay at the Wartburg, the Hebrew word Leviathan is twice translated with German 'Walfische'.<sup>19</sup> In other translations from the age of the Reformation this rendition is absent, except for the Dutch so-called Deux-Aesbijbel<sup>20</sup>.

In the seventeenth century, the Leviathan presented as a whale plays a role in literary works. As an example, I will refer to the epic poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton (1667).<sup>21</sup> The grand poem – no less than ten thousand verses – describes the rebellion of Satan, in the person of Lucifer, against God. There are striking parallels with the stage play *Lucifer* by the Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel. In Milton's poem, Lucifer returns as a serpent in paradise which causes the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Leviathan is mentioned twice, but does not play a special role in the drama:

By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea-beast  
Leviathan, which God of all his works  
Created hugest that swim the ocean-stream  
Him, haply slumbering on the Norway foam.<sup>22</sup>

Wallowing unwieldy, enormous in their gait,  
Tempest the ocean. There Leviathan,  
Hugest of living creatures, on the deep  
Stretched like a promontory, sleeps or swims,  
And seems a moving land, and at his gills  
Draws in, and at his trunk spouts out, a sea.<sup>23</sup>

The Leviathan is called here 'God's greatest creature'. The phrase 'Him, haply slumbering on the Norway foam' suggests that Milton was thinking of a whale.<sup>24</sup>

Milton lived in the early age of the enlightenment. A new way of looking at reality awoke. Tradition no longer was a convincing argument. The presence of the Leviathan in the Bible was no longer decisive for its real existence. Only features that could be observed or touched were thought to exist, everything else was part of a fairy-tale world. Since no animals had been seen that fully corresponded to the description of the Leviathan in the Book of Job, enlightened people thought that the animal did not exist. Some identified the Leviathan with the whale, assuming that the author of the Book of Job exaggerated in his description. Traditional Christians hoped – and some still hope – that the animal will once be found in reality.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> English: whales, at Ps 74:14 and 104:26.

<sup>20</sup> 1562, likewise only in Ps 74:14 and 104:26; this precursor of the Staten Translation (1637) was in many ways inspired by Luther's translation.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>22</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost* i, Lines 200–203.

<sup>23</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost* vii, Lines 411–416.

<sup>24</sup> See Butler, *Giants*, 352–363; Bevan Zlatar, *Image*, 241–266.

<sup>25</sup> For creationists, a dinosaur is the likely candidate; see, e.g., Gish, *Dinosaurs*; Booker, *Candidate*, 14–16. Such a view is criticized by scholars such as Senter, *Dinosaurs*.

Another great piece of literature is the novel *Moby Dick* by the American writer Herman Melville (1819–1891). Its story tells of the heroic battle of Captain Ahab against the monstrous whale Moby Dick.<sup>26</sup> The captain wants to take revenge on the whale for the loss of one of his legs. The whale, however, wins the battle and gobbles up the captain. The ship that had been on the hunt also drowns in the turbulent waves. Only the narrator Ishmael survives the journey. In this novel, the Leviathan occurs about 80 times, always as a synonym for a whale and often in more reflexive passages, for instance in:

... this leviathan [= the Fin-back whale] seems the banished and unconquerable Cain of his race, bearing for his mark that style upon his back. From having the baleen in his mouth, the Fin-Back is sometimes included with the right whale, among a theoretic species denominated Whalebone whales, that is, whales with baleen.<sup>27</sup>

Through this analogy, Moby Dick gets monstrous features. The English author Philip Hoare (\*1958) reports in his book *Leviathan or, The Whale* of his life-long obsession over whales, which was partly caused by the reading of Moby Dick.<sup>28</sup> In sum, there is an ongoing tradition that depicts the Leviathan in the form of a whale. This tradition is mirrored in Zvyagintsev's movie.

In his movie a whale is seen twice. Shortly before Lilja commits suicide a whale is seen swimming in the water. Later, when the son Roman is fleeing away from home, he passes the skeleton of a whale. Kondyuk is correct in remarking that the whales 'appear before big losses, they illustrate the power of separation'. He, however, overinterprets the symbolic value of the whale by construing the animal as a sign of divine presence/absence.<sup>29</sup>



Fig. 5: Roman sees a skeleton of a whale.

## 5.2. Hobbes or Invidia

For many people, the name Leviathan is connected to Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) who published – just after the civil war in Great Britain – a political philosophy entitled *Leviathan*.<sup>30</sup> The reference to Hobbes was unintended by Zvyagintsev. In the interview on the DVD of the film, the director says that only

<sup>26</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*; see, e.g., Glenn, Melville, 165–182.

<sup>27</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hoare, *Leviathan*.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Kondyuk, *Sensing*, 82.

<sup>30</sup> See Hobbes, *Leviathan*; Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Clarendon Edition).



Fig. 6: Frontispiece of the original edition of Hobbes' *Leviathan* (engraving by Abraham Bosse, 1651).

after the film was finished someone pointed him toward the work of Hobbes. After reading Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Zvyagintsev immediately saw the connections with his film and the way power plays a role in the lives of the characters. In this interpretation, *Leviathan* would refer to the trinity of state, church, and capital that depresses the lives of Kolja and his family as a *pars pro toto* for all those Russians who are marginalized by the Putin-regime. At first sight, this seems a convincing interpretation. There is, however, a problem since this interpretation is based on an incorrect reading of Hobbes.

I will mention two examples. First, Hobbes's work is often perceived as a complaint against the power of the state. Until this day, the work is quoted or referred to in anti-big government discourse. In 1938 the American poet Donald G. Davidson (1893–1968) published an essay

*Attack on Leviathan* in which he criticized the interference of the state.<sup>31</sup> In 1987, the traditional liberal Robert Higgs phrased his criticism of the American government in *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*.<sup>32</sup> Much of the Republican rhetoric in the United States – especially from members of the Tea-party – against a meddling government is based on this publication. In the criticism against the plans of Barack Obama to construct a better system for health-care, the former president is often compared with the Leviathan. In that connection various cartoons appeared in which Obama is depicted as a present-day Leviathan by copying his image in the front page of Hobbes' work. This image is very suggestive.



Fig. 7: Obama cast as Leviathan.

<sup>31</sup> Davidson, *Attack*.

<sup>32</sup> Higgs, *Crisis*.

The second example comes from Egypt. One of the government-offices in Cairo is the Mogamma-building at the Tahrir-square. On the fourteen floors of this huge building, 18,000 Egyptian civil servants work. Its popular nickname is the 'Leviathan'. The building stands as a symbol for the extended and slow-functioning Egyptian bureaucracy. The building is the location of the 1992 comic movie *Il Erhab wal Kebab*, 'terror and kebab'. The main character, Ahmed, gets trapped in the corridors of the bureaucracy when he is only asking for a declaration that can help him to move his children to a different school. Being fed up, Ahmed takes the whole building hostage, demanding a portion of kebab for all workers in the building. The European Union is also often construed as a bureaucratic Leviathan. This became clear in an essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger<sup>33</sup> as well as in the mentality out of which Brexit grew.

I have, however, a remark. The tradition that Hobbes' Leviathan contains a complaint against a meddling and interfering state is based on an incorrect interpretation of his work. According to Hobbes, a government is necessary to guard a society against the danger of a war of all against all. In his view, the existence of the state is based on a set of moral codes that he depicts as natural laws. The organisation and the functioning of any state needs to be an expression of these moral codes such as respect and equality. A state is built on a social contract in which all citizens transfer their right to govern themselves by assigning this right to the state. In other words, the state as a Leviathan in the writings of Hobbes is a positive entity that safeguards a society.

It would – despite the remarks of Zvyagintsev himself in the interview – be better to look at another possible thematic connection. Above, it is made clear that in the medieval doctrine of the seven deadly sins, Leviathan is the demon connected with *invidia*, envy, greed and avarice. According to pope Gregory I *invidia* was one of the seven cardinal sins.<sup>35</sup> Leviathan is the demon that accompanies this sin. On various levels of the story, Zvyagintsev's movie is full of themes such as desire and greed. To give a few



Fig. 8: Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450–1516), *Invidia* as one of the seven mortal sins.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Enzensberger, *Monster*.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Gibson, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 205–226.

<sup>35</sup> See Wenzel, *Seven Deadly Sins* 1–22; Bingle, *Envy*

examples: it is greed that drives the mayor of the community in his desire to become the owner of the plot of land on which Kolja's house is situated.<sup>36</sup> It is desire that drives Lilya to the welcoming arms of the advocate from Moscow. It is desire that brings Kolja to the bottom of his vodka bottles. In all these and other acts they reflect the presence of the Leviathan, the demon of *invidia*.

### 5.3. The Book of Job

After the death of Lilya, Kolja meets the local priest on the sidewalk of a simple supermarket. Kolja has just bought his daily two bottles of vodka. The priest sees his desperation and tries to comfort him by telling the passage about the Leviathan from the book of Job (Job 40–41).<sup>37</sup>

The Biblical Book of Job narrates a compelling story on a very human theme: the suffering of the innocent.<sup>38</sup> Its main character, Job, has ended up in misery despite his upright conduct. He became the victim of a horrible arrangement between God and the Satan. God agreed to have Job tested: will he give up faith and confidence when his life is made miserable by illness, death and decay? The main part of the book is written in the form of an extended dialogue. Job discusses his situation with three friends. These three interlocutors try to convince him that he must be guilty, now that such a great suffering has struck him. They argue with a combination of the idea of retribution and a reversed form of evidentialism.<sup>39</sup>

Retribution means that a certain act of a human being always has an impact and that man must be aware of that before acting. This ideology is based on the concept of reward: those who are sweet get goodies, who are naughty receive punishment. Inverted evidentialism assumes that the logical formula 'if p, then q, in formula:  $p \rightarrow q$ ' is always reversible. An invert evidentialist will thus say: 'If you have received punishment (q), then you must have been naughty (p)'. If my pavement is wet, it must have rained. Inverted evidentialism is, however, a logical fallacy. The sidewalk can have become wet for a very different reason: e.g., my neighbor having washed his car.

The chilly logic of the three friends obviously is unable to comfort Job. All fibres in his body oppose their view. During the conversation his position shifts: from acceptance, to complaint, to indictment. On his indictment, God answers Job through a voice in the whirlwind. Through two hours of 'world exploration', God tries to show that human existence is not to be compared with a person

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Bekkering, Leviathan, 1.

<sup>37</sup> See also Bekkering, Leviathan, 45?.

<sup>38</sup> From the abundance of literature on Job and the two monsters, I only mention: Keel, Jahwes Entgegnung; Mettinger, Search of God, 175–200; Kang, Behemot, esp. 160–198; Ansell, Fantastic Beasts, 90–114.

<sup>39</sup> See: Craig, True Love; Crisp, Divine Retribution, 35–52; Conee / Feldman, Evidentialism; McCain, Evidentialism.

searching for an exit in the darkness of a room without light. However, God applies a detour. The short lecture in world exploration is based on an assumption, namely that of an analogy between the physical world and the human world. What God wants to say from the whirlwind is that the world is full of beauty and order and that by analogy human life can be full of beauty and order.

However, that cosmic balance is constantly challenged, as is shown in the analogy of the two sea monsters. Unexpectedly, God brings two animals on the stage of the debate: Behemoth and Leviathan. Real animals, such as a hippopotamus and a crocodile, are often assumed to have served as models for the drawing of the two mythological creatures.<sup>40</sup> Their description, however, transcends reality to such a degree that it would be better not to compare the monsters with real life animals.

The Hebrew word that is often translated with hippopotamus, *bəhemôt*, means as much as ‘the beast of beasts’, ‘the beast par excellence’. In Job 40 this beast is described with the dimensions of an untamable primordial monster, like a dinosaur from the primeval waters:

He moves his tail like a cedar:  
the sinews of his thighs are knit together.  
His bones are as tubes of brass;  
his limbs are like bars of iron.  
He ranks first among the works of God,  
the One who made him  
has furnished it with a sword.<sup>41</sup>

Both animals represent the monstrous and diabolic character of evil. They were chosen by the narrator as images for the dark side of reality. The point at issue is hidden in two questions:

Can anyone catch it by its eyes,  
or pierce its nose with a snare?  
Can you pull in Leviathan with a hook,  
and tie down its tongue with a rope?  
Can you put a cord through its nose,  
or pierce its jaw with a hook?<sup>42</sup>

No man is capable of that. The primordial forces in nature still exceed our ability. However, God does not ask that question to put down Job – and other people – in their inadequate smallness, but rather to give an answer to Job’s complaint. That answer comes down to this: since the forces in the universe are so colossal, even God sometimes stands empty-handed. The Hebrew word *hakkāh*, ‘fishhook’, occurring elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible at Isaiah 19:8 and

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<sup>40</sup> See Keel, *Jahwes Entgegnung*, 127–156.

<sup>41</sup> Job 40:17–19.

<sup>42</sup> Job 40:24–25.

Habakkuk 1:15, is reminiscent of the depictions of the Egyptian demon-snake Apophis who is caught by a fish-hook every evening. In the reception history of the Leviathan this 'hook' is present until our day.<sup>43</sup>

All in all, God communicates this message to Job: I am the creator of an ordered world and evil does not come forth from me, but from elsewhere. Ultimately, therefore, the book of Job contains a dualistic standpoint. Dualism means that 'good' and 'evil' do not sit together in one divine being, but that evil power must be thought of as an entity next to God. In the book of Job, a limited dualism is shown by means of a two hour lecture on world exploration. There are other powers, but they have not created themselves and they are – where possible – being restrained by God.

There is an intriguing hermeneutical parallel between the Book of Job and the speech of the priest outside the liquor store in Zvyagintsev's movie. Like the Biblical figure, Kolja is unaware of what is really going on, though the reader / viewer has this knowledge.<sup>44</sup> In the Biblical book, Job's friends try to comfort him with arguments that are full of confident quotations from the Psalms and other Old Testament passages. They, however, fail to comfort Job. The priest does a comparable thing with Kolja. By literally quoting the Bible he abuses the text. His words do not reach Kolja who is not consoled by the lesson.

## 6. Conclusion

In bringing Leviathan to the movies, Zvyagintsev joined a long tradition. His movie is full of intertextual connections with the afterlife of the Biblical monster. I have marked three themes, but it would not surprise me when in a variety of details and minor themes all sorts of connections with the reception-history of the Leviathan could be found. I almost wrote: even in post-communist Russia the Biblical theme is alive. But I did not. In my view, the Leviathan presents a universal theme. On the one hand, this is evidenced by the presence of comparable monsters in the Ancient Near Eastern mythology. On the other hand, in present day secular society the image of the Leviathan is almost omnipresent. I will give a few examples.

To begin with: music. In 2014 the American composer Matthew Arnerich published a double fugue in A-minor entitled '*Leviathan*'.<sup>45</sup> In Rhythm and blues: the song *Leviathan, the Girl – A Rose Lalonde Fansong* by PhemieC. The lyrics of this song are bitter, looking at the dark side of life. In the chorus, the I-character presents herself as follows:

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<sup>43</sup> See the title of a collection of poems by Johnson, *Leviathan*.

<sup>44</sup> Kondyuk, *Sensing*.

<sup>45</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X\\_Y5j7KYZho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_Y5j7KYZho).

I am the beast, I am the light, I am the blighted being cursed with sight.  
I am the god who created a world, I am leviathan, the girl.

In the genre of hard-rock *Leviathan* is a black-metal project by Wrest (Jef Whitehead). The lyrics in the various albums of the project all centre around the theme of suicide.<sup>46</sup>

From the world of visual arts, I would like to refer to the construction *Leviathan* designed by Anish Kapoor for *Monumenta 2011* in Paris,<sup>47</sup> as well as to the installation *Leviathanation* by the Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping.

In the complex card game *Magic the Gathering* the card *Leviathan* has devastating force, but playing *Leviathan* is quite expensive and can harm the player more than he wants.<sup>48</sup>

In 2012, the board game *Leviathans* appeared. In this game the *Leviathans* are powerful aircrafts who could be used for good as well as for bad purposes.

Among various comics that refer to the *Leviathan*, the more philosophical strip *Leviathan* by Peter Blegvad (\*1951) stands out.<sup>49</sup>

The theme park *Wonderland* in Vaughn near Toronto, has as its main attraction the rollercoaster *Leviathan*. At a speed of 148km/h people are confronted with the borders of their anxiety.

In literature an almost endless row of *Leviathans* occurs. The monster is present in serious novels<sup>50</sup>, in poetry<sup>51</sup>, in a detective<sup>52</sup>, in children's books<sup>53</sup>, and in science fiction.<sup>54</sup>

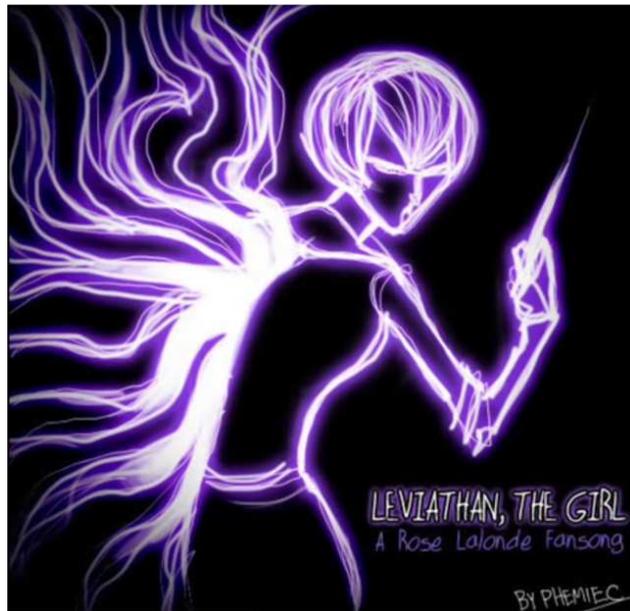


Fig. 9: Cover of PhemieC *Leviathan*.

<sup>46</sup> See (or hear) also the albums named *Leviathan* by Mastodon; Alestrom; Michael Bernier, and the song *Mighty Leviathan of Old* by the hard rock-band Vanderveer.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Loisy, Anish Kapoor.

<sup>48</sup> See Tinsman, Encyclopedia of Magic.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Blegvad, Book of Leviathan; Young, Imagination, 17–33.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Green, Léviathan; cf. Roth, Leviathan; cf. Thomése, Zuidland; cf. Russell, Leviathan. See Joye, Julien Green; Sirna, Beobachtungen.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Oppen, Poems; cf. Johnson, Leviathan; cf. Graaff, Vluchtautogedichten.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Акунина, Левиафан; cf. cf. Baraban, Country, 396–420.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Le Guin, Solomon; cf. Kraegel, King.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Auster, Leviathan; cf. Yanai, Leviathan; cf. Henry, Antiquity Calais; cf. Corey, Leviathan Wakes; cf. Curran, Leviathan.

In my view, the long life of the Leviathan lasts until today because this monster offers an opportunity to give words to indistinct fears at times and could help in coping with the perennial problems of life. I do not believe in the ontological existence of mythological animals, I appreciate them for their symbolic function to help overcome fear – even at the movies.

By way of a final note: Zvyagintsev has touched a tender spot with the Russian authorities. They reacted in a way that could be compared to the traditional – but incorrect – conception of Hobbes' Leviathan. This becomes clear from a reaction out of the Kremlin. The minister of culture Mendinsky expressed his criticism in a subtle way in an interview in the pro-Putin journal *Izvestia*. According to Mendinsky, the movie does not present happy people with a positive view on life. The movie would leave a residue an unhappy feeling, people are not consoled. He is in a strange way correct with this observation, but abuses it by making a wrong argument. It seems as if the minister wants movies to be the 'vodka of the people' in order to escape – albeit only for a moment – from the sorrow of daily life. Russian film-critics with a conservative taste criticized Leviathan for its anticlerical attacks. In their view, Zvyagintsev construes them only as paladins of power.<sup>55</sup> Zvyagintsev pictures that daily life under Putin in all its greyness.

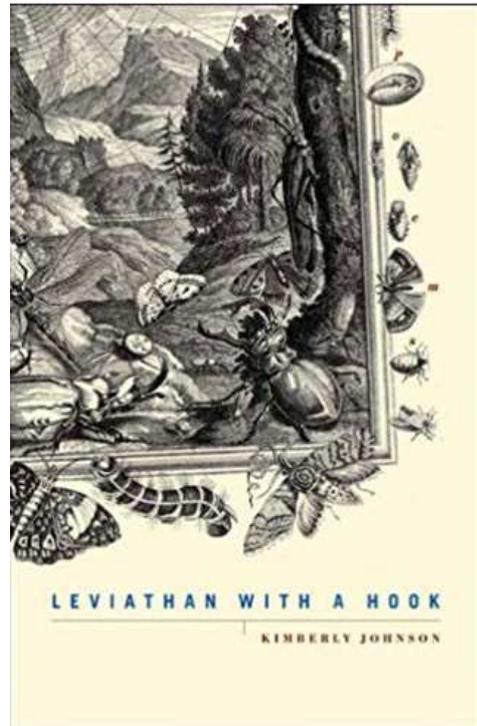


Fig. 10: Kimberly Johnson, *Leviathan with a Hook*.

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See (or hear) also the albums named *Leviathan* by Mastodon; Alestrom; Michael Bernier, and the song *Mighty Leviathan of Old* by the hard rock-band Vanderveer.

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