

# 'One Man Dies a Million Times' Review: A Haunting Portrait of Preservation at the End of the World

Shot by Sean Price Williams in bleakly beautiful black-and-white, Jessica Oreck's latest film finds seeds of life in the siege of Leningrad.

[David Ehrlich](#)

"One Man Dies a Million Times"

A languorous, ethnobiological romance that's lodged somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow — memory and anticipation — [Jessica Oreck](#)'s singularly transportive "[One Man Dies a Million Times](#)" revisits the siege of Leningrad in order to trace a forward-thinking sketch about the essence of self-preservation in a world determined to destroy itself.

Announcing itself as "a true story, set in the future," Oreck's film largely eschews action in favor of entropy, its plot simple enough to sound like a premise: As millions of people starve

to death in a frigid city that was deprived of food for 900 days, two high-cheekboned workers at the world's first seed bank fight to preserve a priceless collection of genetically diverse plant life. Eating the produce would feed a small handful of extremely hungry people for a few days, but harvesting the seeds might allow for the possibility of restoring the world's agriculture when the war ends. If the war ends.

For Alyssa (Alyssa Lozovskaya) and Maksim (Maksim Blinov), the decision is so obvious that Oreck hardly needs to dramatize it being made. One day, they're working in the sunny gardens outside the Institute of Plant Genetic Resources. The next, they're huddled inside the monochromatic hell of a Tarkovsky movie shot by "Heaven Knows What" cinematographer Sean Price Williams. Death becomes the defining aspect of life, as undeniable as the flap of rotten gum tissue that Maksim can't stop himself from exploring with his tongue, but the tension between sacrifice and survival remains so taut that any other, more overt kind of conflict might distract from what's at stake.

Similarly, the film's spine of archival material — including a hushed voiceover track that's excerpted from diaries recovered from Leningrad — rubs against its frequent anachronisms until every passing day feels predictive of the world to come. In the beginning of the film, the '90s-era

computer screens that are scattered across the seed bank seem like invasions from the future; by the end of the film, they could just as easily be relics from the past.

Of course, the most unsettling thing about "One Man Dies a Million Times" is that it ultimately belongs to the present. After a three-year gap between its SXSW premiere and its exclusively theatrical debut — a delay owed more to the pandemic than the challenges of selling a bleak-as-fuck Tarkovskian mood piece, and then redeemed as a protest against the indignities of streaming — Oreck's film is seeing the light of day at a time when Russian citizens have been cut off from the world all over again, and her work is all the more powerful for that. At one point a character scratches their head after spotting a clock on the wall of a half-exploded house, but he's not the only one who can still hear it tick.

Always hypnotic, sometimes discordantly beautiful, and often so moribund that it seems as gray and static as the fallen snow that's settled into a kind of permafrost around the city, "One Man Dies a Million Times" is too diffuse to make a deep impression, yet Oreck's film is sustained by the same clarity of vision that keeps (some of) its characters alive. This is, at heart, a meditation on the myopia that accompanies death, and the struggle to see beyond it when it settles over a place like a heavy fog. It's about the unreality

that fringes decay, and how suffering on a mass scale blurs into abstraction.

Haggard faces in the darkness. Empty crates swaying in rooms full of people who don't have the energy to move. Orange embers flicker outside Maksim's window in a world that's otherwise rendered in apocalyptic black-and-white. At a certain point — long after their bodies have started feeding on themselves in order to stay alive — Alyssa and Maksim drag a frozen corpse to the public square on a toboggan as casually as if they were going on a walk to the local store.

Stalin is often quoted as saying that "if only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that's only a statistic." In its own somnambulant way, and often by omission, Oreck's film keys into the process by which tragedy numbs into something colder. By counterbalancing that same process with a historic act of preservation, "One Man Dies a Million Times" waters its memories of Leningrad into a renewable affirmation of faith. It's one of the bleakest movies I've ever seen about the need to believe in the future.

Buoyed by attractive fictional characters while still being carried along the same ambient undercurrent that has run through Oreck's ultra-expressive documentary work ("Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo," "The Vanquishing of the Witch Baba Yaga"), "One Man Dies a Million Times" might be slow cinema writ large — its story told through erosion, and with

all the velocity of a famine — but the half-imagined past that it remembers is coming for us at the speed of real life.

## **Grade: B**

*“One Man Dies a Million Times” opens at the IFC Center on Friday, July 29, and will expand in the coming weeks,*

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