



NEXT STOP: UTOPIA

MINIMAL FILMS PRESENTS

A DOCUMENTARY BY **APOSTOLOS KARAKASIS**

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NEXT STOP: UTOPIA

When a Greek factory goes bankrupt, the workers occupy it and attempt to run it on their own. Self-management proves no easy task; soon they discover that they first need to change themselves.



THE STORY

When VIOME, a building material factory in Thessaloniki, closed down 3 years ago, its 70 employees faced the risk of never finding work again. After a year of unsuccessful efforts to reopen the factory or to receive the long due indemnities, **Makis** the charismatic union leader suggested they occupied the factory. 20 production workers, unanimously signed a manifesto declaring their will to run the factory as a workers' cooperative under the principles of absolute equality and direct democracy. On the ruins of Europe's most wrecked economy, an egalitarian utopia was being born.

Different political groups of the left in Greece and across the world immediately embrace the endeavour. At last here was an inspiring alternative example to the current crisis, maybe even the forerunner of a wave of factory occupations in Europe, following the "recovered factories" of the past decade in Argentina and Latin America. Their struggle to keep their factory working becomes an international symbol.

Self-management, however, proves no easy task. After the excitement of the first days, when they enter the factory, to find “their working place” and service “their machines”, they have a bad surprise. Most of the stock of the existing raw material, they had confiscated in return for their owed wages, turns out to have already expired. In order to survive, they decide to produce entirely different goods: ecologically friendly soaps and cleaning products. They would be easy to finance and they could sell them to their supporters. Of course their know-how is limited, and initiative has never been a part of their job requirements. Despite all the difficulties, they manage to get production going. The solidarity network built up around their endeavour, allows them to sell their products and generate a small income.



They have to learn everything starting from scratch: production, distribution, promotion, management... On top of that come direct democracy, collective spirit and sense of responsibility. A period of development of new skills and personal fulfilment

has begun. They realise that they have to radically change their way of being and thinking, if they want to reach their purpose. Some will accept it with enthusiasm; others may be reluctant to take the plunge.

Yet, working in occupied premises and selling products without authorisation is a risky business and that worries them a lot. They seek ways to gain legal status through meetings with top government officials, legal experts and political allies. But the state does not seem willing to legislate for their cause. So have they to carry on with their only option: illegal trading.

Meanwhile, media crews, journalists and activists from around the world -even “comrade Naomi” Klein, as Makis introduces her- visit them almost everyday to witness a venture that already claims a place in history. VIOME workers delegations are also travelling all around Greece and abroad to sell products and establish a strong solidarity network. However, for those who remain back in Thessaloniki, time passes without much progress and the families cannot survive with the tiny income everyone gets from solidarity sales.

A year after the occupation, internal conflicts rise. Not everyone shares the same enthusiasm and confidence in this enterprise, not everyone contributes equally. Trust between them deteriorates and two factions are formed.



A ray of hope emerges as the state accepts the creation of their cooperative. Now they have to move fast, take responsibility and make serious commitments. Some of them, the “non believers”, refuse to commit, arguing that they “have always been simple workers” and do not want to “become entrepreneurs”. They will soon leave the venture.

For the remaining workers, more united and dynamic than ever, the coming months are critical. They have to develop better products and set up an efficient sales network. Furthermore they have to enforce their solidarity network in order to keep the police out of their occupied factory “their utopia”: to set an ethical business, both-economically viable and democratically run by its own workers?

One thing is certain: VIOME workers have already succeeded to take control of their lives.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

When we started filming, almost three years ago, the attempt of the Viome workers to take over their abandoned factory, neither us, nor them knew the extraordinary experience that lied ahead of us. What we ended up documenting was an intense adventure that brought mixed feelings of uncertainty and frustration with excitement and hope and provided us with a powerful story with many layers.

The case itself is extreme; workers with no work experience outside the production line, driven by despair, decide to start a small revolution, just for a chance to win back their lives. They want to establish an island of utopia in a capitalist environment and of course they meet a thousand obstacles and conflicts at every level.

They are going against the law, the judicial authorities and the factory's ex-owners, while they fight to gain some kind of legal status. There are conflicts within the group as well; practicing direct democracy among people with different attitudes, convictions and ideas can be very hard. But what proves to be the hardest, is the inner conflicts each individual has to face as the times are calling for a deep personal transformation. These people in their fifties are forced to develop a new identity, one that will allow them to survive in dignity and withstand the sufferings of an "outrageous fortune". The giant shifts they have to perform can sometimes seem comic and tragic at the same time.

As a filmmaker I felt the need to present, as deeply and as respectfully as I could, characters with opposing point of views. In a way they all represent pieces of a collective social mosaic that is not indicative only of the Greek case, but reflects most European societies today. Ultimately this is a bittersweet tale of real people whose lives cross with history. I am deeply grateful to all of them for honouring me with their trust and letting me tell their story as an adventure of our times.

DIRECTOR: Apostolos Karakasis



Apostolos Karakasis has been active in the Greek documentary scene over the last 20 years as director and editor. His work for ERT includes over 20 films on cultural and historical subjects, while his independent films "98 years" (1998) & "National Garden" (2009), were both awarded the audience prize at Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival. He is a professor at the School of Film Studies of the Aristotle University.

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PRODUCTION: Minimal Films

Minimal films (Athens) was created in 2002 by the director/producer **Marco Gastine**. The company has produced feature length creative documentaries: “Marseilles, a Greek profile” (nominated at Prix Europa, Greek state award for best documentary), “Themis” (selected at the Cannes Film Festival, nominated for Prix Europa), “Demokratia, the way of the cross” (nominated for Prix Europa 2013). It has also produced and coproduced Greek & International documentary series. In collaboration with some of Greece’s most prominent documentary filmmakers, it produced the 13 episodes series “DOCVILLE” (nominated at Prix Europa 2011), portraying stories of Greek society in crisis with an observational approach. International co productions include: “The Shadow Fighters” and “Alexander the Great” by B. George for ARTE, “When Sisyphus rebels” by A. Ségal, and two episodes of the ARTE series “Les Oubliés de l’Histoire” with les Films du Tambour de Soie. In 2015, it also coproduced the feature length documentary by Antoine Danis “Athènes les éclats”.

Next Stop: Utopia is produced by **Marco Gastine & Eleni Chandrinou** (Minimal Films), with the collaboration of **Carl-Ludwig Rettinger** (Lichtblick Films, Germany).

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with the participation of
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TECHNICAL INFO:

Duration: 91 mins
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Sound: 5.1
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Subtitles: English

For more information about VIOME, please check: www.viome.org

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