

Ksenia Okhapkina's documentary *Immortal* ends with the image of a roomful of small children in beds, some waking as snow falls outside the window. It's an eerie, fairytale-like scene, as if they're hatching out into the strange world that awaits them. The universe of *Immortal* is strange indeed, and elemental: snowdrifts glitter in close-up; a solitary dog howls in the Arctic night; boys discuss a fabled jellyfish said to live forever, a figure of the impression of suspended animation that dominates the film. But the milieu that Okhapkina films could hardly be more concrete: the industrial town of Apatity in the Murmansk region of Russia's far north, an area that, the opening titles tell us, was developed as part of the industrialisation programme of the gulags. The region was once populated by prisoners; but once the prisons closed, says the caption, people stayed.

The suggestion is that today's inhabitants of Apatity are still prisoners, or perhaps ghosts. *Immortal* depicts something like a ghost society, a residue of the former USSR (a faded image of Lenin still peers down from a wall). The strangest remainder of Soviet values here is the existence of the Young Army, established in 2015 to inculcate military values in Russian youth. We see Apatity's school-age boys undertaking manoeuvres in ruined buildings: learning to dismantle rifles, absorbing their instructor's macho banter, listening to heroic legends of Soviet pilots. Meanwhile, upholding traditional gender roles, young girls study ballet steps with a martial edge in preparation for the gala that the youths will perform for the annual Heroes Day.

Meanwhile, trains and buses clatter by; faceless figures in parkas cluster in the night; the mouldering corridors and stairwells of apartment blocks seem to belong to some submarine realm. Beyond the opening captions, there is no explicit commentary; and the film's jigsaw structure, alternating the children's training with eerie tone-poem images, invites us to assemble our own picture of what Apatity is and what, as a supposedly representative image of Russia today, it *means*. The viewer may feel that Okhapkina is offering a distorted, partial, polemical image of Apatity; the town must surely offer some cultural pleasures beyond the solitary tree lit up with acidic yellow lights. But the world she invites us to inhabit is, for the space of an hour, intensely vivid: a seeming cultural fossil in present-day Russia, and yet manifestly alive before our eyes.

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