When the Leviathan Devours

Law, Legitimacy, and the Experience of Sovereign Power

Garima Chahal

Abstract

This paper examines Andrey Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) through Thomas Hobbes's theory of sovereignty, asking what film can reveal about political power that political theory alone cannot fully capture. Hobbes conceptualizes the sovereign as an overwhelming but necessary authority capable of transforming insecurity and conflict into order. Zvyagintsev's film complicates this account by depicting a political system in which order and functioning institutions persist while protection, accountability, and justice collapse. Through its portrayal of bureaucratic legality, coercive state power, religious legitimation, dispossession, and the erosion of private life, Leviathan transforms sovereignty from an abstract political structure into a lived experience. Particular attention is given to the film's use of institutional ritual, landscape, silence, humiliation, and the recurring Leviathan imagery to communicate the emotional consequences of domination. The paper argues that when sovereign authority becomes fused with corruption and moral complicity, the Hobbesian protector can become a predator. Film therefore reveals how political power operates not only through institutions and law, but through emotion, dignity, identity, and the narrowing of possibilities for meaningful resistance.

Keywords

Sovereignty, State Power, Political Theory, *Leviathan* (2014), Authoritarianism

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Department of Communication, Media and Film

ISSN 2817-2051

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Introduction: Hobbes and Zvyagintsev's Leviathan

In Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), the state is imagined as an artificial sovereign that individuals create by surrendering part of their freedom in exchange for protection. Without a common authority capable of restraining conflict, Hobbes argues that life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (1651, p. 78). The Leviathan is immense and fearsome, but its power is justified because it prevents something worse: insecurity, violence, and unrestrained conflict. Absolute sovereignty, in this account, is not simply domination; it is a political solution to fear.

More than three centuries later, Andrey Zvyagintsev's film *Leviathan* (2014) revisits the metaphor from a radically different perspective. Set in a remote Russian coastal town, the film follows Kolya, a mechanic whose home is seized by a corrupt mayor through a legal system that remains procedurally orderly but substantively hollow. Courts issue judgments, police enforce decisions, and the clergy preach obedience, yet these institutions do not protect Kolya. Instead, they reinforce one another and become sites of humiliation and dispossession. Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* is therefore no longer Hobbes' (1651) abstract "mortal god" securing peace; it is an institutional apparatus capable of consuming ordinary lives while preserving the appearance of legitimacy.

This article examines how Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) transforms Hobbes' theoretical account of sovereignty into an experiential critique of political power. Both works are concerned with law, fear, authority, and the conditions under which obedience becomes politically intelligible. Hobbes explains why individuals may rationally authorize a sovereign; Zvyagintsev asks what that authority feels like from below when protection collapses into predation. Through mechanical legality, the seizure of private space, religious legitimation, visual metaphor, silence, and humiliation, the film demonstrates that domination can exist within order itself. It argues that sovereign power, when fused with corruption and moral complicity, can transform from guardian to devourer, revealing dimensions of political life that abstract theory alone cannot fully capture.

Law Without Justice: Sovereignty and Mechanical Legality

Hobbes grounds law's authority in the sovereign's power to settle disputes conclusively. In Chapter 20 of *Leviathan*, he writes that the sovereign "is the sole legislator" (Hobbes, 1651, p. 123). Subjects are bound by the sovereign's judgments because, without a final authority to resolve disputes, society risks returning to the conflict and insecurity that led to the creation of

the commonwealth. In this framework, law is not intended to sustain endless debate but to establish order by ensuring that disputes reach a final resolution.

Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) exposes how this logic can harden into mechanical domination when legality becomes indistinguishable from inevitability. The early courtroom scene (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 20:25) stages this transformation with unsettling precision. A judge reads the decision at extraordinary speed in a monotone voice devoid of deliberative pause. The performance of legality remains intact: there is a courtroom, a ruling, and procedural formality; yet the pace and tone eliminate any illusion of meaningful hearing. The decision feels predetermined, while Kolya's visible helplessness makes clear that law no longer resolves conflict so much as seals it. The same ritual reappears in the final judgment scene (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 2:07:19), reinforcing the sense that the legal process has become repetition rather than reconsideration.

The contrast with Hobbes is especially sharp because Hobbes treats enforcement as indispensable to political stability. As he insists in Chapter 17, "Covenants, without the sword, are but words" (Hobbes, 1651, p. 103). Zvyagintsev does not deny the power of the sword; he shows what happens when enforcement is detached from accountability. Kolya's wrongful detention (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 39:30) and the later accusation of murder without substantive investigation (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:57:53) reveal coercive power operating beneath procedural order. Even when Kolya's lawyer invokes Article 301 of the Russian Criminal Code to challenge unlawful detention (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 43:15), legal language has no practical effect. Law exists as text, but power determines its consequences.

The film therefore complicates legitimacy by showing that it can be performed rather than earned. Levitsky and Way (2010) describe competitive authoritarian systems as regimes in which formal democratic institutions remain meaningful arenas of contestation while incumbents systematically undermine their autonomy and fairness. Zvyagintsev's courtroom scenes dramatize a related political condition: legality remains visible in form even as its capacity to constrain power is hollowed out. The emotional consequence is suffocation rather than security. In contrast to Hobbes' promise that sovereign authority protects subjects from insecurity, *Leviathan* (2014) depicts a different insecurity rooted not in the absence of order but in the impossibility of meaningful appeal. Through monotony, speed, and silence, the film renders what

political theory can describe only abstractly: being ruled by law can feel less like protection than entrapment.

Sovereignty, Property, and the Politics of Dispossession

Thomas Hobbes constructs his defence of sovereignty from a stark diagnosis of human vulnerability. In Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, he describes a natural condition in which there is "no common power to keep them all in awe" and therefore, a "war as is of every man against every man" (Hobbes, 1651, p. 103). Human beings, motivated by fear of death and the desire for self-preservation, cannot rely on trust alone. The central political problem is insecurity; sovereignty is justified because it consolidates force and transforms insecurity into order.

Zvyagintsev's film reverses that promise. In *Leviathan* (2014), order exists, but protection does not. Courts, police, municipal authority, and the church continue to function; there is no civil war or visible collapse of governance. Yet for Kolya, sovereign power operates not as a contract that secures survival but as an extraction machine that slowly dismantles his life. The mayor gives this power a recognizable face. When he appears at Kolya's home and responds with, "Just all of this" (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 30:53), when asked whether what he wants is authority, sovereignty is stripped of abstraction. Authority is no longer coordinating public order; it is claiming territory.

The mayor's later declaration that Kolya "never had any rights, and never will" (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 33:11) exposes the fiction beneath legal language. Hobbes defends concentrated authority because division may return the commonwealth to conflict, but he theorizes sovereignty as an office directed toward political preservation rather than a personal vendetta. The mayor's authority, by contrast, is saturated with ego, resentment, and arbitrariness. His kidnapping of the Moscow lawyer (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:23:30) shows power extending beyond formal legality into intimidation. The visual framing of the mayor beneath a portrait of Vladimir Putin (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 43:24) further connects local domination to a wider architecture of authority. Security exists for those aligned with power, but not for citizens confronting it.

The political meaning of sovereignty becomes most concrete through control of space. Åslund (2019) argues that contemporary Russian governance is shaped by patronage networks in which state authority can serve elite extraction rather than institutional neutrality. Kolya's home embodies the human cost of such a structure. His house is not merely property; it contains

memory, inheritance, dignity, and identity. Hobbes (1651) famously argues that without sovereign authority, there can be "no mine and thine distinct" (p. 79). Sovereignty is supposed to stabilize possession by establishing enforceable rules of ownership. In Zvyagintsev's film, however, sovereignty destabilizes property. Kolya's home becomes contested territory subject to political calculation.

When the bulldozer demolishes the house (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 2:06:45), its mechanical arm resembles the head of a leviathan: enormous, impersonal, and devouring. The image links physical destruction to political abstraction. Sovereignty takes space and, in doing so, dismantles personhood. Kolya's dispossession is therefore economic and existential at once. Institutions remain intact, procedures are followed, and sermons are delivered, but the outcome is the erosion of home, dignity, and security. The film does not depict anarchy; it depicts structured domination. In this sense, Zvyagintsev challenges any easy assumption that centralized power necessarily produces protection. When private interests capture sovereign power and shield it with ritual legality, it does not eliminate insecurity; it reorganizes it.

Religion and the Moral Legitimation of Power

Hobbes is concerned not only with coercive unity but also with ideological unity. In Chapter 42 of *Leviathan*, ecclesiastical authority must ultimately remain subordinate to civil sovereignty so that competing sources of doctrine do not divide the commonwealth (Hobbes, 1651, pp. 337–343). For Hobbes, political stability requires more than force. It also requires control over rival claims to public authority and interpretation.

In Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014), religion does not merely submit to sovereignty; it helps sanctify it. As Hristova (2020) argues, corruption in the film is not confined to political officials but diffuses through social and religious institutions, creating a shared structure of culpability. The church therefore fails to function as a moral counterweight to the state. Instead, its authority participates in sustaining the legitimacy of political power.

This relationship appears early when the mayor dines with a priest beneath an image of the Last Supper (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 23:55). The composition places political and spiritual authority within the same symbolic frame. Later, during a private exchange (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:11:38), the priest advises the mayor on endurance and obedience while the camera lingers on an icon of Jesus. Religion does not interrogate power; it reassures it. The final church scene makes the alignment even more explicit. A new church stands where Kolya's home once stood,

and a sermon on truth and righteousness is delivered after his dispossession (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 2:13:53). The spatial symbolism is unmistakable: private life has been demolished, and public moral authority has been constructed upon its ruins.

Hypocrisy thus becomes a political technology. The mayor sins privately—threatening, bribing, and kidnapping—yet appears publicly as a benefactor of faith and community. Obedience is reframed as virtue. Hobbes' account ties legitimacy to the sovereign's role in securing peace; the film reveals an additional mechanism through which authority can sustain itself. Legitimacy may be manufactured through moral narration. When the priest invokes the Book of Job in speaking to Kolya (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:52:57), suffering is subtly reframed as part of a divine order. Political injury becomes fate rather than injustice.

Weber's (1922/1963) account of the "theodicy of suffering" helps clarify the force of this transformation: religious systems can provide moral explanations that make inequality appear meaningful rather than arbitrary. In *Leviathan* (2014), suffering is similarly recorded as a spiritual trial. The film suggests that sovereignty rules not only by fear; it also shapes meaning. Authority is narrated as necessary, suffering as ordained, and obedience as righteous. The result is a form of domination that becomes more complete when it acquires sacred language. Zvyagintsev's Leviathan does not always appear monstrous. It builds churches, sponsors sermons, and speaks of truth. Political power is sustained not only through the "sword" described by Hobbes (1651) but also through stories that make the sword appear righteous.

The Leviathan Reimagined: From Guardian to Devourer

The power of Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) lies not only in its depiction of corruption but also in its reclamation of Hobbes' central metaphor. In Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), the state is imagined as a colossal artificial being: terrifying in scale, yet necessary for peace (p. 7). The famous frontispiece depicts a crowned sovereign towering above the landscape and composed of countless individual bodies. Its magnitude is not intended as a threat to society but as its safeguard. Fear of one another is displaced by awe of a common power capable of maintaining peace.

Zvyagintsev reconfigures this image. His Leviathan is not an artificial unity visibly constructed through collective authorization; it is an institutional apparatus that appears ordinary, procedural, and normalized. There is no constant spectacle of centralized tyranny—only bureaucratic hearings, municipal meetings, police interventions, and Sunday sermons. That

ordinariness is precisely what makes the monster unsettling. Sovereignty is not exceptional; it is routine. Kolya does not primarily fear his neighbors. He fears the court, the police, the mayor, and the institutions ostensibly designed to guarantee security.

The film's recurring whale imagery sharpens the metaphor. The skeletal remains of a massive sea creature lie abandoned on the shoreline (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:35:10) —a silent monument to something once powerful and now hollow. Vassilieva (2018) argues that the film's political critique emerges through its aesthetics, particularly landscape, scale, and non-human imagery. Read through Hobbes (1651), the skeleton becomes especially suggestive. Unlike Hobbes's living Leviathan—vibrant, unified, and purposeful—Zvyagintsev's leviathan is dead matter. It no longer protects; it decays. The skeleton evokes the remains of a political promise whose animating principle has disappeared.

Sovereign power in the film devours through procedure rather than spectacular violence. Hobbes defends concentrated force as the condition of peace: better the awe of one sovereign than the war of all. In *Leviathan* (2014), however, fear of the state no longer resolves insecurity; it becomes a source of insecurity. Marriage collapses, dignity erodes, and a child loses his home not because authority is absent but because it is overwhelming. Hobbes's Leviathan is terrifying so that society need not be. Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* is terrifying precisely because society appears stable. The film transforms the protective monster into a devouring one, showing that centralized power, when detached from genuine protection, does not dissolve insecurity; it reorganizes it.

The Lived Experience of Sovereign Power

Hobbes (1651) provides a structural account of sovereignty. He explains why power must be organized, how fear motivates obedience, and why centralized authority can prevent civil war. His argument operates principally at the level of political architecture: it explains what the sovereign does within a commonwealth. Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) supplies another dimension. Through humiliation, silence, emotional collapse, and the erosion of private life, the film renders sovereignty not merely as an institutional structure but as a lived climate.

Humiliation is central to this experience. Kolya is not publicly executed or spectacularly punished; he is gradually diminished. Court rulings strip him of legal agency, while the collapse of his personal relationships strips him of social and emotional stability. When Lilya's affair becomes public (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:10:50), the injury is not merely marital; it compounds a

wider loss of dignity and standing. Political power manifests not only through court documents and police authority but also through embarrassment, silence, and the narrowing of choices. Humiliation is therefore not incidental to domination; it becomes one of its lived effects.

The atmosphere of hopelessness further reveals what abstract theory struggles to convey. Resistance remains technically possible: Kolya hires a lawyer, appeals rulings, and argues his case. Yet every effort feels futile. Arendt (1973) associates domination with the destruction of meaningful political action rather than the simple removal of formal rights. Kolya's predicament reflects that erosion of agency. Legal procedures repeat, but they do not open genuine possibilities. Long shots of gray coastlines, abandoned structures, and the skeletal whale (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:30:00) place human struggle within an indifferent landscape. The state does not rage; it persists. Domination is not explosive; it is enduring.

The collapse of private life shows how deeply politics penetrates the personal. Kolya's increasing reliance on alcohol, visible from early in the film and recurring throughout, signals more than coping; it suggests bodily surrender to sustained political injury. The breaking point arrives not in rebellion but in implosion. Lilya's death and Roma's isolation expose how power reorganizes family bonds and emotional stability. Politics invades kitchens, bedrooms, friendships, and memory. The destruction of Kolya's house mirrors the destruction of his relationships: sovereignty does not merely adjudicate property; it reorganizes intimacy.

Equally significant is the film's use of silence. Political theory often proceeds through declarations, concepts, and arguments; *Leviathan* communicates power through pauses, empty rooms, landscapes, and glances. The scene in which Kolya throws a glass against the wall, only for it not to shatter (Zvyagintsev, 2014, 1:45:00), captures the futility of defiance without requiring a manifesto or ideological debate. Domination is expressed through stalled motion and suppressed speech. Power no longer needs constant verbal assertion once its limits have been internalized. In this way, Zvyagintsev translates abstract sovereignty into embodied despair. Political authority is experienced not only through laws and institutions but through emotion, humiliation, and the slow narrowing of possibility.

Conclusion

Thomas Hobbes (1651) constructs the *Leviathan* as a political solution to fear. In a world threatened by insecurity and mutual violence, individuals authorize a sovereign whose overwhelming power replaces chaos with order. Fear is redirected toward a common authority,

and that fear becomes stabilizing because the sovereign protects life, secures property, and prevents the return of civil conflict. Absolute power may be unsettling, but its legitimacy rests on the protection it provides.

Zvyagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) reopens that argument from within everyday political life. The film does not depict anarchy or institutional collapse. Courts continue to operate, police continue to enforce, clergy continue to preach, and public authority retains its rituals. Order exists, yet protection does not. Through bureaucratic inevitability, dispossession, religious legitimation, humiliation, and the erosion of private life, sovereignty becomes an instrument not of preservation but of predation. Law remains procedural while justice disappears; stability remains visible while dignity collapses.

While political theory is explained abstractly, film renders it experientially. Hobbes theorizes the state as a structure of authority designed to contain fear; Zvyagintsev shows how that same structure can generate a subtler and more suffocating insecurity when protection becomes hollow. Domination need not appear chaotic to be devastating. It can operate through legality, ritual, moral narrative, and routine governance, gradually colonizing the home, the body, and the imagination. Politics, in this sense, is not confined to institutions; it becomes a lived climate. From Hobbes, the Leviathan organizes fear in the service of peace. From Zvyagintsev, the Leviathan survives by organizing fear in the service of power.

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