

DOMINO EFFECT

A DOCUMENTARY

by Elwira Niewiera & Piotr Rosołowski

Produced by
Otter Films & zero one film

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In Abkhazia, a post-Soviet „frozen conflict“ zone, patriotism runs deep. While Sports Minister Rafael is busy organizing an international domino event to put his motherland on the world’s map, his beloved Russian wife is just an unwelcome foreigner. A Black Sea black comedy with socio-political commentary.



SYNOPSIS

Abkhazia is a forgotten war torn country close to Crimea-Ukraine. Perched on the shores of the Black Sea, the unrecognized splinter state used to be a beach getaway for lucky Soviets, but palatial hotels now sit in post-communist ruin. For Abkhazian Sports Minister Rafael, however, everything's looking up. He's hopeful that the mysterious Domino World Championship he's organizing will finally put his beloved motherland on the world's radar and madly in love, he's willing to overlook that his dear wife is a foreigner. A proud Russian opera singer, Natasha gave up her home and custody of her Russian daughter to take a chance on a new life. But when locals won't warm to her and troubles cloud Rafael's "sports" event, their bright future and even national pride start to wobble.

From the Oscar nominated team of "Rabbit à la Berlin" comes a visually stunning Black Sea black comedy - giving us a profound look at life under Russia's spell.

ABOUT ABKHAZIA

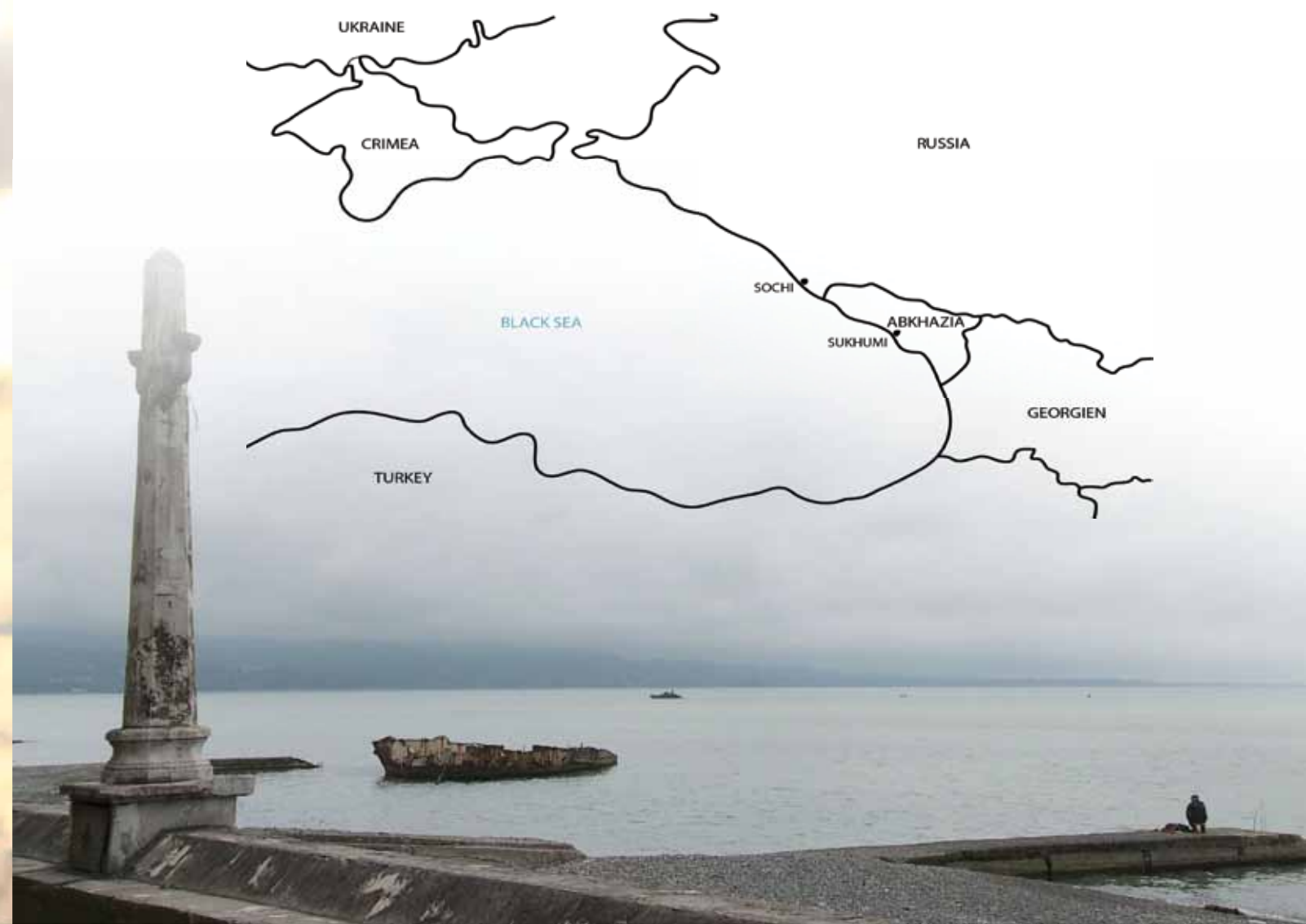
When the Soviet Union collapsed and the world celebrated the end of communism, many of the former member states strived for independence.

This led to an avalanche of political and ethnic conflicts, some of which remain unsolved to this day. This includes Abkhazia, a small republic in the Caucasus at the coast of the Black Sea.

Until 1992, the country belonged to Georgia. A bloody civil war broke out when Georgia refused to accept the Abkhazian claim to independence. Two years the two nations fought each other, thousands died and thousands fled the country. Abkhazia won the war, yet never recovered from the fallout. Wedged between Russia and Georgia, Abkhazia is now sitting on the fence between the two nations. Officially it is part of Georgia, but economically and militarily it is under Russian influence.

It used to be the most beautiful Riviera of the Black Sea, the most luxurious spa of the USSR.

The former Soviet citizens never cease to remember those beaches with melancholy, the palm trees, the tangerine trees. Today it is a rogue republic, devastated by the civil war, where for the past 20 years the citizens have lived in inertia and political isolation.



INTERVIEW

ELWIRA NIEWIERA & PIOTR ROSOŁOWSKI

What gave you the idea to shoot a film in Abkhazia?

Elwira Niewiera: It all began in 2008 – shortly after the war between Russia and Georgia. Russia was the only nation to recognize Abkhazia's independence. I read an article in the papers and asked myself again and again what it actually means to live in a state that the world doesn't want to know about. So I started to read up on Abkhazia in Ryszard Kapuściński's reportages. It was like being pulled by an undertow. And one sentence really stuck with me: "There is a place, which could be paradise on earth, yet there are more field mines than people." And this sentence became kind of an engine and a few months later we decided to travel to Abkhazia.

Piotr Rosołowski: Abkhazia isn't on any map. Hardly anyone knows this beautiful yet cursed place. First there were all the paradoxes we constantly encountered and then we realised that we wanted to understand the tragedy behind the absurdity of this place and decided to make the film. And then Domino happened...

So how did you meet your protagonists?

E: Well, we met Rafael through the Domino World Championship. When we first travelled to Abkhazia, preparations had just started and since domino is recognized as an official discipline here, we eventually found ourselves in the office of Rafael, who was the minister for sports and soon we bonded.

P: ... but it took a whole year until we met his new wife Natasha, who had decided to move to Abkhazia from Russia. We immediately agreed that the two of them had to become our protagonists. It fascinated us to see how they had decided to live together, despite the problems and obstacles.

E: Their difficult personal situation mirrored the difficult situation of the country. In the early stages of our research, we were totally convinced that Abkhazia was entangled in the conflict with Georgia. But relations between the countries had been suspended and the conflict kind of froze up. Today, people are far more concerned with the relationship to Russia. It is very ambiguous, because to be independent for Abkhazia means practically a dependence from Russia. Both in terms of the economy and militaristically. One could call it forced love, because Russia is the only partner for Abkhazia. In the long term, the Abkhazians fear to be annexed completely by Russia. And Natasha is often the target of the fallout from this fear.

P: Natasha represents the empire, which for centuries ruled over Abkhazia culturally and politically. The land has always been a pawn in the politics of the Southern Caucasus. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union the Abkhazians have been fighting for independence. During the civil war of 1992-

1993, they beat the Georgian military on their territory, due to the following economical embargos they lived through years without electricity and running water as part of the geopolitical game. Just like we can observe it right now with Crimea.

You went to Abkhazia seven times – how did you work with your protagonists?

E: The greatest challenge really was to depict the relationship of our protagonists from a perspective of intimacy, to get to their true feelings. As a filmmaker you're expecting a lot from your protagonists. But to me, the work and the life, really, only makes sense when it's "give and take". From the very beginning, we tried to give back and our protagonists were very open to that. I remember sometimes just being there, for a week or so. And then all of a sudden a scene unfolded, which proved to be very important for the movie. We were so well integrated that the camera no longer felt like an intrusion.

The film doesn't follow its protagonists – which would also have been an option – to Russia. Natasha's daughter lives there and Natasha repeatedly returns there. How did you reach that decision?

P: We wanted to shoot the whole movie in Abkhazia, so that we are only in this one country. When Natasha took the train to Russia, we got off on the border. We wanted to limit the story and tell it entirely from the point of view of Abkhazia. I think this creates clarity and the film is formally more cohesive. Everything happens in this small, tiny country, which according to national law doesn't even exist!

Does your protagonists' relationship fail because of the nation or because of love? Does it actually fail?

E: On the one hand they have this great love for one another, on the other hand they're each caught in their own world and their own past. Natasha is torn up inside, has sacrificed a lot and has a lot to loose. Rafael is still burdened with the horror of the war, he feels guilty, disillusioned because all hopes of his country have failed. It's really just a recipe for disaster.

Where did you find the archive footage? One can see scenes of war, the bodies, see Rafael in a pretty exceptional role and situation.

E: Those are images from the civil war with Georgia, which tore the country apart 20 years ago, and Rafael participated as a tank commander. In the film we meet him, as he sends two people to their death. He is torn up by guilt, which he can't get rid of even until today. That's something, Natasha often blames him for – that he cannot live an active life, because he always gives in to people, still feeling guilty. The archive footage clearly demonstrates how people, until today, are traumatised by the violence and the hatred, just like the buildings are still damaged.

P: What one comes to understand very soon in Abkhazia is that people live more in the past than in the present. To them, all this is as important, as whatever occurred just yesterday. It is a completely different notion of time compared to Europe, where people are far more focused on the future. For Abkhazia, however, there simply is no clear future.





You have decided to include this impressive archive footage rather casually, without further explanation as to who shot it and how it happens to be in the film. Why did you choose to do it this way?

P: We intended it to be a memory, to be Rafael's perspective. That's why we did not explain, why it is told as a fragment. That's something we repeatedly experienced with him: suddenly Rafael would tell stories from the war, disconnected, in strange moments. This inspired us to use the footage in the film in this manner.

Why are there so few documentaries about Abkhazia?

P: I believe there are a number of reasons. One has to mention that during the 90s the civil war in Abkhazia was overshadowed by the Balkan war, where far more people died and it was closer to Western Europe. It took until 2007 for Putin to lift the embargo, which had been placed on Abkhazia since the early 90s.

For this entire period the country was really isolated, even from Russia. And one wasn't allowed to enter the country legally, not even as a foreigner. So journalists didn't visit Abkhazia, either.

E: Until today the German Foreign Office still issues official travel warnings for Abkhazia.

Why did you choose Domino Effect as a title? What does it represent for you?

E: During our earlier trips we observed the preparations for the Domino World Championship, which in themselves were

rather absurd. Just the idea that a country invests so much faith and money hoping that finally "people from different nations will visit, talk well about us and recognize us". Then we thought, the title really hit the mark, this event is the beginning of something or at least the hope for a beginning. When we then met the couple, we realised that if we only showed the domino, this would be a very one-dimensional representation of the country, turning it into a laughing stock. We wanted to dedicate the film to the problems, difficulties and challenges, the individuals were facing. Many events we see in the film are leading us back to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the resulting civil war. Even if the war is over, it continues - through human destruction, loss of perspective and emptiness.

And you two? Your collaboration? How do you share the work? I mean: you both direct, Piotr does the camera, you're co-writing?

P: During the scripting period, I was more active; Elwira accesses situations more spontaneously. During the shoot I mostly deal with the camera, and Elwira interacts with the situations and the people.

E: We have developed the division of labour over the course of the years and meanwhile we're well aware of our respective strengths and weaknesses. That helps us to work in a constructive manner and not waste time arguing. Which doesn't imply that we always agree on the content, we often argue passionately over things.

DIRECTOR

Elwira Niewiera

lives and works in Berlin

Elwira Niewiera is a Polish director and researcher. Her feature documentary debut, **Bulgarian Stories** was presented at a number of international film festivals and had art-house cinema distribution in Germany. Elwira worked also as first assistant director and researcher on the Academy Award nominated documentary **Rabbit à la Berlin**. Since 2008 she is Executive Director of the Polish-German cultural foundation Nowa Ameryka.



DIRECTOR & CINEMATOGRAPHER

Piotr Rosołowski

lives and works in Berlin and Warsaw

Graduated as a cinematographer from the Katowice Film School. Awarded with a scholarship of the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. Co-director of the documentary **The Art of Disappearing** (premiere at Visions du Réel 2013), co-author of **Rabbit à la Berlin** – Academy Award nominated short documentary film. Director of Photography of many awarded feature and short films, among them: **On the line** dir. Reto Caffi – Academy Award nominated short fiction and "Nowhere in Europe" dir. Kerstin Nickig – main prize at the Sarajevo Human Rights Film Festival. He was a participant of European Film Academy Master Class 2006, Ex Oriente Film 2005 and Documentary Campus 2007.



PRODUCERS



is an independent production company based in Berlin, producing cinema and TV documentaries as well as art house fiction for the German and International market.

Over the past 20 years the company produced more than 80 documentaries, documentary television series and feature films. Many of them won international awards, among these „West“ by Christian Schwochow, „More than Honey“ by Markus Imhoof, „The Flat“ by Arnon Goldfinger, „Gerhard Richter Painting“ by Corinna Belz, „Black Box Germany“ by Andres Veiel, or „Echoes of Home“ by Stefan Schwietert. The collaboration with Aleksandr Sokurov on films like „Moloch“ or „Father and Son“ was highly acclaimed and awarded in Cannes.

With „24h Berlin“ (2009, director Volker Heise) zero one film broke new grounds, provoking broadcasters to cast aside the traditional slot structure for the duration of 24h allowing for a so far unprecedented 24 hours documentary. With „24h Jerusalem“ zero one film created a follow-up of the award winning format.

www.zeroone.de



The Warsaw-based production company focuses on arthouse fiction and documentary films for cinema and TV, with an emphasis on the international market. Otter Films is a creative team of people devoted to good stories and artistic qualities. Most of projects are international co-productions, shot in many places all over the world (incl. Haiti, USA, Mexico, Abkhazia, Morocco, Mongolia).

We work on projects with such great filmmakers as Sergey Dvortsevov, Jolanta Dylewska, Andrzej Wajda, Agnieszka Holland and Bartek Konopka.

Otter Films is run by Anna Wydra, producer and production manager of many award-winning films. Oscar nominated for the documentary „Rabbit a la Berlin“, awarded the Prize for the Best Producer at the Cracow Film Festival and nominated for a Polish Film Institute Award (Best Foreign Promotion). 2006-09 Head of Production, and from a tutor for Creative Producer Course at Wajda School.

www.otterfilms.pl

CREDITS & CREW

76 min, HD; colour

Poland / Germany 2014

Script & Director: Elwira Niewiera & Piotr Rosołowski

Producer: Anna Wydra / Otter Films (P),
Ann Carolin Renninger & Thomas Kufus / zero one film (D)

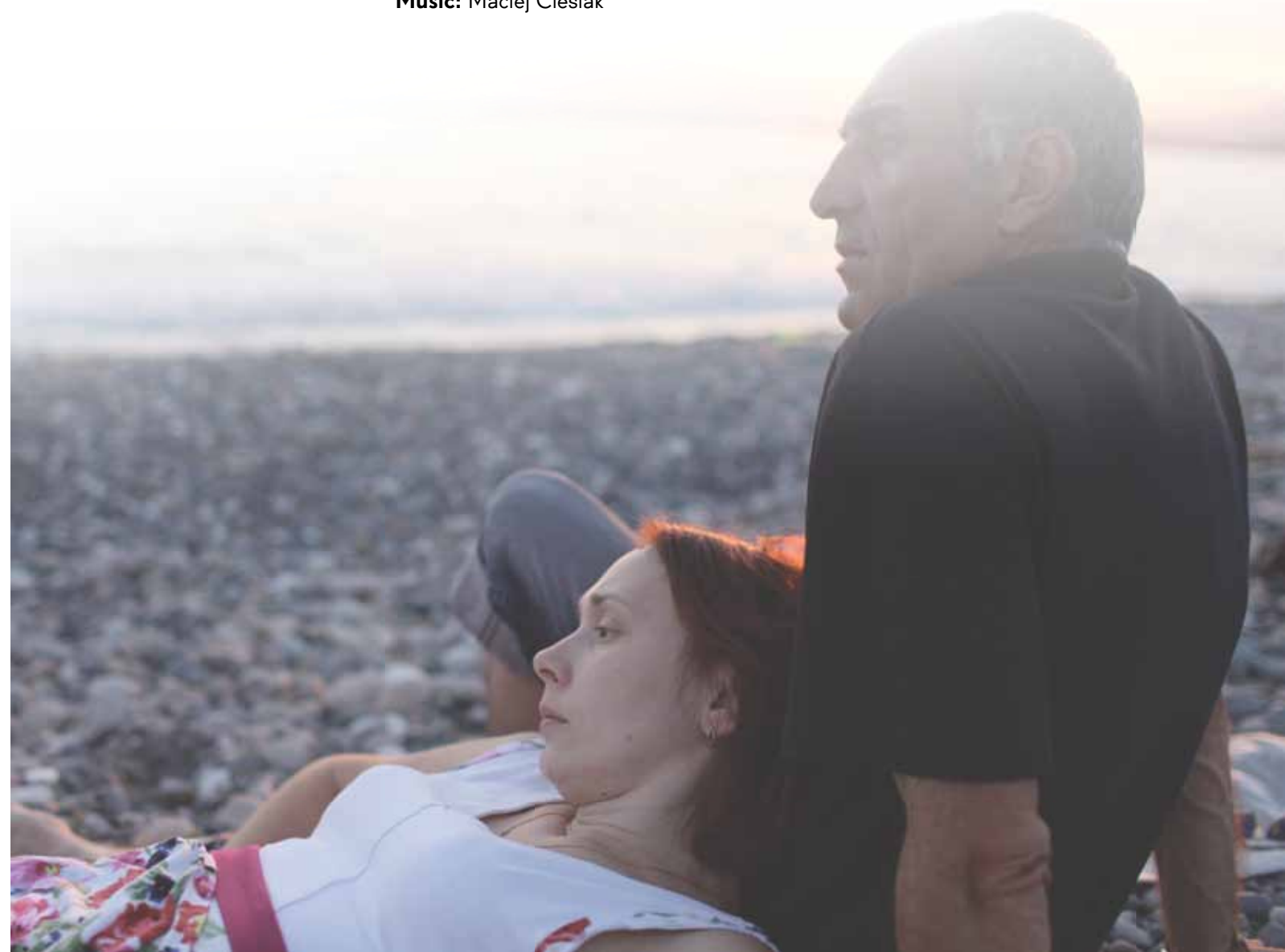
Commissioning Editor: Dagmar Mielke (rbb / ARTE)

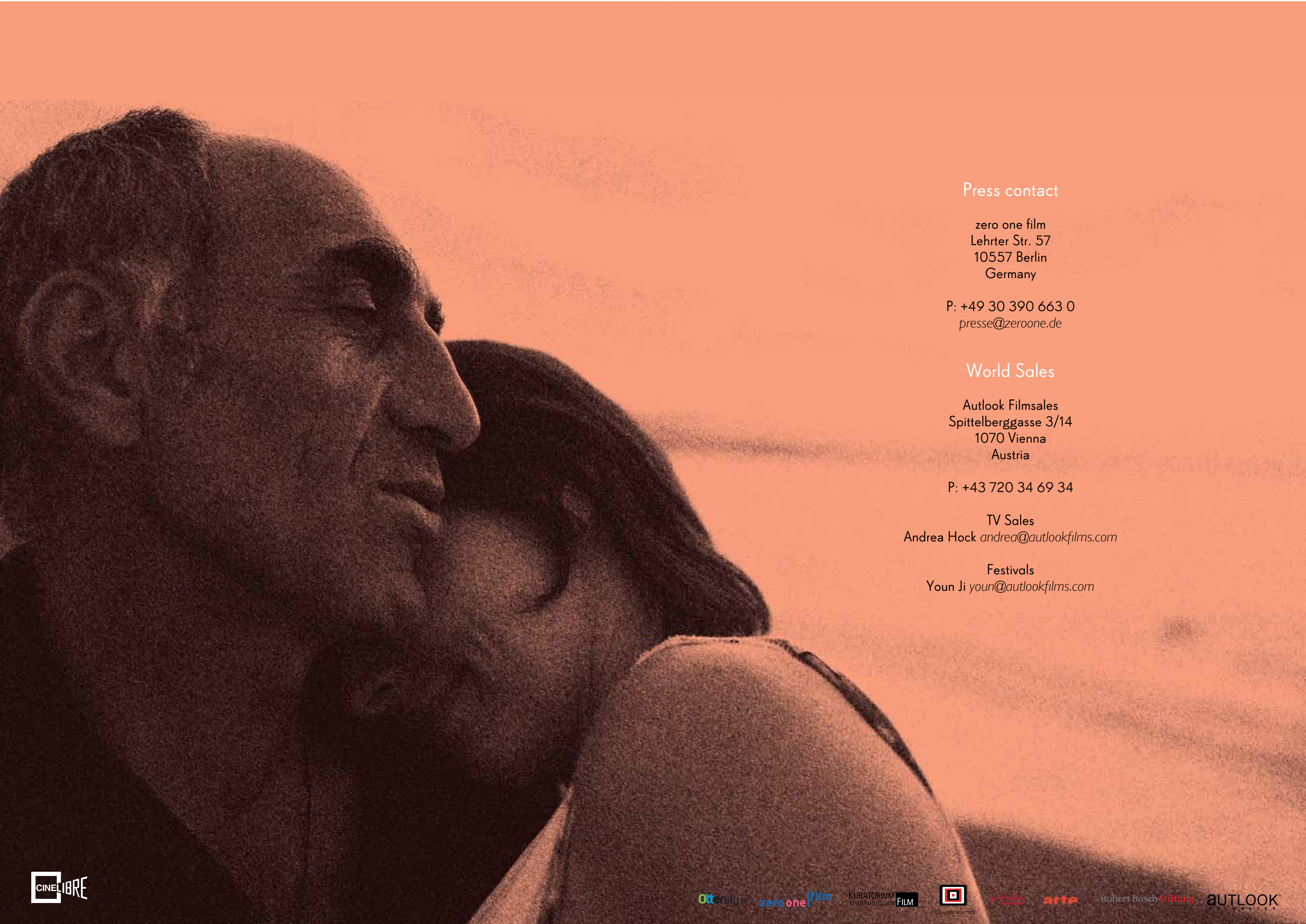
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