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The Kartli Kingdom
ქართლის ცხოვრება

A FILM BY TAMAR KALANDADZE & JULIEN PEBREL

Georgia, France | 2025 | 104'

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Logline

In a crumbling sanatorium in Tbilisi refugee families fight to hold onto their home and fading dreams.

Short Synopsis

"Kartli" refers both to Georgia’s medieval kingdom and a Tbilisi sanatorium sheltering refugees from the 1990s war in Abkhazia, meant as temporary but lasting 30 years. The crumbling building became a recreated “country”, with a farm, gardens, terraces and rooms where old VHS tapes revive memories of a lost paradise. Through Tamuna, Irma, and others, the film explores exile, trauma, and shared resilience, showing that nothing stays the same inside Kartli.

Synopsis

"Kartli" refers to the medieval kingdom giving rise to Georgia and a Tbilisi sanatorium housing refugees from the 90s civil wars - an initially temporary situation that persists for 30 years. Everyone knows that the building, which is split into two parts by a fault, is doomed to collapse. Yet the refugees and their descendants have recreated a "country" for themselves: they have a farm, a garden, terraces for dreaming and partying, and a tiny room that serves as their home, where they replay the old VHS tapes of their youth. Kartli's life is shaped by the melancholy of a lost paradise. This paradise is Abkhazia, the region from which they were expelled. Alongside Tamuna, Irma and other residents, Kartli's life is revealed, and through her, the traumas of exile and the strength of togetherness. When sections of Kartli crumble, sparking fears for residents' lives, Irma leads a fight for immediate relocation, resulting in a slow rehousing process after a tragic suicide Zouri. Amid ongoing removals, Tamuna experiences love, marriage, and pregnancy, while the remaining residents, including Irma, grapple with the prospect of leaving the community that facilitated their shared exile experience.

Directors’ Statement

A four-handed film, two of us bring our shared perspective to this film, a result of extensive discussions. Beneath the collective view, individual perspectives also contribute, each with its unique language, concepts, histories, and cultures. This film captures our interaction, reflecting an intimate embrace of each other's influence. In the field, our roles interchange effortlessly – one operates the camera, the other handles sound recording. Our fluid approach mirrors our innate framing intuition, using fixed lenses and adaptable sound systems. The 4/3 format suits Kartli's confined spaces, resembling stacked cubes. Our film narrates a community's story through its shelter: past, present, and imagined future, blending gentleness, violence, sadness, memories, and humor. These layers of time merge in editing, combining image and sound materials.

Memories, words Tales of Kartli's past shape its inhabitants' lives, forming foundational myths. These stories, like an underground stream, resurface during conversations, interrupting scenes we film. Archival footage adds bursts of collective memory, showing the 1992 war's impact. Families shared cherished VHS tapes, integrating joyous memories into the montage, reflecting generational stories and an idealized past. Spontaneous narratives from characters, though we're rarely seen, reveal hidden aspects. As external interlocutors, we prompt unspoken stories during interviews. Our presence enables them to discuss subjects they wouldn't with Kartli's residents.

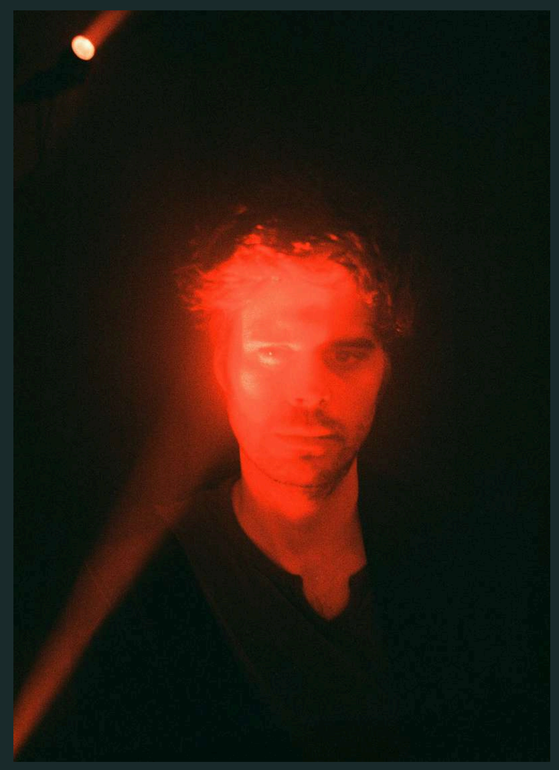
The present: daily life and struggle We capture daily life intimately, focusing on expressions, sensations, and light play. Our approach, influenced by documentary photography, finds the right perspective and distance for immersive insight. These moments brim with life - shared memories, whispered words, organizing meetings, shop discussions, and playful shepherd banter. Here, we unveil community essence, bonds, and cherished yet poignant elements. Our scouting was disrupted by rehousing struggles and Zouri's tragic suicide. We documented aftermath like protests and funerals, keeping Zouri's memory alive. Group scenes, demos, and commemorations are filmed with direct cinema's dynamic movement, reflecting ongoing momentum.

Tamar Kalandadze - Director

Tamar Kalandadze, born in 1990 in Tbilisi, is an emerging Georgian filmmaker. She co-directed "The Kartli Kingdom" with Julien Pebrel, a project that has been in production for seven years, exploring the resilience of a refugee community amidst social chaos and uncertainty. Tamar has collaborated as an assistant director and script editor with renowned Georgian and international filmmakers. She graduated from the Tbilisi State Film and Theatre University in 2012 and the Caucasus School of New Cinema in 2018. Additionally, Tamar has participated in various art residencies and group exhibitions. She works across different media, including video and photography.

Julien Pebrel - Director

Julien Pebrel is a French director and photographer living in Paris and Tbilisi. The Kartli Kingdom is his first feature film, co-directed with Tamar Kalandadze. As a photographer, he has been a member of MYOP since 2011. His work focuses on how banality and everyday life unfold in territories marked by traces of their recent history. He has worked in the Danube Delta in Romania, Armenia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Gagauzia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and others. He has been published in, among other outlets, The Financial Times Magazine, The Sunday Times Magazine, The Washington Post, The Guardian, M Le Magazine du Monde, L'Obs, Internazionale, Géo, La Reppublica, Revue XXI, Libération, Mare, Le Temps, Time, and Le Monde. His work has also been exhibited and screened in personal exhibitions, group exhibitions, and photography festivals in France, Georgia, South Korea, Germany, the UK, and elsewhere.



Q&A with the directors

To start from the beginning, how did you find out about Kartli and its residents, and what drew you to this place?

Tamar: "Now, you will understand what kind of childhood I had," my cinema schoolmate Badri, nicknamed Kita, told me. He had driven me to the sanatorium Kartli for the first time. His eyes sparkled, and a big smile was on his face. He is a Georgian refugee from Abkhazia, who has lived in a similar place, with a name in Arabic that means "Full Moon," and his nickname in Japanese is "Rejoice Often." He wanted to create a short fiction film in Kartli and needed me as a cameraman. He knew someone there who would be our guide in Kartli's universe, and that is how I met Tamuna.

On the very first day, Tamuna made us cross all seven corridors, see the Tbilisi Sea from all three terraces, stand by the water and garbage in the basement, and run up the spiral staircase. I was holding a camera, filming here and there. At the end of the day, surrounded by the soft colors of the hot summer evening on the side balcony, Badri and I quickly reviewed the footage. Without exchanging a word, we nodded in agreement.

Back then, we were engaged in intense debates at the Caucasus School of New Cinema, headed by Dymitry Mamulia, about what is potentially cinematic and what is not. We discussed what constitutes a dead territory and what is alive, and how we can capture "living atmospheres" or the "living essences of individuals." What I saw on the small screen of the camera was incredibly inviting. I felt I didn't want to straightforwardly fictionalize this place or the people in it, as Kita wanted, but rather to observe and dwell within them.
With this idea in mind, on the same day, I sent some screenshots to Julien.

Julien: I was away for three weeks at an exhibition in France. But I remember very well, Tamar sending me a photo of Tamuna lying on her bed in a black dress, bathed in orange light. Upon my return, Tamar and Kita took me to Kartli.That day, we shot the corridor scene with sunset light, and I still remember the thrill - realizing we were capturing something deeper than the corridor itself. Soon after, Kita found his joy in theatre and poetry rather than cinema and left film school. Yet, we shot many summer nights under the full moon!

Your film paints an intimate portrait of a community. How long did the filming take and what was your process of developing the story?

T: The initial driving forces behind making the film in Kartli stemmed from amazement and a powerful emotional bond. Sometimes we call it “cinematic magnetism,” but it can also be described as destiny or karma. At that time, we weren’t focused on a specific plot or story. Instead, we were exploring the early works of Šarūnas Bartas, Lisandro Alonso, Pedro Costa, Jia Zhangke, Artur Aristakisian, Carlos Raygadas, and others, and were naturally in search of “the story” within what often seemed to be “not a story.” We felt, this place had already been exhausted with story-seekers. Our approach was cautious and respectful - we aimed to work with that “time written manuscript” that Kartli already embodied, seeking to be credible enough to allow it to gradually unveil more of itself.

Between the oldest shot and the most recent one in the film 7 years have spanned. We see that seven-year cycle more as an upward-curving spiral on Kartli’s staircase than as a linear period of time. A lot happened during these seven years, both in our personal lives - including us becoming parents - and in the life of Kartli itself.

J: There were two distinct phases in our filming. The first focused on Tamuna and the place itself - before Zuri’s suicide - capturing a contemplative silence, centered on someone seeking peace in Kartli after getting a room of her own. Gradually, as she started a relationship, Tamuna drifted away, and her presence faded.

Then, after Zuri’s death, everything changed. Irma entered the scene - her strength became the heart of Kartli’s fights. She led negotiations, gathered people, and revealed a new, pulsating reality of the inhabitants’ lives. Though different from Tamuna’s world, it was another aspect of Kartli’s life.

We knew bridging these moments would be challenging - almost like making two films - and we'd have to let go of some initial ideas. But we believed the film had to manage the coexistence of different perspectives and forms.

In the film you present dozens of residents and their everyday life and memories. Could you speak about your relationship with them and how this might have evolved?

T: Sometimes, you meet a completely unknown person and feel strangely, even disturbingly, attracted. You want to find a name to this emotional interest, and you can only come up with a few more or less understandable criteria for why you think you are drawn to them. As time passes and a mutual relationship begins to develop, things start to unfold, and you discover deeper reasons behind this bond.

This is what happened with us and Kartli, and that’s why I tend to mention "the work of karma”. At some point, we realized that filmmaking was merely a tool or a “created situation” within a larger scenario - designed to foster this encounter with “our people,” the people of Kartli.

J: It’s simply how a genuine friendship can evolve. We first met Tamuna and naturally fell into long conversations wandering beside the Tbilisi Sea or sharing drinks at bars. We grew close - almost like siblings to her parents and grandmother. She even gave us keys to her apartments so we could stay, film, sleep, and drink coffee there while she worked. That’s what time gives. This kind of relationship also stemmed from our own openness, our desire to film without any particular goal or expectation - we were just spending time with people, searching for something they might have sensed too: a real connection.

Irma, already familiar to us as Tamuna’s aunt, had known us for some time. But eventually, our gatherings in Irma’s room with her friends became more frequent and intimate. We cooked together, decorated New Year trees, and made Easter cakes… We felt well with them, they felt well with us, that’s it. They saw that we were spending time with them for no other reasons than enjoying their company and trying to work our best…

This spring, we welcomed Irma to Paris, in our flat. Today, whenever she needs to speak about something peacefully, she calls Tamar. One day, after several weeks without visiting Kartli, we ran into Murtaz - one of the men in the film - on the stairs. “Oh, it’s been so long! I thought you had gotten the keys to your new apartment and left Kartli.” Well, it’s true that they granted us the status of Kartli’s inhabitants.

The film starts off with the aftermath of Zuri’s suicide. Could you please speak about how this event impacted the community as well as the final outcome of the film?

T & J: The suicide deeply impacted the community, both on a personal level - bringing grief, shock, but also fostering the sense of solidarity and togetherness - and in more tangible ways, affecting everyday life and routines.
After Zuri’s suicide, the government tried to discredit him and dismiss his sacrifice as the act of a madman, but because the community consistently defended Zuri’s name across all media outlets, this narrative ultimately failed. So they were compelled to start the process of relocating the inhabitants, and within the first few months, more than half of Kartli families received the keys to their new apartments. However, gradually, the story faded from the media and public discourse as other dramatic political events related to Georgia’s shifting course unfolded, slowing down the relocation process. Today, 30 families from Kartli, including Irma’s, remain on the waiting list.

But the cinematic time begins with Zuri, eyes closed, and ends with his gaze - a searching look paired with a shy smile. When we finally discovered this ending, both of us wept. We never really talked about it explicitly, but we felt the need to meet his gaze.

That’s why we wanted his silhouette to appear on the poster. We hope he finally witnessed the healing light filling the gaping wound of Kartli.

Though the film is a portrait of many inhabitants, Irma stands out as somewhat of a main character, driving the narrative as well as the collective spirit forward. Why did you decide to focus on her story?

T & J: Without her being fully aware of it, Irma has been - and still is - a sort of central fire of Kartli, the Kalsifer from Miyazaki’s Howl’s Moving Castle. She is the one who's "burning the brightest" - putting her emotional and intellectual efforts into moving things forward, even at great personal cost. It has taken a toll on her health; she has undergone two heart surgeries in these seven years.

She was very trusting and open, yet also highly self-aware of the filming process. She felt comfortable in front of our cameras, and as she became the main character in our film, we believe she gradually adopted "the director’s vision" of her life. Even if things outside didn’t change much - or even worsened - she was able to take an inner decision to transform her life and mark another beginning at 55. The symbolic illustration of this is when she decides to get a tattoo in the film.

You mention "Kartli" refers to Georgia’s medieval kingdom and the Tbilisi sanatorium sheltering refugees from the 1990s war in Abkhazia. Having spent such a long time with the residents in the building, could you please speak about what “Kartli” means to you?

T: More than anything, Kartli has been a life lesson - an experience that deepened my understanding of myself, of my country’s recent past and present, what is truly precious, and what the future of Kartli as both a community and as saKARTvelo [the native Georgian name for Georgia, derived from the historical region of Kartli] should be founded upon.

J: It has been a place where many people we loved lived, a place where we would meet friends, just go to say hello, and hang out in search of something - a light, a frame, a scene to film, or a conversation. Can you imagine how beautiful it is to work in a place like this when you want to be a director?

On a more personal level, I've felt there is something that I probably always missed in my life: a sense of community, of belonging to a group. As a kid, I grew up in a family that was somewhat isolated, which has influenced the person I am today. I would observe the people of Kartli and admire the presence they had with each other. I often imagined what it would be like if I lived in the same building with my family and my best friends. Irma lived there with her brothers, her mother (who has passed away), her aunt, her cousin's family, and her best friends - and perhaps this is how they managed to overcome the hardships of their situation.

While the film has a strong observational character, its narrative is intertwined with rich archival material and home videos. What was the process of acquiring this material and was it all from the residents themselves?

T & J: There are two main types of archives in the film - actually, even three.

First, we used footage from The Georgian National Broadcaster, depicting the road of exile. We felt it was essential to bring some consistency to a word that is unfortunately often underestimated, almost losing its meaning - like many words today: exile. There were several routes for Georgians fleeing Abkhazia, but the final one was the road through the Chuberi pass. People left everything behind, crossing a 2,780-meter pass in the Caucasus mountains during the snowy season of fall. You can't truly grasp what that means without seeing it.

Next, we approached people from Kartli to see if they had personal archives. It's fascinating - at that moment, what do people film? Usually, birthdays or weddings. So, we found footage of Irma and Marina singing together, young Tamuna falling to sleep in the arms of her dancing uncle, Murtaz making toasts, and Zuri getting married.

Finally, we shot some material ourselves - current archives captured with an old digital camcorder and a selfmade pinhole camera.

All along, we felt that the film should weave these layers - moving from words to silence, from evocation to narration, from facts to feelings. Because that's simply how life is in the Kingdom of Kartli.

This is your debut film as individual filmmakers and a creative duo. Could you talk about the collaboration between you?

T: Our first collaboration was traveling together across various communities throughout Georgia. The second was encountering the Kartli community and settling in what we call "The Kartli Kingdom." The third is our family and a bilingual child.

I can say that we are most in sync and independent at the same time, when we are in Kartli: one filming the corridor, another capturing the stairs; one filming the terrace, another the side balcony; one focusing on adults and children, another on dogs and cats, one having coffee at Irma’s, another taking a nap on Tamuna’s bed. And after a day like that - tired but joyful - we would share the magic and the beauty of those encounters.

J: Of course, it wasn’t all easy. The end of the editing process, when time was limited, was more tense - mainly because we had different working styles, let’s say one more drastic and the other more step-by-step. The overall context of the editing and post-production, set against the backdrop of the dramatic Georgian political crisis, made things a bit more challenging, I’d say.

Over time, the vision for the film became clearer through conversations and numerous editing tests. It was always very clear to both of us what we wanted, what we rejected, and how we felt about certain scenes. Overall, it was a very trustful and collaborative process.

Credits

Director	Tamar Kalandadze Julien Pebrel
Producers	Ketevan Kipiani (Sakdoc Film) Jean-Baptiste Bonnet (Habilis Productions)
Executive Producer	Niko Mikadze
Cinematography	Tamar Kalandadze Julien Pebrel
Editors	François Sculier Eka Tsotsoria Julien Pebrel Tamar Kalandadze
Sound recording	Tamar Kalandadze Julien Pebrel
Additional recording	Niko Tarielashvili
Sound Design **Sound Editing** **Sound Mix**	Emmanuel Soland
Composer	Nika Pasuri