

Dear Max,
 What does a diplomat
 for a country that isn't recognized
 do when he comes to the office
 in the morning?

Eric



Question time: the film follows the epistolary exchanges between filmmaker Eric Baudelaire and Maxim Gvinjia, a one-time minister in Abkhazia

Letters to Max

France/Norway/Belgium/USA 2014
 Director: Eric Baudelaire

Reviewed by Nick Pinkerton

The foundation on which *Letters to Max* is constructed is an epistolary exchange between filmmaker Eric Baudelaire and Maxim Gvinjia, a diplomat and one-time minister of foreign affairs in Abkhazia. The two men met during Baudelaire's visit to Abkhazia's capital city Sukhumi in 2000 and struck up a friendship, which they kept up through the subsequent years. Maxim – 'Max' for short – reads aloud from Baudelaire's letters, which are loaded with open-ended questions, and then offers his answers, his voice the film's principal narration. The accompanying visuals, images taken all around Abkhazia, combine with Max's words to create a portrait of both the man and the nation he represents, though its very claim to be a nation remains disputed.

A typical missive from Baudelaire might ask, "What does a diplomat for a country that isn't recognised do when he comes to the office in the morning?" (The liminal status of Abkhazia is a through-line in his back-and-forth with

Max.) The images connect to the matters being discussed sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely – but a shot of a stalled gondola lift dangling between two towers at some long-shuttered industrial concern can easily be taken as a visual metaphor for Abkhazia's neither-nor status, as well as one more piece of evidence that the country has never recovered from its 1992-93 war. (The film's opening images are of the rainy countryside, where shells of dead tanks are in the process of being reclaimed by overgrowth.)

Abkhazia, which claims for itself a population of around a quarter of a million and an area about the size of Cyprus, is located on the eastern coast of the Black Sea. It declared its independence from Georgia after the war, though most of the world's nations have never acknowledged it, and at the time of filming it had only secured eight of the 97 votes required to be recognised as a member nation by the UN. Because *Letters to Max* isn't an info-dump doc, so much of this is alluded to or comes out in the natural course of conversation rather than being stated outright.

Baudelaire's motive for choosing Max as his co-author is immediately obvious, for the answers he offers to each question are thoughtful and unexpected, touching on matters both practical and abstract. The first response that we hear from Max is in answer to Baudelaire's

opener: "Are you there?" "The question... it's very philosophical," Max replies. "I don't live in the space where I'm actually physically living. I'm always somewhere in my thoughts."

This is not to say that the collaboration is entirely eye to eye; at various points Baudelaire presses Max with questions about Abkhazia's dependent relationship with its ally, Russia, as well as about the mass exile of Georgians from Abkhazia in the years following the war. The movie abounds in images of abandoned homes, some of which, it is suggested, belonged to fleeing Georgians. There are also gutted holiday villas and Soviet-style poured-concrete brutalist blocks of flats mortally wounded by artillery and run to seed, too big to fix up and too big to knock down.

While Max discusses the history of Abkhazia, Baudelaire shows the physical evidence of that history as it can still be found today, more than a quarter of a century after the collapse of the USSR: a mosaic depicting a rocket launch, for instance, recalls Abkhazia's connection to the Soviet space programme. Recounting his shifting impressions on repeated visits to Abkhazia, Baudelaire writes, "The ruins had become monuments. Monuments to another logic of time, another logic of space, another logic of politics – the politics of isolation, and the politics of non-recognition."

Baudelaire's compositional sense and historical



In looking at the identity of a nation-that-isn't-a-nation, Baudelaire and his collaborator take the opportunity to touch on larger philosophical questions

perspective elevate this above mere 'ruin porn', and he's after something more besides. The past infringes on the present in Abkhazia, but so too does the promise of a glorious tomorrow – souvenir T-shirts bearing the flag are emblazoned with the motto 'Abkhazia Country of the Future'. In looking at the identity of a nation-that-isn't-a-nation, Baudelaire and his collaborator take the opportunity to touch on larger philosophical questions. The disjuncture expressed in Max's response to the question "Are you there?" is at the heart of *Letters to Max's* design; as Baudelaire has stated in interview, this is "a film that's based on asynchronism". In his voiceover, Max alludes to 12 years having passed between his meeting Baudelaire and the beginning of their correspondence, and while they speak of anticipating a future reunion and plan the film they will make together, the accompanying images reveal that of course this reunion has already taken place, the distance has been breached and the film has been shot. ("Our correspondence is more like recalling the past and talking from the present," Max says, "but you didn't listen yet to it. Possibly you'll come and see something else.") Further complicating the timeline of the film, Baudelaire and Max attempt to 'replay' certain key scenes in Max's life, such as 26 August 2008, when Russian president Dmitry Medvedev announced that the Russian Federation was going to recognise the independence of Abkhazia, or the day when Max received word of his nomination for the post of minister of foreign affairs.

Running through all this is the question of what, precisely, makes a country. "It's possible," writes Baudelaire, "that nations are based as much on what the people jointly forget as what they remember." That forgetting is the helpmate of sentiment. Max, for his part, confesses to a "great nostalgia about the Soviet Union", while expressing doubt about Georgians who might like to return to ancestral homes in Abkhazia, stating that they "want to return to their nostalgia, they want to return to a past that isn't there any more". And despite Max's repeatedly stated optimism, a general sense of the good times being gone, in more ways than one, lends the movie a pervasive melancholy. Once a political prodigy, Max is now out of office and nearing 40, the boyishness of his soft face betrayed by his receding hairline and wistfully preoccupied expression. He has three sons but, he tells Baudelaire, lives apart from their mother

and shares custody of them. Then again, as Max is reporting his estrangement from his wife, we see the family together at an outing on the beach – have they reconciled since those words were spoken? It is in moments such as this, or in Max's telling Baudelaire that it's a "sunny September day" while rainfall is audible on the soundtrack, that Baudelaire teases out 'asynchronism'.

Letters to Max is the fourth feature-length work by the 42-year-old Baudelaire, who was born in Salt Lake City but is now based in Paris; he is international in his concerns, which he has pursued consistently and resourcefully. His first solo exhibition, 'Imagined States', at Toulouse's Château d'Eau in 2005, comprised pictures taken in Abkhazia. ("How," the catalogue essay asked, "does one photograph the longing for Statehood?") His 2009 short *The Makes* shows the film critic Phillippe Azoury, playing himself, leading an illustrated bullshit discourse on the non-existent Japanese period of Michelangelo Antonioni, a touchstone for anyone who, like Baudelaire, is interested in photographing architecture.

The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years Without Images (2011) and *The Ugly One* (2013) were collaborations in a more traditional sense, both made partly in concert with Adachi Masao, a Japanese avant-garde director who abandoned filmmaking to work for the Palestinian cause. *The Anabasis...*, whose title refers to Xenophon's account of the Greek army's homeward journey, is also built from a correspondence: Adachi, now barred from Beirut, remotely instructs Baudelaire on what to film in his former home. For Baudelaire, however, the idea isn't to say, "You can't go home again," but to ask if you were ever there to begin with. [S](#)

Credits and Synopsis

Photography

Eric Baudelaire

Editing

Eric Baudelaire

Laure Vermeersch

Sound

Juliette Navis

Production Companies

A film by Eric Baudelaire
Produced with the

participation of
Région Ile-de-France,
Bétonsalon - Centre
d'art et de recherche,
Bergen Kunsthall,
Argos Center for
Art and Media,
Image/Mouvement
- Centre national
des arts plastiques,
UC Berkeley Art
Museum, Pacific
Film Archive

Produced by
Poulet-Malassis

In Colour
[1.78:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
Independent
Cinema Office

A documentary exploring the story of Abkhazia, a disputed breakaway nation still considered by most world governments to be part of Georgia, through an exchange of letters between filmmaker Eric Baudelaire and former minister of foreign affairs Maxim 'Max' Gvinjia. Images of life in Abkhazia are accompanied by Gvinjia reading from and responding to letters from the filmmaker, with whom he struck up a friendship during the latter's visit to Abkhazia in 2000. Gvinjia, who has retired from politics, gives thoughtful answers to Baudelaire's questions, discussing both his personal life and the past and future of his nation, beginning with the 1992-93 war that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and ending with Abkhazia declaring its independence from Georgia and expelling Georgian residents. Other landmarks discussed include Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's August 2008 announcement that the Russian Federation would recognise the independence of Abkhazia, and the first official overseas visits by the Abkhaz president to Nicaragua and Venezuela. After visits to a Black Sea resort, a sculptor's studio, a puppet theatre and a folk-dance variety show, the film ends with a letter from Baudelaire, wondering if his earlier letters have been received at all.



Instruments of war: Abkhazia's ruined buildings offer evidence of the country's wartime past