

# LEVIATHAN

**Monday, April 13, 7:30 pm**

Reviewed by A. O. Scott - NY Times      Rated R      95 Mins.

Andrei Zvyagintsev's "Leviathan" is as heavy with symbolism as its title, and yet it also holds you viselike in the raw grip of the real. The film's furious mixture of the metaphoric and the actual is quintessentially Russian. Without ever losing its dramatic bearings, the film takes a small-scale conflict in a remote northern township on the Arctic Coast and, by implication, expands it to include all of Russia.

Car-shop owner Kolya (Andrei Serebryakov) lives with his second wife, Lilya (Elena Lyadova) and teenage son, Roma (Sergey Pokhodaev), from an earlier marriage. He works in a small garage adjoining the scenically situated house where he has lived for much of his life. This property is now under seige from the corrupt local mayor, Vadim (Roman Madianov), whose claims of eminent domain over land and home are in the final stages of a court battle Kolya is primed to lose.



To fight the case, Kolya invites up an old army buddy, "Dima," (Vladimir Vdovichenkov), now a powerful Moscow attorney. Dima digs up some highly incriminating (and unspecified) dirt on Vadim and assumes that the threat of its revelation will end the onslaught. Instead, the mayor and his goons intensify their vendetta to unspeakable limits. Rarely has a movie so resoundingly anatomized the brutal consequences of institutionalized thuggery.

In a director's note included in the film's program notes, Zvyaginsev, who co-wrote the film with Oleg Negin, wrote: "The arduous alliance between man and the state has been a theme of life in Russia for quite a long time. But if my film is rooted in the Russian land, it is only because I feel no kinship, no genetic link with anything else." Zvyaginsev, unlike most other celebrated contemporary Russian directors, grew up in the provinces, and perhaps this is why "Leviathan" has such a fierce feeling for rural existence. Kolya's loss of home isn't merely metaphoric – it's

startlingly real. This man is like a jagged outcropping of the landscape. To be uprooted, for him, is to be more than dispossessed. It means to be denatured entirely.



The Leviathan of the film's title is a double reference: to the fearsome sea serpent in the Book of Job and to Thomas Hobbes's treatise about the supremacy of sovereign power. In one of the most powerful scenes in the film (which won the best screenplay award in Cannes), Kolya reaches out to a Russian Orthodox priest for guidance, and the priest, who is in cahoots with the mayor, quotes from the Book of Job: "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down his tongue with a cord?...Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you?" The corruption Kolya faces is total.

The image of the carcass of a beached whale in "Leviathan" is too heavy-handed, but many of the obvious touches are rightly in-your-face. It makes sense that the mayor would have a photo of Putin above his desk, or that, in a festive shooting party outing, the rifle targets should be everyone from Lenin to Gorbachev. The symbols in this movie draw blood because they are drenched in the lifeblood of the Russian people.

Kolya, a boozier and a brawler, is far from a saint, and the movie does not attempt to martyr him unduly. His sufferings are without a religious aspect. When asked if he believes in God, he responds that he "believes in facts." The universe of "Leviathan" is one in which thuggery has displaced God. The Orthodox priest can say, with full rectitude, that he is "doing God's work."

For all his failings, Kolya, in the movie's terms, is a natural man, and so his fate in fighting his implacable enemies in the state has a mythic resonance. The movie would not be as powerful as it is if he were haloed. It is because Kolya is earthy and jagged-edged that his predicament takes on a larger meaning. He is a man and he is also the yoked soul of Russia fighting for its life in an accusatory universe. "Leviathan" is, in the widest sense, a horror film.

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# TIMBUKTU

**Monday, April 27, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by A.O. Scott - NYT*      *Rated PG-13*      *97 Mins.*

This month, Abderrahmane Sissako's "Timbuktu," an official selection in Cannes last year and a current nominee for the best foreign-language film Oscar, was caught up in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo murders, when the mayor of a Paris suburb briefly succeeded in banning it from a local cinema. Coming amid an outpouring of public and official support for freedom of speech, this act of censorship was both dismaying and ridiculous.

Mr. Sissako's movie, far from being "an apology for terrorism," as the mayor (who, of course, had not seen it) supposed, is an unflinching, quietly furious exploration of life under radical Islamist rule. It also makes a point about power that even nonextremist, democratically elected leaders would do well to keep in mind. When you try to restrict the movies people can see, the music they can play or the opinions they can express — in the name of whatever theological or secular ideal you claim to represent — you may or may not become a monster. That you will make a fool of yourself is, in contrast, a moral certainty.

The authority of the jihadists in "Timbuktu" is cruel, but it is also absurd. Mr. Sissako, who was born in Mauritania and whose films have mainly been set, like this one, in Mali, examines the varieties of this absurdity with an eye that is calm, compassionate and remorseless. The most obvious vice exhibited by members of the militia controlling the desert city of Timbuktu in the name of Allah is hypocrisy.

Their failures to live up to their own rigid notions of Shariah law are evidence of their humanity. Abdelkrim (Abel Jafri), one of the leaders, sneaks off behind a dune to smoke a cigarette, an activity he has forbidden in the city. "Everyone knows you smoke," says his young driver, who has been trying to teach his boss to drive a stick shift. In the midst of flirting with the wife of a herdsman, Abdelkrim scolds her for immodestly leaving her hair uncovered. He also experiences a frustration common to many filmmakers when he tries to direct a video featuring a young fighter whose diffident, hip-hop-inflected performance style doesn't quite strike the right tone. "We're not doing, 'Yo, man,'" says the would-be auteur, "we're doing religion."

But the way he and his comrades do it is hardly a laughing matter. In the course of the film, a couple accused of adultery are stoned to death. Members of the Islamic Police storm a house where music is being played, and one of the musicians (a woman, of course) is publicly whipped for the crime. When a jihadist's offer of marriage is refused, he vows to take his would-be bride by force. When he does, the commanders inform the local imam that their interpretation of Muslim law is, by definition, the correct one. Might makes right, and the righteousness of the strong is an excuse for all kinds of indulgence.

Collectively, these warriors in the name of Allah are a bunch of bullies. They are indifferent to local customs and ignorant of many of the languages spoken by residents of Timbuktu, an ancient trading hub known for its cosmopolitanism. Individually, the fighters are

sometimes sadistic, sometimes weak, sometimes kind and frequently confused.

Showing them this way is not a matter of "humanizing" fanaticism, which is the kind of accusation that is often unthinkingly leveled at stories that veer away from presenting political conflict as a simple fight between good and evil. How could the bad guys be anything other than human? Their folly lies in the belief that they can transcend that condition and terrorize their fellow Muslims into holiness. They may be sincere in their devotion to their God and his prophet, but they are still jerks. "Timbuktu" is an act of resistance and revenge because it asserts the power of secularism not as an ideology but rather as a stubborn fact of life.

In that way, it is un peu Charlie Hebdo, though Mr. Sissako's sensibility is gentler, his satirical impulse less scabrous and his imagination more expansive than that shared by most of the magazine's cartoonists. There is a strong current of anger and disgust running through his film, which was inspired by the Islamist takeover of Timbuktu and other parts of northern Mali in 2012. With some adjustments, it could have been set in Syria, Iraq, Nigeria or Pakistan. But the glory of "Timbuktu" lies in its devotion to local knowledge, in the way it allows its gaze to wander away from violence toward images of beauty and grace.

Mr. Sissako's previous feature, "Bamako" (named for Mali's capital city), similarly embedded a political argument in a rich evocation of daily life. In that film, the main action is a surreal (but entirely earnest) trial of the institutions of neo-liberalism for crimes against Africa. But the story keeps wondering off into the streets of the city, taking refuge from abstraction in the pleasures and travails of everyday life.



The narrative of "Timbuktu" is a weave of anecdotes and subplots, but it returns frequently to the tent in the dusty hills outside the city where Kidane (Ibrahim Ahmed) lives with his wife, Satima (Toulou Kiki), and their daughter, Toya (Layla Walet Mohamed), tending cows and drinking tea. The presence of the heavily armed fanatics running Timbuktu sends a dispute involving Kidane and one of his neighbors spinning toward tragedy and horror, but Kidane is more than just an innocent victim, in just the way that Mr. Sissako's film is more than a simple polemic. He is a symbol of decency and tolerance, of everything the extremists want to destroy, precisely because he is an intriguing, fully rendered individual. And "Timbuktu" is a political film in the way that "The Bicycle Thief" or "Modern Times" is a political film: It feels at once timely and permanent, immediate and essential.

In Arabic, Bambara, English, French, Songhay and Tamasheq, with English subtitles.

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# GETT

## THE TRIAL OF VIVIANE AMSALEM

**Monday, May 11, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by Manohla Dargis - NYT Not Rated 115 Mins.*

The hypnotic “Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem” is the story of a woman wronged by men and God, if finally, in a sense, redeemed by cinema. Under Israeli law, a woman can be divorced only if her husband presents her with a religious bill of divorce called a gett (sometimes spelled get). No gett, no divorce. The long-suffering title character desperately wants to be free of her husband, who refuses to let her go. So year after year, Viviane pleads her case before a rabbinic court, waiting for her divorce as days slip into weeks and then months, her pacific face glazed with tears and her body occasionally rocked by a laugh tinged with knowing and madness.



Viviane — brought to powerful life by Ronit Elkabetz with currents of humility and hauteur — is at once a fleshed-out character, a political metaphor, a shout to heaven and earth. The movie’s title brings to mind all those novels named after their protagonists, especially women with tribulations (Jane Eyre, Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina), but the word trial also almost predictably suggests Franz Kafka. It soon becomes clear why. In Israel, all divorces and marriages, even secular ones, are under the power of rabbinic courts and therefore Orthodox Jewish law. A wife who doesn’t receive a gett from her husband becomes an “agunah” — chained or anchored woman. A husband can be chained, too, although this is apparently rarer.

Set in the present, “Gett” focuses on Viviane’s determined efforts to divorce her longtime husband, Elisha (Simon Abkarian), a pious man with whom she has had several children and an apparently unhappy life. As radical in its narrative conceit as it is in its secular politics, the movie takes place almost entirely inside a rabbinic court presided over by a nameless judge (Eli Gorstein) who is flanked by two others on a raised podium embellished only with an emblem of a menorah. These three bearded men in black suits and kipas stare down upon Viviane and her lawyer, Carmel (Menashe Noy), who are usually seated at a small, plain table next to a similarly humble table where Elisha is dolefully parked, sometimes with his brother and advocate, Shimon (Sasson Gabay).

Although Viviane and Elisha both periodically speak — mostly to their representation and to the judges, sometimes to each other, quietly slipping between Hebrew and French — much of the talking is done for them. “Gett” is a trial narrative complete with witness testimonies and periodic admonitions from the judge, but with little of the courtroom dramatics that characterize mainstream legal stories. Nothing if not dialectical, “Gett” instead unfolds as a debate about love, marriage and human rights that turns on personal stories and philosophical asides, arguments and counterarguments. As one witness after another testifies about Viviane and Elisha’s marriage, her virtue, his rectitude, it becomes clear that divorce here isn’t a personal choice, but a matter for God and a people.

This makes for gripping cinema from start to finish, almost implausibly so. “Gett” is the third movie featuring Viviane that Ms. Elkabetz has written and directed with her brother Shlomi Elkabetz, after “To Take a Wife” and “Shiva” a.k.a. “Seven Days,” and their work here is assured, streamlined and bold. As if to underscore the highly subjective quality of the storytelling in “Gett” (he said, she said, they said), the Elkabetzes use only point-of-view shots throughout, which tethers every image — of the judges, of Viviane’s legs, of Elisha’s profile — to the perspective of one of the characters. This concentrated focus underscores the personal stakes and torques the tension so that even the image of Viviane letting down her hair — and incurring the wrath of the court — becomes a tremulous action scene.

With her dramatically pale face framed by a voluptuous dark cloud of hair, Ms. Elkabetz is never more effective than when she’s holding still, her face so drained of emotion that it transforms into a screen within the screen on which another, indelibly private movie is playing. This stillness can be transfixing in close-up because the human face remains one of cinema’s great landscapes even if our screens are cluttered with banally framed head-and-shoulder shots. There’s nothing indifferent about the human face here, especially Viviane’s. That’s why every so often the filmmakers fill the screen with her face, allowing you to traverse its planes and trace its lines and, in the process, discover a woman who — even as she has been denied her freedom — retains a stubborn, transcendent humanity.

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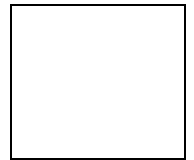
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# LEVIATHAN

"Haunting, sprawling. . .  
mammoth and muscular.."

*Guy Lodge - Hitflix*

Monday, April 13 at 7:30 pm

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"A mesmerizing mix of mood and tone".

*Manohla Dargis - New York Times*

Monday, April 27 at 7:30 pm

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# TIMBUKTU

"Expertly written and brilliantly acted."

*Jay Weissberg, Variety*

Monday, May 11 at 7:30 pm

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VIVIANE  
AMSALEM