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## NON-LOVE IN A NON-PLACE: LIMINALITY AND DISLOCATION IN ANDREI ZVYAGINTSEV'S LOVELESS

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### Summary

In this article Andrei Zvyagintsev's film *Loveless* (2017) is analysed from the angle of domestic space using the theoretical prism of liminality and non-places. It is argued that, while the concept of home may be defined as private and personal, as opposed to public and impersonal, the domestic space in this film, far from being a comforting and reassuring destination in itself, can be read as liminal, 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. The article also examines *Loveless* in the light of Marc Augé's 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 and liminal public spaces of airports, hotels, shopping centres and other typical non-places. It is demonstrated that, as in Zvyagintsev's earlier films *Elena* (2011) and *Leviathan* (2014), *Loveless* uses a framing technique which highlights the centrality of domestic space in the film. From the outset, the film is concerned with the 'in-betweenness' of the characters' lives, and domestic space plays a key role in this, although it is not consciously sought or coveted by the characters, but rather a consequence of their actions. It is argued that tragedy is not a feature of *Loveless*: in its place are incomplete transitions, rites of passage awaiting their natural fulfilment. It is this dislocation and liminality which pervades the entire atmosphere of the film and gives it its almost unbearable sense of foreboding.

**Key Words:** Post-Soviet Russia, National Identity, Domestic Space, Liminality, Non-place, *Loveless*, Andrei Zvyagintsev, Bjørn Thomassen, Marc Augé.

## Introduction

In this article, Andrei Zvyagintsev's feature film *Loveless* (*Нелюбовь*) (2017) is analysed through the thematic prism of domestic space. Just as with two of his earlier films, *Elena* (2011) and *Leviathan* (2014), *Loveless*, it is argued here, revolves around the central theme and visual element of domestic space. Unlike these two earlier films in which domestic space was, in fact, a prime motivation in terms of plot – in both films the *acquisition* of real estate was key to the events in the film –, in *Loveless* its role is more visual and consequential, but, nevertheless, a key feature, as can immediately be surmised by the film's beginning and end, which provide a framing structure using apartment scenes. As in our previous analyses of Zvyagintsev's films, the concept of *place* and *non-place* (with particular reference to the work of Marc Augé (2008)), is able to uncover many of the underlying elements in the film. Indeed, it will be argued that the concept of *non-place* runs concurrently with the negated sense of love (literally the noun 'neliubov' in the title translates as 'non-love'), as the settings for the negation of this emotion provide no sanctuary in any abode for the entirety of the film, returning bleakly at the end for a last view of the (non-)place where it all began. In addition to this, liminality, the idea of being 'in between', of being in a state of transition between physical places, in particular home and work, and also rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death, will also play a significant role in the analysis.

*Loveless* was released in 2017 and, like *Elena*, was the recipient of the Jury Prize at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival. Among other accolades, it was also selected as the Russian entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 90<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards (the Academy short-listed it for a nomination). It received much critical acclaim (largely from countries outside Russia, but also in Russia), as well as a certain amount of hostility in Russia, mainly in terms of its perceived negative political and social messages with regard to contemporary Russia. As an example of the former, Peter Bradshaw (2017), the Guardian film critic, awarded it a full five stars with lavish praise, comparing it, amongst other influences, to Bergman's 'Scenes from a Marriage'. Anton Dolin (2017) discusses the film's pathos and social dimensions, finding that the search for the missing boy Alesha is ultimately meaningless as it is, in effect, a search withing ourselves. Adam Nayman (2018), reviewing the film in *Sight and Sound*, evaluates *Loveless* rather negatively as a depiction of Russia's "deficit of empathy and fellow feeling", its "lost innocence", a film which gives a rather "dim view of human nature". Anthony Lane (2018, 105), writing in *The New Yorker* magazine, highlights the dramatic intensity of the film, notwithstanding the rather linear plot and grim details: "for all the deadened souls who throng the tale, the telling could not be more alive. The characters may be stuck; the camera is on the move." An illustration of the reception in Russia itself can be seen in A. Korolev's (2018) review, in which he sums up the two most prevalent attitudes towards Zvyagintsev's work. As he states, "«Нелюбовь» очень быстро получила от зрителей как громкие комплименты, так и яростные обвинения в том, что это антироссийское кино и чернуха. Нередко в соцсетях можно встретить сообщения пользователей, которым этот фильм не нравится, но при этом они наотрез отказываются его смотреть. Уже обожглись с «Левиафаном»: сплошная коррупция, несправедливость, безнадега, не хватает только медведей с балалайками для успешного экспортного фильма о дремучей и ненужной России. Тошно, одним словом."<sup>[1]</sup>

The plot of *Loveless* is relatively simple and linear, even described as "eventless" (Kolotaev & Ulybina 2017, 84), but, as with other films by Zvyagintsev, it operates thematically on several levels of complexity. Boris, a sales manager, and his wife, Zhenia, who runs a beauty salon, are in the final, bitter stages of their marriage, both having found new partners (Masha and Anton

respectively). Masha is already pregnant with his child. All that remains is to sell the apartment and to decide custody arrangements for their 12-year-old son, Alesha. Late one evening in their apartment, in the course of an unpleasant quarrel between them which Alesha overhears, each spouse tries to foist the boy on to the other (or even send him to an orphanage), in a tacit attempt to ensure that their new relationships are not encumbered with the presence of their offspring from the previous marriage. On the following morning, after the mother berates her son over a desolate breakfast scene, Alesha runs off to school, never to return. As both parents spend the night with their lovers, Zhenia returning from Anton's apartment before dawn, neither realises that the boy has not returned home from school during the day. After the school rings to notify the parents about the absence of their son on two consecutive days, Zhenia calls the police. The visibly overworked police officer who visits her in the apartment advises her that most cases like this end in the return of the missing child after some days and that the best thing would be to call in volunteer search and rescue teams, rather than initiate the whole unwieldy bureaucratic process: Zhenia proceeds to do this. The head of the volunteers draws up a plan of action and suggests that first of all they visit Zhenia's mother who lives some three hours' drive from Moscow. Zhenia doubts that Alesha will be there, firstly because the cantankerous grandmother does not like her grandson, and, secondly, because she thinks it unlikely that the young boy would have been able to travel such a distance to find her. Nevertheless, Boris, Zhenia and one of the volunteers make the trip to her country house. Zhenia's mother refuses to accept that the boy is actually lost, preferring to imagine that the spouses are conspiring to move her through pity to take in the boy to live with her. The trip ends in an acrimonious scene between mother and daughter, and, as Boris and Zhenia drive home, Zhenia informs him that she only married him in order to escape her repugnant mother. Seething with repressed rage, Boris dumps Zhenia on the side of the road still some distance from Moscow. After their return to Moscow, the volunteers' search still bears no fruit: a schoolmate of Alesha's directs them to a derelict building in the woods where they used to meet in secret, but only Alesha's jacket is found; a boy who turns up in a hospital and who resembles Alesha also turns out not to be him. Finally, Zhenia, Boris and the head of the search team view the disfigured body of a boy in a morgue, but the parents do not identify him as their son, in spite of the advice of the head searcher to verify the DNA. Zhenia becomes hysterical, Boris breaks down into tears on the floor of the morgue, but the question of the boy's identity remains undecided. Two years later the boy is registered as missing, while the parents live with their new partners in their respective apartments, both living spaces dominated by the sound of news reports on the television. Boris lives in a cramped apartment with Masha, her mother and his baby son, but clearly does not feel much love for the child; Zhenia lives in the luxurious but somewhat cold apartment of Anton, but their relationship appears to have reached its zenith some time ago. The film ends with images from the start of the film in reverse order: the apartment where Alesha once lived being stripped back and renovated, the woods where Alesha first walked home from school and, finally, the piece of police tape first picked up by Alesha, still caught in a tree overhead.

Other than film reviews, scholarly analysis of the film has been rather lacking. Kondyuk (2018) gives a theological analysis of the film based on a discussion of its applicability to the concepts of *epektasis* (evolution in eternal happiness) and *apatheia* (Stoic equanimity). Kolotaev and Ulybina (2017) give a psychological analysis of the film which they view as a means of presenting three models of constructing an identity: reproductive, productive and metaproductive. Each of three main characters is taken as a representative of one of these categories: Boris represents the reproductive model of identity construction, attempting to arrange his life (e.g. marry, have children, provide for his family) according to what is expected, what is 'traditional', rather than

through pure love; Zhenia represents the productive model of identity, one which seeks to construct itself on the basis of external models, typically media-based, using artificial means such as make-up, clothing etc., i.e. this is a manufactured, superficial identity; and, finally, the workers of the 'Liza Alert' team, who look for Alesha so efficiently and selflessly, represent the metaproductive model. Unlike Boris, who creates his identity from an illusory past, and Zhenia, who creates hers from an illusory future, these volunteers do not require any external factors, but create their own identity from existing, variable conditions. While the psychological approach of this film is not directly relevant to the current discussion, the article also discusses references in the film to other directors and films, for example, Bergman, Antonioni and also the Russian director Tarkovsky, in particular his film *Stalker* from 1979 (Tarkovsky 2006). Kolotaev and Ulybina (ibid., 84) make the important point that in *Loveless*, "a film without events" ("бессобытийный фильм"), when the three-quarters point of the film (i.e. 75% of the film has occurred) is reached, a point when, typically, the dénouement begins (e.g. a character suddenly gains insight into some important aspect of the plot), in this film, by contrast, the characters find themselves in an abandoned, derelict building as they continue their search for the lost boy, i.e. the plot development appears to be almost suspended. The authors of this article argue that, far from lacking in significance at this point, the scene in fact references an important theme of *Stalker* (Tarkovsky 2006) (the dripping water from the ceiling certainly suggests Tarkovsky audio-visually). In this latter film the characters also enter a room in which one's true desires are realised ('комната исполнения желаний' ('the room where desires are fulfilled') – not necessarily those which one asks for, but those which are authentic and true (and, possibly, ones that one may not be particularly proud of). In the case of Zvyagintsev's film, according to the authors, the true desires of the parents transform into the scene at the morgue where their son's body lies, but which the parents refuse to recognise as their own flesh and blood. The wish which they all but express in the film's opening scenes (i.e. for their son to disappear) is authentic, and the result is now realised, too terrifying and shameful in its awfulness to be acknowledged by them.

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 this film, 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. "At its broadest, liminality refers to any 'betwixt and between' situation or object, any in-between place or moment" (Thomassen 2014, 7). Thomassen characterises our modern era with its drive towards endless innovation as "boundary-breaking" (ibid., 8), but this boundary-breaking leads in turn to implosion, social problems and alienation, to what can be termed 'liquid modernity'. This paper will, therefore, examine *Loveless* in the light of liminality and also Augé's (2008) seminal work, *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*,<sup>[2]</sup> 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 and liminal public spaces of airports, hotels, shopping centres and other typical *non-places*. In his ground-breaking work, Augé (2008, 63) defines *place* as "relational, historical and concerned with identity" and *non-place* as its absolute antithesis. Thomassen (2014, 17), similarly, characterises the move into liminality as "a loss of home and a ritualized rupture with the world as we know it." Thomassen (ibid., 225) views uncorrupted domestic spaces (Augé's 'places') as "distillations of centuries, indeed millennia, of human experience, realizing over and again, and with the same awe, the sacrality of dwelling and the irreducible importance of establishing and maintaining human relations within some form of recognized boundaries. When such a recognition of

meaningful boundaries is torn apart and thrown into oblivion, much is at risk.” The ceaseless movement and innovation of supermodernity with its concomitant undermining of identity and place lead to lives increasingly led in transitory states where concepts such as ‘home’ lose their essence, and even key rites of passage such as marriage and death are no longer discernible. As Thomassen (2014, 11) puts it, “liminality somehow came to occupy a more and more central place within the space of modernity, a process which is currently accelerating to the point of absurdity.”

Augé 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), or, as Thomassen states (2014, 226): “It is impossible simply to feel at home everywhere if one does not feel at home *somewhere*.”

### Analysis

As in Zvyagintsev’s earlier films *Elena* (2011) and *Leviathan* (2014), *Loveless* uses a framing technique which highlights the centrality of domestic space in the film. The film begins with a bleak winter scene: a leafless tree, a marshy forest in winter, the entrance to a school from which children, including Alesha, soon emerge; his walk back home through the now autumnal wetlands. Alesha picks up a piece of police barrier tape and hooks it on to a tree branch high above. A perfectly centred view of his vast apartment block appears on high in the distance, after which Alesha is pictured, perfectly framed at his desk, as he looks out of the window of the apartment. At the film’s end, these places are viewed in more or less reverse order: after the scene in the morgue, Alesha’s apartment (his bedroom, in fact, where he sat earlier) is seen being stripped for renovation; the camera moves outside slowly through the window to show families playing in the snow; next, the two apartments where his parents now live are shown, first Masha’s, then Anton’s; the final images are of the forest again in winter and the police tape flapping from the same tree branch.

Using the primary apartment (i.e. where Alesha and his parents live at the start of the film) as the inner part of the frame (the forest forms the outer part) has two main effects. Firstly, of course, it puts domestic space itself into a central role in the film, with the final view through its (Alesha’s) window of families playing outside constituting an elegiac finale. While the actual acquisition of domestic space is not involved in this film as a major plot element to the extent that it is in *Elena* and *Leviathan*, the use of the primary apartment in the framing technique, as well as the role of the two secondary apartments (those of Masha and Anton, discussed below), clearly single out domestic space as a major plot element. Secondly, this technique also highlights the liminality of domestic space in this film. Indeed, from the outset, Alesha’s apartment is shown from both outside and inside: as he walks home from school, his block is seen from afar, after which he is shown perfectly framed as he gazes from his window to where he has just come from. Marshland and rivers, in fact, the scenery through which Alesha walks home, are also definitive liminal objects, borders between two areas or qualities. As Alesha sits at his desk, the camera now passes from viewing him from the position of the window inside the apartment to the exterior, and this is repeated at the film’s end: first of all, Alesha’s room is shown being renovated from the interior, but, thereafter, the camera gradually moves through the window to show the exterior – families playing in the snow. The sense

is one of insecurity and liminality: home for Alesha is nothing more than a veneer, an invisible and fragile border no different to the transparent, 'illusory' glass which allows the camera to pass through it, unrestricted.

Windows are representative of the archetypal liminal condition and the camera essentially subsumes this role as it views Alesha at his desk, becoming both the physical (window) frame through which he is viewed, as well as the instrument which moves through this frame. The framing here is of a different kind to that which is used to bind together the film's opening and closing scenes. This particular moment in the film is somewhat reminiscent of a scene in *Elena* in which one of the characters, Sergei, stands on his balcony, perfectly centred by the apartment block around him. Both of these shots, one in *Elena* and one in *Loveless*, are highly significant and serve to place the person framed in the context of their physical surroundings, i.e. domestic space, in a sense defining their identity through the physical restraints in which they are forced to exist. In the case of Alesha, it is the vulnerability of his situation which becomes apparent. Although living in relative comfort, his fate in fact depends totally on the circumstances of his domestic space and this shot serves to highlight this physical reality at this point in time. The status of the domestic space as a 'place' (as Augé defines it) rests also with the people who live there and Alesha's parents render this particular place dysfunctional and even something of a 'non-place': their comings and goings, as far as we can tell from the few occasions they are there, resemble visits to a hotel rather than their own home, as Augé (2009, 70) describes it: "The traveller's space may thus be the archetype of non-place."

Indeed, as the film enters into the first dialogues (up to the point of Alesha sitting at his desk there has been no word spoken other than the children leaving the school), doors – another archetypal liminal object (Thomassen 2014, 13) – are open and shut incessantly both by Zhenia and then by a couple who are inspecting the apartment, which, we now learn, is, in fact, for sale. Alesha's name is not used once by the mother. The nearest she comes to giving him a name is by saying to the prospective buyers that "he is twelve years old and turning into a savage". Later in the film the head of the search team is surprised that the parents never seem to refer to their son by name, preferring rather to refer to him as 'he' or to give him the epithet *нацан* ('the lad'). Liminality pervades Alesha's world: he is essentially nameless, his parents do not properly occupy their own home, but rather pass through it on their way elsewhere, and, moreover, are planning to sell it anyway; their marriage is ending as the film begins; his view into his apartment is mirrored by one out of it. Key in all this is the breakdown of the marriage: if life's three main rites of passage are accepted as birth, marriage and death, then the film begins in the liminal space somewhere between the parents' marriage and divorce, while Alesha's fate is to be, for most of the film, to be somewhere in between birth and death, but we cannot ever be sure where as his fate is not revealed.

From these initial scenes of domestic liminality, the structure of the plot now splits symmetrically into two halves which are bisected by Alesha's absence and disappearance: firstly, both Boris and Zhenia are shown in turn at their work places, and, secondly, each is shown in the apartment of their respective new partner; thus, in total four locations are presented (six, if two 'food' scenes are counted: Boris and Masha are also shown in a supermarket prior to going home, Zhenia and Anton in a restaurant). In each of these scenes the theme of the parents freeing themselves of Alesha is either implicitly or explicitly apparent. Just before this, however, almost unnoticeably to the first-time viewer, Alesha is seen for the last time, eating his breakfast while his mother stares into her phone and berates him for his slowness, not even noticing the tear which falls from one of his eyes. As he runs down the staircase for the last time, the camera tries to follow him, but gradually stops, leaving only the sounds of his footsteps as it gazes into the empty stairwell. This

moment of liminality as the child's life evaporates, caught in a transition from 'non-place' to somewhere uncertain, possibly even death, underscores the entire film and its understated sense of loss and dislocation.

Another significant source of liminality and 'non-place' in the film is represented by several scenes inside cars, and Boris's journey to work is a key example of this. Hermetically sealed from the sounds of the world outside, he listens to the radio as it talks of apocalyptic events from the past. This is Augé's world "surrendered to solitary individuality" (Augé 2008, 63) which produces both "homogenization and exclusion" (ibid., ix). All drivers, as it were, sit in their vehicles, isolated and solitary, yet each engages in a similar way with the world in his or her own disconnected way. This journey also prepares the viewer for the 'non-place' where Boris works, a somewhat surreal 'brave new world' where objects, in particular plates of food, are shown disconnected from human contact. Boris talks with a colleague over lunch (during which no names are exchanged between the two) on the topic of divorce in this particular company where they both work: Boris wants to find out whether being divorced will lead to his loss of employment, as the owner of the company pursues a strictly Orthodox code of practice in the workplace (a picture of a Russian church on the wall hints at this, though this is somewhat satirised by an employee playing solitaire on his or her computer in the same shot). Implicitly, Boris is searching for ways of both freeing himself from his son (by giving him to his wife for custody) and maintaining the appearance of being both married and a caring father at work. The place where he works and his role there are both liminal; the workplace is itself 'in between', since, ethically, as a separated man, he appears neither to belong there, nor does he wish to leave it; his wife's phone calls to him at work about Alesha later are clearly an intrusion, as he lowers his voice and tries not to look concerned. His role in this workplace is thus liminal in the sense that it is marginal, nameless, disingenuous and, ultimately, compromised by his other life outside, which is itself liminal.

Zhenia's workplace is somewhat different, but also contains elements of liminality. In particular, Zhenia, both here and with her new partner, Anton, strives to unburden herself of her feelings of dislike towards her husband and son, and, by doing so, to free herself from her former family ties and enter a new space. As she sits in the beauty salon which she runs, having her hair cut and styled, she finds it no effort to inform the stylist with whom she works about the most personal details of her life, of her increasing repulsion towards her family, of how her son smells more and more like his father, and even gives graphic details of giving birth to Alesha: "he didn't want to come out" ("не хотел вылезать"). Her explicit renunciation of both members of her family at this point is continued that evening at her lover's apartment, where she continues the theme of her own lack of love from her mother as a child, her 'escape' to Boris and her subsequent feeling of disgust towards her son ("отвращение какое-то было"). The notion of the home as a safe haven where intimate topics can and should be discussed in private is, therefore, undermined, and the liminality of the primary apartment is now refracted by this and by the transitory places where Boris and Zhenia now appear to be moving to, i.e. their partners' apartments.

Both workplaces, Boris's and Zhenia's, now lead to the apartments, indeed love-nests, of their newly found partners. Firstly, we see Boris return via the supermarket with Masha to her, or, in fact, her mother's apartment, where they proceed to make love. Masha's mother is currently away: the apartment is, therefore, temporarily 'available'. Immediately on arrival at the apartment it becomes clear to the viewer that Masha is pregnant and, therefore, the motives for Boris's insistence on Zhenia having custody of Alesha becomes clear: in the cramped conditions of this apartment, the addition of a new baby as well as Alesha would probably spell disaster. Once again, therefore, Boris's denial of his own son is implicit. From this scene we are taken to Anton's apartment where

the love-making is more intense, as is the post-coital dialogue, or, rather, monologue. Zhenia can, it seems, only truly love Anton if she is able to dismiss cathartically her husband and her son from her life through expressing her feelings of dislike and even disgust for them both. The same is true with regard to her mother who, she confesses to Anton, treated her without affection as a child. In all this it is, of course, possible to draw both moral conclusions (i.e. both parents are guilty of abandoning their son to their selfish desires, and, therefore guilty of extreme neglect and worthy of some form of divine retribution) and also the theme of 'bad mother' which passes down from generation to generation, which to some extent exculpates Zhenia as the victim of her own mother. However, this is not Zvyagintsev's style or approach: the film is more concerned with questions of existential phenomenology than questions of ethics and conscience. It is these questions which are at the heart of the journey undertaken by Boris and Zhenia as they travel together to Zhenia's mother's house, then separately search for Alesha in a derelict building, in the countryside, at a hospital, and, finally, together at a morgue. Through this journey, Zvyagintsev portrays the lived experience of both characters, hinting at their mixed inner feelings of relief and guilt, but not dwelling on the moral choices each makes. Only when faced with the actual rite of death at the morgue do they reach some kind of catharsis, but, even here, the experience is in-between as they deny that the body belongs to their son.

At the end of the film, the true liminal qualities of both apartments, Masha's and Anton's, become clear. In a sense, both Boris and Zhenia have been drawn to what attracts them more, Boris to a more modest, Soviet-style apartment, cramped and down-market. Zhenia is drawn to the chic new style of post-Soviet Russian architecture, spacious but cold. However, what is more important than this is the transitory nature of both apartments for both characters. This is hinted at in the earlier scenes after each of them has made love: each distances him/herself from their lover physically and appears to lose emotional contact with them (Boris goes to the kitchen for food, Zhenia stands gazing through the window). As the film ends, this distance and dislocation is clear to see: Boris sits in a separate room with his young (almost two years old) son watching television, while in the kitchen Masha and her mother discuss new living arrangements. This is no homecoming: his new life with Masha is in-between and transitory (he is literally being displaced by the conversation in the kitchen), and, as if to underline this, Boris, annoyed with his son's incessant noise as he plays, places him into a play-pen in a different room. Zhenia, meanwhile, fares little better: as the television in Anton's apartment also blares out the latest violent news from Ukraine (which Boris is also watching at this time, another instance of Augé's (2008, 83) world of "solitude and similitude"), she goes out on to the balcony and runs on a treadmill wearing a tracksuit emblazoned with the Olympic-style 'RUSSIA' motif. The balcony, neither inside the apartment nor completely separate from it, underlines the liminality of her situation, as she finds herself (framed) alone, neither properly within her new marriage, nor completely free from her previous marriage as a result of the uncertainty of her son's fate, who himself lies somewhere between birth and death. Her efforts to free herself from her past have proved to be as vain as her 'stationary movement', as she runs to nowhere. Liminality is pervasive and all-encompassing (morality and conscience are secondary in supermodernity), and life becomes enmeshed in its tendrils.

From the cultural point of view, Boris and Zhenia, in different ways, acquire new domestic spaces which are different types of 'non-places'. Through the actions of these parents and their lack of love towards their son, the primary apartment is rendered liminal, insecure and is consequently fractured into two further liminal domestic spaces, the apartments of Masha and Anton into which each parent moves (Boris and Zhenia respectively). Domestic space in Russian and Soviet culture has always played a large role. As Joost van Baak (2009, 383) observes: '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.’ Boris appears, therefore, to gravitate towards this past world, the more obvious ‘non-place’ of Soviet society. As Svetlana Boym puts it in her seminal work on Soviet/Russian mythologies of everyday life (Boym 1994, 11), ‘Common place refers to both the organization of space and the organization of speech. This trope has degraded through history: from the noble Greek *topos*, a site of classical argument, it has turned into the modern commonplace, the synonym for a cliché.’ Zhenia, however, subconsciously seeks to distance herself from this past world by moving into Anton’s modern apartment, but it, in turn, turns out to be little more than an equally empty and meaningless space in cultural and philosophical terms, a place where one is “always, and never, at home” (Augé 2008, 87).

### Conclusion

Andrei Zvyagintsev’s *Loveless*, although almost eventless in terms of its plot, manages to effect a powerful psychological hold on the viewer largely through the use of liminality and the tension it evokes. While it is not explicitly concerned with morals and conscience, this is not to say that they are not playing upon the minds of the characters. However, in the supermodern world of this film, the focus is on the existential level, the experience of being in a world of liminality and non-place. Thomassen (2014, 7) states: “Liminality explains nothing. Liminality *is*. It happens. It takes place.” It is this phenomenological aspect which explains the apparent lack of events in *Loveless*.

From the outset, the film is concerned with the ‘in-betweenness’ of the characters’ lives. Domestic space plays a key role in this, although it is not consciously sought or coveted by the characters, but is rather a consequence of their actions. The primary apartment, that of Boris and Zhenia, is used as part of the film’s framing device, shown at the beginning of the film, as Alesha comes home from school, and at the film’s conclusion, as workers renovate what once was his room. In this way, domestic space is placed thematically at the forefront of the film. Identity is tied to domestic space and it soon becomes apparent that this apartment represents insecurity and imminent change for Alesha. The camera moves from within to without, doors open and close, his parents’ marriage is in its final stages and their comings and goings are increasingly unpredictable and disruptive. This liminal space is fractured into two other liminal domestic spaces as both parents establish their new lives with their new partners. Their workplaces are also portrayed as in-between locations: visually, Boris’s office portrays the solitary contractuality of supermodern non-places, while Zhenia brings to her workplace the intimacy which should be reserved for her home life, thus undermining the security and privacy which should be integral to her own domestic space.

As Alesha’s liminal life now retreats further into uncertainty with his disappearance and possible death, his parents renounce him either implicitly, as in the case of Boris, or explicitly in the case of Zhenia. With this denial of their son, their search for him increasingly resembles a half-hearted attempt to recover him until the moment when they are confronted by the reality of death in the morgue. For the parents, however, the power of this rite of passage is too much, and Alesha remains somewhere between life and death, as they return to their newly found liminal existence with their new partners. As the film concludes with its reverse frame sequence, the viewer sees with clarity the effects of the parents’ actions in terms of domestic space: far from being a homecoming, Boris sits alone as his mother-in-law plans his imminent ejection from the apartment.

The rejection of Alesha is mirrored by Boris' placement of his younger son in the play pen so that he can watch television in peace. The apartment bears the hallmarks of Soviet cramped living conditions. Zhenia's efforts to free herself from her unhappy life appear to have failed. Although the large apartment where she now lives provides comfort and space, the image of her running on a treadmill on the balcony seems to suggest her 'stationary movement', "[a] movement whose only end [is] itself" (Augé 2008, 71). Tragedy is not a feature of *Loveless*: in its place are incomplete transitions, rites of passage awaiting their natural fulfilment. It is this dislocation and liminality which pervades the entire atmosphere of the film and gives it its almost unbearable sense of foreboding.

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<sup>[1]</sup>“*Loveless* very quickly received from viewers both enthusiastic compliments, as well as fierce accusations of being anti-Russian cinema and *chernukha* (i.e. cinema that is often gory and/or obscene, and dwells on dark, negative elements [Authors’ note]). On social media networks one can quite often come across posts from users who do not like this film, but, at the same, time they flatly refuse to watch it. They’ve had their fingers burnt once with *Leviathan*: nothing but corruption, injustice, doom and gloom, the only thing missing is bears with balalaikas for a successful export film about a remote and useless Russia. In a word, it makes you feel sick.” [Authors’ translation]

<sup>[2]</sup>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.

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