FROM POST-SOVIET TO POST-NATIONAL: DOMESTIC SPACE AS NON-PLACE IN ANDREI ZVIAGINTSEV’S ELENA AND LEVIATHAN

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Summary

In this article two films directed by Andrei Zviagintsev, Elena (2011) and Leviathan (2014), are compared and contrasted from the point of view of Marc Augé’s concept of place and non-place. Although these two films differ in specific details, similarities exist at several levels which are frequently linked with the theme of domestic space. Both films utilise similar framing techniques which place the respective main domestic spaces at the structural and thematic forefront of each plot. Both films employ a binary locational symmetry: while Elena juxtaposes a Soviet-era apartment with a modern luxury apartment, Leviathan operates with a single domestic space which stands opposed to the world outside and is, ultimately, destroyed by it. In each film the main domestic space is usurped by nefarious and dishonest means, in Elena by the murder of Vladimir by the eponymous heroine who thereafter brings her family to live in the new apartment, and in Leviathan by the scheming mayor who, it is assumed, murders Nikolai’s wife and destroys his house for the purposes of building a new church. The ultimate casualty in both films is moral truth which finds its perfect setting in the modern world of non-place.

Key Words: Post-Soviet Russia; National Identity; Domestic Space; Non-place; Elena; Leviathan; Andrey Zvyagintsev; Marc Augé.
Introduction

In this article, two of Andrei Zviagintsev’s feature films, *Elena* (2011) and *Leviathan* (2014), are compared and contrasted largely though the thematic prism of domestic space. Although these films have significant differences in terms of plot, setting and structure, it is argued here that their wider thematic meaning is to be found in the concept of *place* and *non-place* (with particular reference to the work of Marc Augé (2008)), especially in its function of ironic subversion of the more obvious and expected messages carried in the surface structure of these films. Though, clearly, there are differences between the two films, it is also evident that both films concentrate, even from the point of view of plot alone, on the theme of domestic space. This is immediately apparent from the respective opening and closing frame shots in both films (the modern apartment in *Elena*, the site of Nikolai’s house in *Leviathan*), as well as the central structural and thematic importance of domestic spaces in both films (the two main apartments in *Elena*, Nikolai’s house (and its location) in *Leviathan*).

_Elena_ was the winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2011. It was met with generally good critical acclaim at the Festival and in the media upon its release later that year. While a taut screenplay, good acting, intelligent cinematography and the music of Philip Glass accounted for much of that positive appraisal, the film also operates at a more complex level: ostensibly a film whose main storyline involves one family’s upwardly-mobile move from a shabby, Soviet-era flat to a chic and spacious city apartment through the deadly machinations of the central and eponymous protagonist, Elena, this rather ‘idealistic’ surface plot is, as will be shown here, negated by an implicit and subtle irony involving the two main living spaces of the film.

_Leviathan_ was released in 2014 to generally very positive acclaim, both by critics and at various film festivals. For example, Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*, in a glowing appraisal, awarded it the maximum five stars; it was selected to compete for the ‘Palme d’Or’ in the Competition at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, it won the best film of the year at the 2014 London Film Festival and was nominated for (but did not win) an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film at the 87th Academy Awards. In Russia itself, the film has attracted both positive and negative critical responses, though, as Fedorov (2017) makes clear, such reactions are generally dependent on the respective political views of critics: more conservative views have tended towards a more hostile reception of the film, something heightened by the fact that the film received state funding, yet proceeded to ‘bite the hand that feeds’, while more liberal views have taken a rather macabre pleasure in the pessimistic picture of Russia, depicted so masterfully by Zviagintsev and his impressive cast of actors.

It will be argued here that, while the concept of home may be defined as private and personal, as opposed to public and impersonal, the domestic space in these two films, far from being a comforting and reassuring destination in itself, can be read as liminal (Thomassen 2006, 322), as transitory, as a space ‘in-between’ or, indeed, a space which, ideally, should be a sanctuary, but which is, in fact, vulnerable to external forces. This paper will, therefore, examine these two films in the light of Augé’s (2008) seminal work, _Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity_, in particular the extent to which his theory of _non-places_ may, in certain instances in this supermodern globalised world, be as applicable to the domestic space as it is to the increasingly ubiquitous public spaces of airports, hotels, shopping centres and other typical _non-places_.

Augé (2008, 63) defines _place_ as ‘relational, historical and concerned with identity’. It stands
to reason, therefore, that he should define *non-place* as ‘a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity’. He hastens to point out, however, that the distinction between *place* and *non-place* is not to be imagined as a mutually exclusive binary opposition:

[The *non-place*] never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it […]. Place and *non-place* are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly written. (Augé 2008, 64)

Indeed, as will be argued in this paper in relation to the domestic space: ‘The possibility of *non-place* is never absent from any place’ (Augé 2008, 86).

**Analysis**

**1.1. Plot structure**

Both *Elena* and *Leviathan* open and close with shots of domestic spaces taken from the exterior. Both films, therefore, operate with similar framing techniques which place the respective domestic spaces of each film in the central thematic position.

*Elena* opens with a striking and lengthy shot of Vladimir’s modern apartment as it awakens at dawn through the branches of a leafless tree and the rather sinister cawing of a crow. No human voice is heard for several minutes, even when the camera enters the apartment; language is absent. The living space – both this particular apartment as well as the motif of living space – thus appears as the central element from the very outset. The location for the setting is unknown. The apartment could be located in any city in Russia, indeed anywhere at all. There is no explicit mention during the entire film about its actual location, i.e. either what town or country it is set in. This universal quality of the apartment is also important. Its international appeal and amenity make it all the more characteristic of a *non-place*, and indeed we find ourselves ‘in a world where there is no longer an elsewhere’ (Augé 2008, xxii). We are not in some culturally specific Russian space in this apartment, making it all the more appealing for Elena’s family seeking to escape the confines of their cramped and typically (culturally specific) Soviet apartment, and, at the same time, seeking to escape the legacy of the nation’s past.

*Leviathan* also uses a framing technique which employs the central domestic space in the film, Nikolai’s house, or, at least, its site, since, at the film’s end, the house itself will be destroyed and replaced by an Orthodox church. At the film’s opening the camera first explores the harsh north-Russian environment, in particular the sea, before concentrating on the house itself. As in *Elena*, the scene takes place in the early hours of morning just before dawn, and the house is thus depicted in semi-darkness and without dialogue: human existence is secondary to nature, it is enveloped by it both physically and temporally. In this way, the domestic space itself features as the key element in the film, filtered from the vast world outside and containing human lives within itself. At the same time, however, the somewhat unstable aspect of Nikolai’s home becomes clear: it has no fence nor clear boundaries, it stands on a slope within a harsh environment (as shown in the opening frames of the film) and the first detectable human action involves a departure in a car by an as yet unknown person. Indeed, in the course of the film the constant arrivals and departures from Nikolai’s house serve to develop further the sense of transience and instability which characterise the house. Though it is a domestic space, from the outset its fragility is apparent both from its physical location in a
harsh environment and the sense of movement away from it, and, therefore, its status as place is constantly under threat. As the film progresses, there is an increasingly clear motif of the corrupting influence of the wider space (society/state) on the micro-space of domesticity (home) and the lives it contains.

Both the plot and locational structure of Elena are strikingly symmetrical as each of them is determined by the two living spaces (the apartments) which bind the eponymous heroine Elena to them psychologically and physically. Elena is, in fact, the central link in both plot and location. The two apartments establish and develop the central theme of the film, namely the question of Russia’s past and future identity (with the present an apparently perpetual liminal space of its own), the old and new, Soviet and Post-Soviet. The depiction of two apartments from different historical periods is representative of the linear progression of Russian history, yet, at the same time, this progression is caught in the particular Bakhtinian ‘time-space warp’ of the film, Soviet and modern, as it were, juxtaposed both temporally and physically. Both the atmosphere of the Soviet-era apartment and the displaced ‘universality’ of the modern apartment show two aspects of non-place respectively: non-place as both physically and aesthetically alienating living-space. The film explores contemporary identity by using the embodiment of the past (the older apartment) within the present time-space. As Augé observes, ‘individual and collective identity is always constructed in relation to and in negotiation with otherness’ (Augé 2008, ix), the latter here represented by the older apartment.

In Leviathan the plot itself is set in motion and resolved by the domestic space itself, in particular, the efforts – ultimately successful – of the corrupt mayor to exploit Nikolai by purchasing his house for less than its actual value and building a church on the site. This is done in collusion with the rather venal, not to mention, unethical bishop. Although, at the very beginning of the film, this is not yet clear to the audience, the initial car journey from and back to the house results directly from it. Nikolai is, in fact, driving to the local railway station to pick up an old friend who now works as a lawyer in Moscow and will be able to aid him in his bid to resist the mayor’s (Vadim Sergeevich Sheleviat) efforts to oust him from his home and leave him with only a portion of the money he would receive for the house if he chose to sell it under normal circumstances. From the outset, therefore, the already rather delicate balance of family and domestic space is undermined by the exterior non-place, i.e. the state or the ‘Leviathan’ in the persona of the mayor, since Nikolai’s fractured family consists, in fact, of his son, Roman, and the boy’s stepmother, i.e. his second wife. Space within any state (or Hobbesian ‘Leviathan’) cannot be hermetically sealed, and the corrosive influence from the outer circle seeps into the interior spaces of domesticity, ironically here, in the person of Dmitry, i.e. Nikolai’s friend.

1.2. Domestic spaces from within and without

At the start of Elena, after the exterior shot of Vladimir’s apartment, the camera moves from exterior to interior, and the humans who inhabit the apartment, Elena and her husband Vladimir, take second stage to the spacious apartment itself through which the camera is free to move and linger as it chooses. Again, therefore, it is the living space which dominates thematically. The series of long shots that serve to showcase the modern apartment, much like a feature article in the pages of Vogue Living magazine, resemble a still-life – aesthetically beautiful and yet seemingly impossible to live in, highlighted by the absence of any dialogue initially and the sense of the characters being almost strangers to themselves and their environment. The way the apartment is shot reflects ‘the spatial overabundance of the present’ (Augé 2008, 28), with the non-places of
Augé’s *supermodern* world characteristically large in scale, dwarfing the human subject, and ensuring that ‘the dominant aesthetic is that of the cinematic longshot’ (Augé 2008, xiii). This is the postscript to Soviet culture then, a curiously vapid, yet comfortable world, where everything appears to be in place, but lacks any defining sense of realness.

At this opening juncture of the film we now see the early morning routine of Elena and her husband Vladimir, who, as we shall learn later, has been married before, though, as with Nikolai in *Leviathan*, his former wife is barely mentioned in the film. Even without this knowledge, however, the strained, formal and artificial character of their marriage is apparent. All this is played out in the large, spacious and modern apartment that the wealthy Vladimir has acquired through his business interests. After an initial longshot of Elena’s (separate) bedroom, we are presented with a fragmented and fractured image of the protagonist looking at herself in the mirror, brushing her hair in a repetitive and despondent fashion. The image is reminiscent of François Truffaut’s Antoine Doinel in his mother’s bedroom in *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*) (1959) – another depiction of a protagonist who finds himself in a space in which he does not belong and who resorts to crime in order to escape his domestic and social predicament and find his own identity. The (extensive) space of the modern apartment may well be universal in its appeal, but just as apparent is Elena’s isolation in it, both within and beyond the confines of her marriage. As Augé puts it: ‘The current globality consists of networks that produce both homogenization and exclusion.’ (Augé 2008, ix) Elena is alone both in her marriage and in the modern world. Her physical appearance, middle-aged and thick-set with the requisite headscarf tied under her chin, suggests Soviet Russia, leaving Elena cutting a somewhat anachronistic figure in ‘a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality’ (Augé 2008, 63).

Elena moves slowly through the house, opening doors with a sound which increasingly seems to suggest the heavy sound of a tomb being opened – important later when the reverse sound, the door to Vladimir’s bedroom being closed, signals his imminent demise after he is poisoned and his apartment becomes his tomb. The irony is increased by the fact that Elena is his personal carer and a nurse by profession. The wide space and lack of (human) movement which the apartment is able to give to the camera is utilised to the maximum: as Vladimir and Elena have breakfast together, the camera is able to take in with ease the entire length of the table at whose opposite ends they sit. The viewer is acutely aware of the magnitude of the space that separates the two characters. The composition of the shot places an empty chair in the centre of the frame, once again reminiscent of Truffaut’s landmark film (1959), except that in this instance the protagonist occupying the chair is not the young Antoine Doinel, but rather the ‘spatial overabundance’ (Augé 2008, 28) that characterises the *non-place* in which the couple lives. Indeed, the fact that the camera is able to rest and take in the scene without movement highlights even more acutely the tense and unnatural tone of their dialogue (which now finally begins, albeit in rather cold and terse conversation) and their slight movements and gestures.

The intention of this opening scene is ironic: the modern, chic apartment, appearing at dawn from the city gloom as if the harbinger of a better future, is not a home to its two inhabitants; rather, it represents a *non-place* for them as they live out their dysfunctional lives and marriage within it. The marriage is essentially a sham, a convenience for both Vladimir and Elena. The fragile dysfunctional balance is only disturbed when Elena attempts to extend the significance of their union to her own family. Then it becomes apparent the extent to which her marriage is a fantasy, sustained by the apartment in which she appears to be more of a maid and a nurse than a wife, living in her own quarters and performing her housekeeping tasks diligently and perfunctorily. What should be a triumphant movement up the social scale for her through the economic benefits of her marriage thus
becomes like ‘[c]ertain places [that] exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense they are non-places, or rather, imaginary places: banal utopias, clichés’ (Augé 2008, 77).

The rendering of Elena’s domestic space as a non-place is further evidenced by the juxtaposition of the scene involving her pottering in the kitchen with the shot of her standing immediately afterwards in the lift lobby outside the apartment. The décor is almost identical – modern, aesthetically pleasing and yet lifeless. Likewise, once she finds herself downstairs in the street, the streetscape appears just as universal, soulless and artificial. This exterior scene is reminiscent of Jacques Tati’s 1967 film Playtime, for which Tati constructed an entire cityscape of homogenised modern buildings architecturally designed and engineered for a promising future, and yet assuring a dehumanising and unsettling present. When Elena boards the tram and then the train to visit Sergei and his family, we are in an even more universal and familiar non-place, sitting in silence with our physically and emotionally isolated protagonist whose constant movement between her two worlds betrays her stagnation: ‘The traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of non-place’ (Augé 2008, 70). It is interesting to note that the other archetypal non-places in the film also play similar roles: as Vladimir drives to the fitness centre in his plush car, he is strangely unable to tune the radio to any station which suits him – indeed, the impression is almost one of a man who owns a manifestly underused car. The outside world which he sees populated with ordinary working people and pedestrians is hermetically sealed from him just as the only audible sounds we can hear come from within the car. The fitness centre, though by no means empty, almost becomes the scene of his death as he suffers a heart attack while swimming, then flounders and floats on the surface of the water unnoticed for several moments before he is rescued. Finally, the hospital where he is brought back to health has as its longest scene the dialogue between Vladimir and his adult daughter, a scene which makes clear the dysfunctional relationship between them and the almost nihilistic level of cynicism which has become the norm for his daughter. All these locations add to the general sense of unease and displacement which the characters of the film exhibit to some degree.

In order to reach Sergei’s Soviet-era flat, Elena must traverse what can only be described as a no man’s land flanked by forest on the one hand and the towering presence of Soviet-era power installations on the other. The distance between the two apartments is clearly more than geographical. The contrast with Vladimir’s apartment could not be greater: as Elena leaves Vladimir’s building, she is given a polite greeting from the concierge on the ground floor, whereas upon arriving at Sergei’s dilapidated, Soviet-era block of flats she is greeted by a rather intimidating group of youths, the same youths who will later be involved in a gang fight of extreme violence with Sergei’s son Alexander in their midst. The framing technique employed in the film plays a key role in this respect, since the opening scenes of the film deliberately cause the viewer’s eye to become gradually accustomed to both the spacious and luxurious interior of Vladimir’s modern flat, as well as the almost indolent pace of the action and movement of the protagonists. The shock is, therefore, all the greater as the journey takes the viewer progressively back into a different time-space dimension characterised by one of the quintessential images of communist-era East European life, the apartment. The director in no way mitigates the force of this effect, choosing rather to highlight the sense of incarceration by portraying Sergei framed, a solitary figure, on the middle balcony of a dilapidated block of flats. This is surely one of the most striking images in the film: as Elena approaches the apartment of her son on foot, we are presented with a medium shot of Sergei himself as he stands perfectly centred in the middle balcony of the apartment block, an image where geometry and culture intersect – humankind framed and defined by its living spaces with the historical context (here Soviet) also present. Sergei is smoking and lets fall from his lips a ball of spit which he watches fall to the ground some distance below. Just as the film’s opening scene makes it
clear that we are dealing first and foremost with the theme of living spaces and their relation to human life, so here too we see the human race defined and contained by its living space. The descent of the ball of spit is determined by gravity as much as the life of this particular man is confined by the non-place he is forced to inhabit. As Augé observes: ‘What he is confronted with, finally, is an image of himself […]. The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude’ (Augé 2008, 83).

Once the camera enters the apartment which belongs to Sergei and his wife Tanya, the cramped and stifling living conditions come to the fore and stand in direct contrast with the preceding scenes in the film. Whereas in Vladimir’s apartment the camera has had the space to roam freely and rest on objects without inhibition, in Tanya and Sergei’s apartment the camera cannot find the space to rest on anything, confined as it is by the cramped conditions and the people living there. There is an irony to this also: while the modern apartment certainly provides space and comfort, the camera is static, reflecting a curious lack of movement and dynamism on the part of the protagonists who live in it. Although the camera, like the people who live here, has the freedom to roam and explore uninhibited by spatial restrictions, its movements are slow and unadventurous. By contrast, the restricted and somewhat squalid apartment of Sergei and Tanya results in a constant fluidity of camera movement, occasioned, of course, by the need to move in order to capture the protagonists, but, nevertheless, giving a sense of motion and life in comparison to the first apartment.

In a curious way, however, the atmosphere in Sergei and Tanya’s confined apartment is more life-affirming than in Vladimir’s apartment. Although Sergei and his son continue to play on the computer in spite of Elena’s arrival and Tanya’s pleading for them to join them in the kitchen, the overall impression is of a family with at least some degree of interaction, though, of course, the close physical living conditions enforce that to some degree. Nevertheless, in this apartment, just as in Vladimir’s, we are within the realm of the non-place again: the thudding sounds of the computer game echoing through the other rooms of the apartment are akin to the almost lifeless sounds of the televisions in Vladimir’s apartment which are de rigueur switched on every waking hour of the day (and night). The squalor of Sergei’s apartment block is clearly instrumental in moulding the identity of Sergei’s son Alexander who, towards the end of the film, is involved in a violent fight with another gang living on the same estate for no apparent reason: domestic non-places lead to non-reason and to non-lives, and, ultimately, to where truth is turned on its head. The involvement of Sergei’s son with the gang is perhaps indicative of the struggle for identity experienced by all of Elena’s family. Just as the young male seeks to have his identity bolstered by involvement with a group of equally lost and misguided delinquents, so too does Elena’s family’s rise – through social aspiration at all costs – seem to fall in line with Augé’s observation that: ‘The temptation to narcissism is all the more seductive […] in that it seems to express the common law: do as others do to be yourself’ (Augé 2008, 85).

Leviathan, as pointed out above, has a different locational symmetry from Elena, with only one main domestic space against which the outside world (in the form of the local town) is juxtaposed. Nevertheless, there are some striking parallels between the physical roles of the domestic spaces in the two films. In Leviathan, in addition to the fragility of Nikolai’s domestic space in terms of the composition of the people living there (mentioned above), the physical features of his home also contribute to its sense of liminality. In particular, its lack of fencing or other boundaries, its position on a slope and its proximity to the river and a bridge give it a sense of unsettledness. Indeed, on multiple occasions in the film, the exterior of the house is presented in connection with the arrival or departure of cars. The first view of the house at dawn involves the silent departure of the main protagonist, Nikolai, and the film’s conclusion shows a cortege of cars
leaving the site of the newly built church and proceeding across the bridge. In one of the earliest scenes in the film, Liliya waters her plants and does her make-up in the gaze of the traffic officer who waits below for Nikolai to arrive home. Indeed, one of the main features of the house is the large amount of windows which make the interior highly visible from the exterior, thereby heightening the foreboding sense of vulnerability, both in terms of the house’s physical structure (threatened with demolition) and the fragile structure of the family living within it – a second marriage undermined by adultery and a recalcitrant son, as well as by external pressures exerted by the invasive, destabilising forces of a corrupt State.

Although it is underplayed at the film’s beginning, one of the most direct effects of the mayor’s actions is the arrival of Dmitry and his essentially intrusive presence in what is already a somewhat strained domestic situation. The erosion of Nikolai’s domestic space thus begins both at the macro and micro level. Liliya, it soon becomes clear, is Nikolai’s second wife and, therefore, the stepmother of Roman. In a tense early scene, Roman refuses to greet his stepmother with a ‘good morning’, prompting a stern rebuke from her, and in turn the comment ‘She’s not my mother’ (‘Нематьонамнел’) and a slap on the head from his father when he arrives back home with Dmitry. As the plot progresses, Dmitry undermines and ultimately destroys Nikolai’s marriage by sleeping with Liliya. This in turn leads to Nikolai’s demise at the macro level by giving the mayor the perfect motive for framing Nikolai for his wife’s murder, i.e. Nikolai’s threat to kill her in earshot of other characters at the picnic, as well as the (quasi-) rape of his own wife which gives the police the evidence for the purported rape and murder. The macro non-space leads directly into the already fragile domestic space, destroying the latter space in every possible way, ultimately even quite literally by a wrecking machine as its metal arm pulls the house to pieces. Interestingly, in an early scene, when the mayor arrives uninvited at Nikolai’s house in order to intimidate him, Nikolai prophetically refers to his car as a ‘hearse’ (‘катафалк’): in virtually the final scene of the film, a cortege of such ‘official’ black cars is shown crossing the bridge at the site of Nikolai’s former house, an image rich in irony and allusion.

The fragility of Nikolai’s domestic space and the intrusion of the exterior non-place is well illustrated some 26 minutes into the film when Nikolai and Dmitry drink vodka and the former shows his friend a photo of the house dating back many years. ‘Here is my entire life’ (‘Здесьвсемояжизнь’) he says, before first Liliya cuts him short in a rather patronising manner, and then the mayor with his thugs appears on his property, drunk, abusive and threatening. It seems that even the smallest attempt to explain the sense of place which he feels with his own domestic space is misunderstood, while, at the same time, the actual domestic space is already in the process of being taken from him. The next day the two friends drive into town to hear the court decision in their case as they vow to ‘fight the entire town’ (‘со всемгородомвоевать’), as Liliya later puts it. In one of the most striking scenes of the film, the essential dysfunctionality of the world at large is laid bare as the court’s decision is read out by a clerk of the court at great length and at breakneck speed – the only pauses taken are literally to take breath. The language of the state becomes non-language, it loses all meaning and connectedness with its surroundings by its uncompromising refusal to engage in normal human communication. As the state becomes a monstrous leviathan, a monster crushing everything in its path, language becomes a hideous travesty of its own true essence, little more than an automated text. This linguistic dysfunctionality is then mirrored by actual dysfunctionality of Kafkaesque proportions, as Dmitry searches through the legal institutions of the town to find anyone in a position of authority, only to be told that there is ‘no one’ (‘Нетуникого’).
1.3. Intrusion and seizure

Both Elena and Leviathan close with images of usurped domestic spaces: in the former, the apartment is shown from the exterior with Sergei and his family now comfortably ensconced in what was formerly Vladimir’s apartment, but who has been murdered on account of the property itself. In the latter, the penultimate closing shot, i.e. before that of the surrounding seascape, is of a newly built church on the site of Nikolai’s former house. In both cases, the finality and irrevocability of injustice and untruth appear unshakeable.

After Elena has murdered Vladimir and taken the required amount of money to her son, the film Elena concludes with the ‘invasion’ of Elena’s relatives (Sergei and his family) into the late Vladimir’s flat, ostensibly on a permanent basis. One of the final images is that of Sergei and Tania’s youngest child, the baby. While in the cramped conditions of their flat, the baby is never seen alone, but is constantly held by either the mother or grandmother (Elena). With the move of Sergei’s family to Vladimir’s spacious apartment we see the rather disturbing image of the baby placed alone in a bedroom, suggesting the overriding irony – that while living conditions here are vastly superior, there is also moral emptiness: the cuckoo has taken over the nest, but the nest determines lives and it will not bring to this invader any more joy than it did to the rightful owner. It also reiterates the ironic fact already mentioned that, notwithstanding the more difficult living conditions in Sergei and Tanya’s apartment, the latter is nevertheless more full of vitality than the more luxurious apartment of Vladimir.

Prior to this scene, the film explores the question of Elena’s feelings of guilt as she travels from her own apartment to that of her son’s in order to deliver the ill begotten money; the train journey, in particular, concentrates on the question of Elena’s conscience even though it is done almost entirely without dialogue. For much of the journey Elena herself is depicted in close-up, her facial and hand movements betraying her sense of tension as the police stop the train before allowing it to move on again. In truth, it is perhaps not so much Elena’s conscience which is troubled as the possibility of being arrested by the police, and it is this which momentarily changes the tenor of the film to one of a thriller. However, as the train moves off again after its brief stop, our attention is drawn by the comment ‘Look!’ of some other passengers and the shift of the camera to a horse which has fallen and apparently died or, perhaps, been struck down, near the railway crossing through which the train on which Elena is travelling passes. The image of the horse, coupled with the preceding sense of impending doom as a result of the murder committed, is obliquely, but unquestionably connected with Dostoevsky, in particular Crime and Punishment, in Part 1 Chapter 5 of which Raskolnikov dreams of a mare being battered to death by a group of peasants. While the actual details differ in many essentials – the dream in Dostoevsky’s novel occurs before the crime and acts more as a stimulus to the crime than as an examination of Raskolnikov’s guilty conscience – (see, for example, Shaw 1973, 135-136, and Snodgrass 1960, 232-233), the scene in Elena serves to link Elena herself psychologically and morally with Raskolnikov in the Russian tradition and is certainly Dostoevskian in its tenor and its treatment of crime and conscience in an urban setting. However, the inevitable conclusion to be drawn from the film Elena is that the immoral act of murdering the innocent horse (i.e. Vladimir) plays a limited role in comparison to the drawn-out drama of Raskolnikov’s battle with his own conscience: by the time Elena reaches the apartment of Sergei and Tanya her struggle appears to be over, as does the threat of any legal consequences. Just as traditional place becomes non-place in Elena, so traditional right and wrong become intertwined and ultimately vapid and meaningless in supermodernity. A similar distortion of...
truth and morality is seen in the closing scenes of *Leviathan*, as shown below.

Just as the film opened to the lifeless awakening of Vladimir and Elena as their day begins, so at the film’s end – the closing of the frame – the camera draws away after showing the vacuous scene of the new inhabitants making themselves comfortable and Sergei settling down to television and a bowl of snacks. From non-place 1 to non-place 2, the migration appears complete. The final shot of the film, the closing frame as it were, takes us back out of the domestic space that Elena’s family has claimed for itself and shows the apartment from a distance, perhaps yet another suggestion that this is simply another further evolution in a transitory existence, and that ultimately it is the space itself that will most likely outlast and outlive its inhabitants as they pursue a universal goal of social aspiration through the acquisition of increasingly desirable living space: ‘A movement whose only end [is] itself’ (Augé 2008, 71), where people are as much in transit in their domestic space as they are, increasingly, in the ever more prominent non-places of shopping malls, airports and hotels. Augé also reaches the potentially disturbing conclusion that ‘in the world of supermodernity people are always, and never, at home’ (Augé 2008, 87).

As shown above, *Leviathan* has a different binary symmetry from *Elena*, insofar as the main domestic space, Nikolai’s house, is not juxtaposed with another domestic space, but is vulnerable to corruption from the world outside. This liminality and vulnerability to what lies outside reaches its climax at the end of the film as the wrecking machine reaches, claw-like, into the house, knocking over the furniture and destroying the windows as it does so, the exterior non-space now entering and enveloping the private domestic space. The innovation of the filming of this scene of destruction from within the home reinforces, with powerful and dramatic effect, the sense of invasion of personal and domestic space. Building demolitions are typically filmed from a safe distance, suggesting an efficient, clinical operation in which safety is paramount, and from which the onlooker remains at a reassuring physical and psychological distance. To witness the physical destruction of the family’s domestic space from within generates an almost unbearably unnerving effect on the viewer. The fact that the house has evidently not been emptied of furniture nor of the family’s belongings prior to the demolition adds to the sense of violation of the family’s living space. The subjective vulnerability of the viewpoint imposed by the filming of the destruction from within, and the immediacy of the act committed without due preparation of the space, represents a clear lack of consent on the part of the family whose home is being destroyed. This invasion and violation of clearly-marked and unprepared domestic space is tantamount to a rape of that space as well as to its murder, in effect, therefore, a metaphor for what has now occurred in Nikolai’s personal life.

The use of the symbolic figure of the dead whale is reminiscent of the scene of the beaching of a monstrous sea creature at the conclusion of Federico Fellini’s *La dolce vita* (1960). The creature, or at least its carcass (in fact, it is not clear if the creature is still alive or already dead), in Fellini’s film can be seen to represent the corruption of the protagonist Marcellio’s (Marcello Mastroianni) ultimately unsatisfying unabashed hedonism of his party-going jet-set lifestyle, especially when contrasted with the purity of the image of the Umbrian angel Paola in the very last shot of the film, from whom Marcellio bids an unconvincing and rather pathetic farewell as he resigns himself to a meaningless and apparently morally reprehensible life of self-indulgence. Similarly, in *Leviathan*, the carcass of the whale represents the rotting decay of a corrupt society, this time at the hand of a powerful and intrusive State and of a self-serving religious hierarchy that has strayed all too far from its core values. There is a certain irony in the fact that in order to depict the rotten ‘state of the State’, as symbolised by a decaying whale carcass (i.e. an element of nature, which suggests that corruption is an entrenched, engrained and indeed ‘natural’ part of the local landscape), Zviagintsev had to have the model man-made out of metal, as, presumably, no naturally occurring skeletal
remains were convincing enough as a depiction of the magnitude of man-made corruption at play in the context of the film, and, presumably in contemporary Russia. Therefore, the apparently ‘natural’ symbol takes its place, like the church that will replace the family home, as part of the ‘built’ environment; it too is contrasted with the natural beauty of the landscape, which can be seen to survive, endure and outlast even the most reprehensible acts of the darker elements of mankind.

The role of nature in the film is also not without significance. It frames the film, in particular with the nocturnal image of the sea and waves crashing on to the shore. Essentially the imagery portrayed is of cold indifference which, ultimately, will have the last word: at the film’s conclusion, all that has happened in the course of the film now appears irrelevant in the wider scheme of time and space. The same is true of Elena, though, nature itself is much less evident in this urban film other than at the opening and closing frame shots. As individual people are subject to the laws and customs of the particular Leviathan they live in, so the Leviathan state itself is ultimately locked in by space and time and will eventually be reduced to nothing but bones, like the wrecked hulls of ships and the carcasses of whales stranded along the littoral. Just prior to her death, Liliya stares out into this abyss and sees a live whale, but the earlier imagery of the dead one connotatively suggests both her own and Nikolai’s imminent fate. Animal symbolism, i.e. the horse and whale images, is a minor, though noteworthy similarity between the two films.

Perhaps the only other significant scene of nature in Leviathan is when several of the characters drive to a bleak, but picturesque spot for a picnic. On this occasion, it would be hard to claim that humans are portrayed here in harmony with their surroundings: the prominent activity of the day, other than drinking, is firing rifles. While actual violence from these firearms is only suggested and the shooting is only for target practice (though portraits of former state leaders are also considered), the mood is somewhat threatening. In fact, what transpires is a key element in Nikolai’s ultimate demise: his friend Dmitry is spotted having sex with Liliya by the children, who misconstrue the act as one of violence. Though we are not given access to the subsequent violence, Dmitry is severely beaten up, as the subsequent scenes reveal: he lies in bed in a hotel with Liliya, his face a hideous canvas of cuts and bruises. Even nature, therefore, gives an external sense of threat to Nikolai’s domestic space. Indeed, with this scene of adultery, Nikolai’s domestic space is effectively destroyed, not physically, but from the point of view of its existing structure and relationships, and his demise is now assured. From both the outside and then the inside, his domestic space has been usurped and violated. In spite of everything, however, Liliya is drawn back to the house and her marriage, but the corrupting influence from without is unstoppable. Roman increasingly becomes a stranger in his own house, often escaping to the sanctuary of a now crumbling and non-functioning church, while Nikolai’s relationship with Liliya is now so strained that their final amorous encounter is, in fact, a non-consensual sex scene, witnessed by Roman and leading to his total alienation from his father and home. Ironically, of course, this same scene takes place as the contents of the house are being packed away, following the decision of the court in the mayor’s favour. The domestic space is now clearly in the area of non-place, domestic relationships are being terminated as the physical home itself is dismantled.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the above comparison of domestic spaces in two of Zviagintsev’s films, Elena and Leviathan, new insights into their structure and themes are achieved. In both films a framing technique places domestic space at the forefront of both plot and theme. Structurally, however, there are differences: Elena depicts modern Russia through the prism of two non-places,
the modern luxurious apartment and the more cramped and squalid Soviet-era flat. Identity is inextricably linked to physical space in the Russian context, and given that these living spaces represent non-places, the lives depicted in the film can be read as non-lives. Though both living spaces scarcely possess any redeeming moral features, each shows a different aspect of Russian life. While the Soviet-era apartment is ‘warmer’ in some ways, with more human life and contact, its indolence and decadence are toxic, most evidently in Alexander’s character. The modern apartment is, by contrast, cold and tomb-like, lifeless and even non-specific with regard to nationality, with the static ‘widescreen’ shots in the modern apartment resembling still-life. Elena is the bridge between these two apartments; she constantly opens and closes the doors and curtains of the ‘tomb’, preparing the stage, as it were, for Vladimir’s demise and her family’s somewhat dubious rise.

In Leviathan the symmetry of plot is somewhat different. The film’s use of a framing technique establishes the site of Nikolai’s house as the main thematic focus. From the outset, however, Nikolai’s home is depicted as a somewhat liminal, exposed and vulnerable space, both in physical and abstract terms: the house itself is not separate from the outside world, while the relationships inside the house are already strained. The actions of the mayor lead directly to the arrival of Dmitry in this already fragile domestic space, and force Nikolai to engage in a discourse of non-language in the world outside. Soon, however, it is clear that the ‘little man’ is powerless in the face of the Leviathan of power, particularly one which erodes identity and home and subverts language, place and even truth. 

Leviathan is, then, primarily concerned with the fragility of place and domestic space. At the film’s conclusion, Nikolai is imprisoned for the (non-)murder of his wife, the space which Nikolai has held as his own all his life is bulldozed, and, as an elegy, the bishop, on the very site of the victim’s recent abode, expounds on the essence of truth and love, as opposed to lies and strength, as the congregation gazes and nods in almost robotic obsequiousness. The bleak message of the film is of the home as a transitory, liminal space, vulnerable to the corruption and destruction from the external and ever-increasing force of the outside world, the Leviathan of officialdom, which negates all that is inherent to and necessary for human identity.

What links both films at a higher level is their irreversible descent into non-truth and moral emptiness as a direct result of the corruption and subversion of domestic place. In Leviathan, within the dichotomy of place and non-place, an interesting subtext is played out with the theme of religion and the two priests. Although the bishop is connected with officialdom and his language represents non-meaning, the priest whom Nikolai encounters towards the conclusion of the film, as he enters his darkest hour, is clearly in a different category. While the bishop is essentially venal, and his language couched in platitudes aimed at achieving his own ulterior motives (the construction of the church and, presumably, the maintenance of his luxurious lifestyle), Father Vasili speaks with clear religious conviction and humanity. In spite of Nikolai’s vicious jibes – ‘Where is your God … your merciful God?’ (‘Где твой Бог … милосердный’) –, he remains lucid and sympathetic, explaining to Nikolai the meaning of the legend of Job and his path from suffering to joy. The general appearance of this priest, his demeanour, clothes and modest house, all suggest authenticity, while the bishop seems to exude falseness. Genuine identity in this film is, therefore, linked with disconnectedness from the official world at large and its corrupting influence, which in turn leads to a negation of space, language and identity. In another variation of this theme, the old and decrepit church where Roman and his friends go to socialise exudes a certain spirituality and sanctuary, while the newly built church, which is seen in the film’s conclusion, represents falsehood in both its conception and current state. Indeed, after Liliya’s unexplained disappearance, Nikolai also sits in the church with the boys for a few minutes, drunk, but able to contemplate the religious painting which still adorns the walls in the flickering firelight.
The final spoken scene in *Leviathan* is heavily ironic: an inaugural service is held at the newly built church which now stands on the site of Nikolai’s former house, and the bishop delivers a lengthy sermon, which, inter alia, discusses two types of truth, that which is real, истинна (from the Greek αλήθεια), and that which is just, правда (δικαιοσύνη, δίκαιον), and comes immediately after a scene in which the mayor sits in a restaurant and orders more vodka to celebrate the news that Nikolai has been sentenced to 15 years in prison with hard labour. The camera also takes in the congregation, with, at one point, the mayor informing his young son that this is their Lord and ‘He sees everything’ (‘Он всё видит’). The language is in fact a kind of *non-language*, a negation of truth while promoting it and pontificating about it. The unjust way in which Nikolai has been divested of his home and his subsequent framing for the murder of his wife with a lengthy spell in prison with hard labour is, as it were, discussed in the very location where a few weeks before he had been living a relatively happy life, making the philosophical sermon about different types of truth and acting not through strength, but through love (‘Не силой, а любовью’) entirely and tragically preposterous. The concepts of truth and justice, then, are absurd in the extreme, as is the notion that a just God sees this and does nothing. This *non-language* of the bishop is the counterpart of the legal *non-language* mentioned above which occurs when the second decision of the court is read out at breakneck speed by the female clerk. It is also related to the obfuscation of truth which is conducted in the police station when Nikolai is interrogated and charged. Although the policeman speaks rationally and clearly, the hopeless situation becomes clear to the viewer and the inebriated Nikolai, and the resulting dramatic irony as we see and grasp Nikolai’s clear bewilderment and grief is a powerful statement on the tragic demise of the ‘little man’ in the face of the Leviathan of state power. The final voice heard in the film is the bleak cry of a raven over the deserted and windswept landscape.

Truth and morality in *Elena* are also the ultimate casualty. In a discussion of Soviet culture and living spaces, Boym (1994, 7) discusses the iconography of a well known 1952 Socialist Realist painting, ‘The New Apartment’, which portrays the arrival of a family in their ‘new’ communal apartment: ‘The painting is neither reflective nor self-reflective: people and objects hardly cast any shadows here, and there is no mirror hidden in the corner. The scene flaunts its perfect bright visibility and transparency of meaning. […] It is the way the culture wishes to see itself and to be seen, without thinking about the act of seeing. This is a perfect Socialist Realist genre scene, not an accurate portrayal of a Soviet apartment.’ The final scene in *Elena* in some ways represents an ironic inverse of this kind of image: while the Soviet apartment in *Elena* lays bare the shortcomings of that era’s living spaces and the culture and ideology that gave rise to them, the modern apartment takes us almost full circle to the brave new world of spacious and luxurious living in Russia. The final scene of the modern apartment is, in a sense, a replica of that described by Boym above *mutatis mutandis* and with a liberal serving of irony thrown in. While the more squalid aspects of the Soviet apartment are now far removed (even Sergei’s son now appears miraculously unscarred from his recent brawl), the metaphysical questions ‘What to do next? How to live?’ seem to be answered by the promise of television, snacks and the solitary baby. The film’s ostensible premise of linear progression and concomitant progress from Soviet to post-Soviet is, as it were, framed in this final ‘family’ scene, but, at the same time, the sense of cultural and moral emptiness which is highlighted by, for example, wide physical space, lack of movement and banal dialogue, only serves to undermine what is portrayed in this particular ‘painting’. Rather than portraying a progression from *non-place* to place, the film offers a somewhat sombre appraisal of Russian national identity as a shift to just another instance of post-national *non-place* characterised by the sense of universal displacement typical of supermodernity.
See, for example, the review in ‘The Guardian’ newspaper: http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/oct/25/elena-review (last accessed 12/2/2018).


Augé’s work was originally published in French in 1992 by Seuil under the title Non-Lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité, which was subsequently translated into English and published in 1995 by Verso under the title Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. Reference in this chapter is made to the second edition of the English translation, which was published in 2008 by Verso.

Joost van Baak (2009, 383) makes the apt observation: ‘The House, as an anthropological concept, implies a set of basic values that include privacy, personal security and individual freedom, and it is my belief that the doctrinal dogmas that directed Soviet society led to the deliberate repression, or at least to the systematic and planned neglect, of these values.’

Other images of horses representing innocent victims of human cruelty in Russian literature are Vronsky’s rough handling of the mare Frou-Frou during a horse race in Anna Karenina resulting in its death, and Mayakovsky’s poem ‘Хорошее отношение к лошадям’ (‘Kindness to horses’), a moving account of a horse which falls in the street to the amusement of the passers-by.

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