

Radical Documentaries, Neoliberal Crisis and Post-Democracy

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Abstract: This article examines radical documentaries in Greece, in the context of neoliberal crisis and post-democracy. In a context where the mainstream media have made themselves irrelevant, facing historical lows in trust and credibility, we found that radical documentaries have emerged outside the commodification of information and form part of the growing social or solidarity economy in Greece. Our analysis shows that these documentaries operate through a different political economy relying on crowdfunding, free distribution and a collaborative organisation. Specifically, these documentaries are firmly oriented towards society rather than the political sphere. Further, they seek to recuperate the media through engaging professional media workers, journalists, film directors, academics and actors; they operate through reclaiming media know-how; through radicalising the financing, production and distribution by refusing to participate in commodification processes; and through recreating commonalities by thematising the common, the public, and responsibility towards others. Their specific political role is that of helping to restore the social body and to contribute to processes of commoning, whereby solidarity and social trust is recovered.

Keywords: Radical Documentaries, Journalism, Media, Solidarity Economy, Commons, Neoliberalism, Crisis, Greece

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1. Introduction

Greece has been at the epicentre of neoliberal austerity crisis, connected to protracted and deepening social and political crises. The state of affairs in Greece at the moment fits very clearly into the post-democratic scenario that Colin Crouch so eloquently discussed in 2004 and in more depth in 2011. As the crisis is deepening and intensifying, and within a context where citizens are effectively disenfranchised, how can they assume agency, formulate new understandings and seek redress? In Greece, the crises saw several responses, which included protests and occupations (The Invisible Committee 2015; Simiti 2014; Mason 2013); conspiratorial, mystical and fascist movements (Bakalaki 2014; Papastathis 2015); the rise and fall of the coalition of the radical left party Syriza (Ovenden 2015; Sheehan 2017); and bottom-up social organisation and the rise of a solidarity economy and a resurgence of thinking about the commons (Rakopoulos 2013; 2014; 2015). In this article we argue that the emergence of radical documentaries in Greece has to be understood within the context of the formulation of productive responses and practical, lived alternatives to the crisis.

The article seeks to explore the political role and significance of this media form, and by token the broader field of radical media to which it belongs. Examining a series

of documentaries produced in the years of the crisis, we interrogate the new documentary practices that have emerged, with a view to contributing towards theorising the role of radical media within the context of protracted economic, social, and political crises associated with neoliberalism. In doing so, we engage in a discussion of post-democracy and the erosion of civic and political rights associated with neoliberalism. In this context, the role of mainstream traditional and liberal media is either redundant or reactionary and a void is created. It is within this void that radical documentaries emerge.

Radical documentaries are theorised as part of new forms of bottom-up social and economic organisation, broadly understood as the solidarity economy. These documentaries are discussed in terms of the political economic contexts of the production of such media forms, the identities of the producers, the themes and topics engaged in, and the relationships fostered between media producers and the public. The discussion indicates that the political functions of the genre may be located in its contribution towards allowing the social and solidarity economy to scale up, moving beyond agitation and pedagogy and towards a process of collective social understanding of the crisis, and management and rehabilitation of the social trauma through dealing with blame, creation of divisions, expropriation and socio-cide. In this manner, these documentaries seek to restore broken social bonds and hold society together, thereby offering ongoing resistance to the individuation and social breakdown of neoliberal crisis.

2. Neoliberalism, Crisis and Post-Democracy

Following Crouch (2004; 2011), we understand the political context in Greece as post-democracy: the condition where, while the formal trappings of democracy, such as elections and so on, are still present, all-important political decisions are made elsewhere. For Crouch, this is linked to the inability of nation states to move away from neoliberalism. Post-democracy is therefore first and foremost the result of the advance of neoliberalism as a political and economic ideology revolving around ideas of minimal state and maximal market. Crouch (2011, 17) argues that the main tenet of neoliberalism is that “optimal outcomes will be achieved if the demand and supply for goods and services are allowed to adjust to each other through the price mechanism, without interference by government or other forces – though subject to the pricing and marketing strategies of oligopolistic corporations”. This directly contradicts the social democratic policies associated with Keynes, in which the government interferes in periods of low demand, typically by pumping the economy with money. Rather, neoliberalism holds that protectionism and government intervention will, in the long run, lead to deeper crisis and more unemployment because they will ‘skew’ the market by not allowing prices and wages to adjust to each other ‘naturally’. The political domain has to operate outside and separately from the economic domain and the market. It follows that any kind of government or legal interventions in the form of support for binding collective agreements, any kind of labour protection or subsidies, are antithetical to neoliberal tenets because they interfere with the independence of the market.

The impact of neoliberal policies has been well documented. Harvey (2005) and Piketty (2014) have shown how, instead of equalising societies, neoliberal policies lead to extreme wealth concentration and an increasing polarisation between the very rich and the very poor, with a disappearing middle. Crouch (2011) argues that the rise of oligopolies and the spread of corporate power and influence are two of the main characteristics of the neoliberal era. These are in turn associated with the shrinking power of the political sphere, the use of debt as a disciplinary mechanism for states and for persons (Lazzarato 2015), and a broader shift in social and cultural values towards an

intensified individualism, often cultivated in social media as networked individualism (Castells 2001; Wellman 2001).

The shrinkage of the power of the political sphere is in many ways the direct outcome of prioritising the market, which has been taken over by corporations. This situation is referred to by Crouch as post-democracy: while the formal institutional apparatus of the representative democracy is still there, in practice political decisions are not taken in parliaments but in trade agreements and in essentially secret negotiations (Crouch 2004). In this manner, although elections still take place, governments change and political parties are still in operation, their power is significantly diminished, as they more or less operate as enforcers of neoliberal policy under the 'there is no alternative' doctrine.

Nowhere is this manifested more clearly than in Greece, the European epicentre of the financial crisis. In the eight years since the crisis began in 2009 there have been four national elections, a referendum and seven changes in government. The governments have all been relatively unstable coalitions, including a government by appointment, headed by Loukas Papademos, a technocrat and former vice-president of the European Central Bank. The task of these governments has been to manage the debt, which they all did through signing and approving deeply unpopular bailout agreements or memoranda with the so-called Troika (the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund) with increasingly negative terms for Greece. The post-democratic context became clear to all when Syriza, the 'Coalition of the Radical Left', was elected in January 2015 on an anti-memorandum platform and with an agenda to renegotiate the loan agreements in order to achieve the protection of social rights. Despite Syriza's proclamations and a referendum that ended with a resounding 'No' to further bailout agreements, the Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, ended up agreeing to one with even more stringent terms (Sheehan 2017). These developments have led to an all-but-complete disenfranchisement of Greek citizens and a widespread disillusionment with the political process.

2.1. Mainstream Media and Post-Democracy

In this context, the traditional role of the media as a fourth estate, and hence another governance institution, has to be re-discussed. In liberal representative democracies the normative role of the media is to act as a watchdog and to help citizens formulate a public opinion which can feed back into the political process (Siebert et al. 1956; Habermas 1996). Although there has been widespread criticism regarding the ability of the media to fulfil their role given the political economic context within which they operate (Herman and Chomsky 2010/1988), their normative role is rarely questioned. However, in the context of post-democracy, when political institutions are cut off from the citizenry, we may need to rethink the role of the media. Moreover, this rethinking should not be disconnected from other political, social and cultural responses to the crisis, as a new normative understanding may emerge out of actual media practices. It is within this context that we need to position radical documentaries in Greece.

Greek mainstream media have been deeply implicated in the crisis, both in political economic and in cultural terms. The convoluted and difficult issue of media ownership and operation in a deregulated or often badly regulated environment in Greece has been discussed by several authors (for example, Papathanassopoulos 2001; Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Papatheodorou and Machin 2003; Veneti and Karadi-mitriou 2014, Siapera et al. 2015). Siapera (2015a) found that media ownership in Greece is confounded by the multiple business interests of media owners who use the

media to pursue their own agendas, while Smyrnaioi (2013a) showed how deeply intertwined are the interests of media owners with those of political parties and the main business families in Greece.

Although displaying some idiosyncratic characteristics, the oligopolistic model of media ownership is not unique to Greece. Nevertheless, the political economy of the Greek media may contribute to understanding how intricately they were involved in legitimating the bailout agreements and supporting the various Greek governments that signed and implemented them (Smyrnaioi 2013a; Poulakidakos 2013). As Lekakis (2017) has argued, curtailed by partisan and commercial constraints, mainstream media are conspicuously promoting a pro-austerity agenda. In cultural terms, therefore, the Greek mainstream media act as propaganda vehicles supporting bailout agreements and overly criticising or silencing any dissenting voices (Leandros et al. 2011; Poulakidakos and Armenakis 2014; Pleios 2015). Hence, it is not surprising that critiques of mainstream media appear as part of the responses to the crisis.

3. The Solidarity Economy

The solidarity economy emerged in the context of post-democracy and the retreat of the state, and while it does not directly confront post-democracy it contributes to alleviating some of the losses involved, through providing an alternative safety net addressing some of the needs of citizens. While contention surrounds the term 'social' or 'solidarity' economy (Laville 2010; Rakopoulos 2013), we use it here to refer to bottom-up economic practices that tend to prioritise use value and social benefit over profit. One of the results of the crisis and the imposition of austerity has been the state's withdrawal from offering public services, including health and education, and its general reductions in the provision of a social security net. Solidarity networks emerged in part to fill this gap, voluntarily offering services. For example, in the 'Social Clinics' and 'Social Pharmacies', doctors and nurses volunteer their services and people donate medicines they no longer need. Additionally, cooperatives and direct food distribution networks have emerged in an attempt to serve the needs of people for food and other consumer goods without exploiting them for profit. In such markets, farmers sell their goods directly to consumers without any 'middlemen' (Rakopoulos 2013). Finally, there have been some successful attempts to self-manage recuperated factories by workers themselves. For example, workers seized the Vio.Me factory in Thessaloniki after the company collapsed.

Trust constitutes a crucial parameter for the success of such efforts. In his anthropological investigations of solidarity initiatives in Greece, Rakopoulos (2013; 2014; 2015) focused on how people view solidarity and their connections to others. Rakopoulos found that these socialities, which he understands as informal practices, developing from the bottom up and in the absence of formal rules, are built on local bonds, through neighbourhoods, and through kinship and friendship networks; being sustained through mutual trust and a morality that has developed through this close social contact. The solidarity economy thus depends on a kind of sociality that revolves around close association and bonds with others. It follows, therefore, that this kind of sociality – emerging in the solidarity economy as a response to the crisis, but also moving beyond the crisis and towards the future – is very different to the atomised individualism of neoliberalism, with a sociality revolving around personalised networks and trust based on recommendation systems. However, as Rakopoulos notes, a crucial tension in solidarity networks is between the informality that sustains the solidarity networks in the present, and the demands for formalisation placed by the future ambition to scale up and expand the solidarity economy. Sociality, or bonds with others, might emerge

as a key factor in allowing for scalability while retaining the solidarity elements. The question is how to find ways of building and maintaining bonds and trust in the absence of formal (or mechanical/algorithmic) rules¹. It is here that we locate radical media: these have emerged within and from the crisis, characterised by a pragmatic orientation towards the here and now, but with a longer-term concern for sustainable change beyond the crisis (Siapera and Papadopoulou 2016; Siapera et al. 2015).

This discussion has been necessary in order to point to the embeddedness of the media in the social, political and economic environment. Thinking about radical documentaries in Greece as a new media form cannot take place outside this broader environment. As this article will outline in the following sections, the changing normative and political function of these media is to sustain social bonds in a society that is under assault, compared to the 'watchdog and objectivity' functions of liberal media and the 'agitation' function of other radical media forms. These media are therefore not incidental but central to efforts from below to manage the crisis pragmatically, to deal with the affective traumas caused by the crisis, and to imagine and create a new future. While documentaries are part of the broader field of radical media in Greece, their position and role is unique in having the space and the means by which to confront some of these issues head on.

4. Radical Documentaries

The radical media in Greece constitute a dynamic and evolving field whose importance and role in the current context shouldn't be underestimated (Siapera 2015b). The production of radical documentaries has been integral to the field, and one can even argue that they inaugurated radical journalism, or at least kick-started its current form, which is characterised by high-end production values, the participation of professional journalists and cinematographers, and relatively high visibility both in Greece and abroad (Ibid.). This section begins with a discussion of documentaries as a media form before moving on to discuss the specificities of radical documentaries, looking at the context of production and the identities of the producers; the topics and subjects at the heart of these documentaries; and their aesthetics, distribution and reception.

4.1. Documentaries as Media Form

In a much-quoted definition, filmmaker and theorist John Grierson defined documentaries as "the creative treatment of actuality" (quoted in Hardy 1966, 13). However, this very broad definition can include a great variety of non-fiction media forms, including, for example, advertisements and corporate films, public information films or instructional films, and also journalism, thereby diminishing the explanatory capacity of this definition. Another set of challenges comes from the nature of this 'actuality' and the tension between truthfulness, creativity and perspective. Plantinga (2005) proposes a definition which addresses these openings and recognises the positioned perspective of documentaries without compromising their truth claims. For Plantinga, documentaries can be seen as asserted veridical representations, where there is an implicit understanding that the documentary director asserts the truthfulness of the propositions involved in the work and that the images and sounds are a reliable index of the

¹ In the future and as more and more activities migrate to the digital domain, perhaps blockchain technology may help address this question (Bollier 2015). Even then, however, the crucial socio-political question of maintaining society, commonality and community in the face of atomisation, individualisation and intense social competition is still not addressed. This may require a different kind of social labour, and the media may prove central to it.

truth. As Plantinga puts it, “When a filmmaker presents a film as a documentary, he or she not only intends that the audience come to form certain beliefs, but also [...] communicates some phenomenological aspect of the subject, from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to form a sense of that phenomenological aspect and/or form true beliefs about that subject” (2005, 111).

Truth and facticity are a central part of radical documentaries, alongside the idea that these documentaries are looking to initiate changes in the audiences based on the representations contained in the work. We therefore see that the positioned element is clear and upfront, rather than hidden behind notions of ‘objectivity’ or ‘balance’ that are typically associated with the tradition of liberal journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007). Secondly, while journalism is a continuous process of news selection and reporting, documentaries focus on one subject, allowing an in-depth and comprehensive treatment of that subject. Finally, because documentaries are typically one-off projects they can be easier to finance, while they can find clear distribution paths through social media, thereby reaching a wide variety of audiences.

As will be seen below, all these elements are found in the field of Greek radical documentaries, which, however, depart from the liberal or mainstream tradition of documentaries in three key aspects: (i) the overt politicising of their subject matter; (ii) the identities of their producers; and (iii), the political economy within which they operate.

4.2. Producing Radical Documentaries

Beginning with the latter, the political economy of the production of radical documentaries marks a clear departure from the mainstream based on at least two parameters: financing and the structure of the production process. More specifically, the traditional business model of producing a documentary involves essentially significant support from conventional revenue streams such as investors, bank loans, or pre-sale agreements and contracts with distributors. Moreover, the production process presupposes strict hierarchies and specified roles for each contributor and member of the crew. Conversely, the political economy of radical documentaries is based on a completely different business model, where financing comes mainly through crowdfunding and other supporting groups (such as artistic cooperatives) and the production process is based on horizontal and collaborative structures without clearly separated roles, meaning that the director may be also the screenwriter, the music supervisor and the cameraman.

The documentary that has in many ways inaugurated the field, *Debtocracy*, produced by Infowar Productions in 2011, relied exclusively on crowdfunding, succeeding in covering all its expenses in fifteen days (Chatzistefanou 2014). Infowar, the production company set up by the investigative journalist and filmmaker Aris Chatzistefanou, also produced *Catastroika* (2012), *Fascism Inc* (2014) and *This is Not a Coup* (2016), all through crowdfunding. While for *Debtocracy* crowdfunding was used to cover expenses, for *Catastroika* wages were successfully covered for the people employed in the project for at least one or two months, over €25,000 having been collected. *Fascism Inc* was even more successful, while in 2016 Infowar crowdsourced a fourth documentary titled *This Is Not a Coup*. For Chatzistefanou, the importance of crowdfunding lies in the independence that it allows for the production team, who do not accept donations from banks or private companies. Most other productions rely on crowdfunding exclusively, or alongside funding from unions or activists. For example, the documentaries *Ruins* (Zoe Mavroudi 2013), *Greedy Profit* (Giannis Karypidis 2013), *Knowledge as a Common Good* (Ilias Marmaras 2014), *WaterDrops* (Nelli Psarrou 2014), *Non Omnis Moriar* (Theodosia Grammatikou 2015), *Athens from Beneath*

(Takis Bardakos 2015), *Skoros*, *Anti-Consumption in Practice* (Andreas Chatzidakis/Athina Souli 2015), *Golden Dawn: A Personal Affair* (Angelique Kourounis 2016), have all been, at least in part, funded by crowd donations. An interesting parameter here is that these production companies help and support each other (for example, *Non Omnis Moriar* and *Ruins* have been supported by InfoWar Productions), indicating that this is a field that is not characterised by the competition typical of the media. Crowdfunding operates not only as a guarantor of independence but also as a way in which to collaborate with audiences, inviting them along to the production process.

This kind of production process suggests a third way between that of Comedia's full endorsement of mainstream media marketing and entrepreneurialism and that of the Leninist media as party organisers and vanguards (Comedia 1984; Khiabany 2000). This is because it constitutes an *ad hoc* media form whose long shelf life enables the makers to eschew the financial stress of continuous and ongoing media publications. The hopes of producers are that a successful, well-received documentary will allow them to return to people asking for donations for future projects. Indeed, this has been the case with both Aris Chatzistefanou and Takis Bardakos, the latter of whom is currently crowdfunding for a documentary on refugees (*Border Souls*). On the other hand, there is a danger of crowdfunding fatigue, given the ubiquitous use of this mode of funding. Additionally, better-known cinematographers may be in a better position to ensure adequate funding, while newcomers may fail. However, we have not come across any such failure in our research.

Turning to organisation, collaboration is central to the way in which the production process is organised, although it operates differently in different production teams. Some production teams are set up as cooperative, not-for-profit enterprises, such as the Lokomotiva Film Collective (*Non Omnis Moriar* 2015) and Square Films (*Athens from Beneath* 2015), while others are part of looser collaborative networks, such as the Personal Cinema collective, which supported the documentary *Knowledge as a Common Good* in 2014, and *Building Communities of Commons in Greece*. These documentary productions involve collaborations between filmmakers, journalists, academics, artists and activists. For example, the documentary *Skoros* understands itself as 'a collaborative ethnographic film', and its production team includes Andreas Chatzidakis, a UK-based academic. Nelli Psarrou, who produced and directed *WaterDrops*, is a political scientist and activist, while *Debtocracy* relied on the collaboration of well-known academics such as David Harvey and Alain Badiou, among others. Zoe Mavroudi is an actor, playwright and screenwriter who collaborated with Omnia TV, a radical media collective, and Unfollow magazine, to make *Ruins*. The documentaries *Athens: Social Meltdown* (2012) and *Future Suspended* (2013) were a result of collaborations between Dimitris Dalakoglou, then at the University of Sussex, Antonis Vradis, a journalist, Ross Domoney, a filmmaker and part of the UK-based Aletheia Collective, and as part of the research project Crisis Scape, run by Dimitris Dalakoglou. International collaborations are a key part of this field and must be seen as part of its political agenda to link Greek experiences with other parts of the world, thereby building global solidarities.

4.3. Political Identities

While producers can be understood in varied terms as artists, academics, filmmakers and journalists, they all have in common a kind of radicalised political identity that has emerged from the context described above as 'neoliberal capitalist crisis' and 'post-democracy'. This radicalised identity is important if we are to understand the political function of these documentaries, but it also marks a point of departure from a filmmaker

identity understood as mediating between audiences and subject matter or representation. Media workers and journalists have become polarised in the context of the crisis in Greece, with some becoming compromised and opting to work for mainstream media, which are generally seen as propaganda vehicles (Poulakidakos 2013). Others became radicalised, having experienced the impact of the crisis through unemployment, hyper-exploitation, and police repression (Siapera et al. 2015; Siapera 2015b). They therefore become vocal and active in creating radical media spaces within which different narratives of the crisis can develop, and alternative social imaginaries can be suggested and explored.

The directors and producers of these documentaries have strong political views, which motivate them and animate their work. In an interview we conducted with Zoe Mavroudi², the director of *Ruins*, which deals with the case of HIV+ women who were forcibly tested, imprisoned, and shamed through the media in a highly publicised case, she explained how this case was emblematic of the violence of the system. She told us that she became angry and indignant at the ferocity with which the state and the media persecuted these women. Mavroudi felt that it was necessary to create a record of this as a means by which to question the power and absurdity of the state and the media, showing that in post-democratic conditions, mainstream media are part of the state repression apparatuses. Aris Chatzistefanou³, the director of *Debtocracy*, talked of his personal trajectory, being sacked from Skai, one of the biggest private broadcasters and media groups in Greece, because he refused to sign an individual agreement with the station which would effectively invalidate the collective agreement between media employers and employees. He spoke of the overt pressures put on media workers by media owners, of the deeply corrupt media system, and of the lack of any social justice.

4.4. Themes and Contents

If we were to draft a timeline of the themes and contents of the documentaries we are considering, the first topic of concern would be the crisis itself, with documentaries providing in-depth analyses, linkages between the Greek experience and debt experiences in other countries, seeking to make connections between international politics, capitalism, and the intensification of exploitation. *Debtocracy* and *Catastroika* (Infowar 2011 and 2012) were two such documentaries, alongside *Mute: Visualization of an Economic Rape* (Yannis Biliris 2012), which explores the crisis visually. This theme is explored by documentaries turning to the effects of the crisis: selling resources, mass layoffs and closures of small and medium businesses. The pillaging of public resources and the ecological destruction in the case of the goldmine in Skouries is covered in *Greedy Profit* (2013); the attempts to privatise the public water companies is detailed in *WaterDrops* (2014); while the destruction of industry and the struggle of steel workers is documented in *Non Omnis Moriar* (2013). The trajectory from public to private spaces in Athens with the privatisation of public land is documented in *Future Suspended* (Dimitris Dalakoglou/Ross Domoney 2013). The impact on people is explored in *Ruins* (2013), where Zoe Mavroudi explores the ruined lives of HIV+ women persecuted and publicly shamed, while the documentary *Athens from Beneath* (Bardakos 2015) makes visible the new underclass that has emerged in Athens. Recently, there have been attempts to link the plight of refugees to the austerity crisis in Greece; for example, in Bardakos' new project *Border Souls*. Theopi Skarlatos examines social

² Interview 30.4.2015

³ Interview 22.5.2014

and romantic relationships in *Love in the Time of Crisis* (2014). The rise of the Golden Dawn is documented in Angelique Kourounis' *Golden Dawn: A Personal Affair* (2016), in Marsia Tsivara's *Burning from the Inside* (2015) and in *Fascism Inc* (Infowar 2014). The democratic deficit and post-democracy is explored in Theopi Skarlatos' (2015) *This is a Coup* and in *This is Not a Coup* (2016) by Infowar Productions. Next to these themes, radical documentaries are further exploring new ways of addressing and resisting the crisis, through developing alternative means of self-organising, common spaces, and social solidarity. *Next Stop Utopia* (Apostolos Karakasis 2015) on the self-managed factory Vio.Me; *Knowledge as a Common Good* (Ilias Marmaras 2014); *Let's Not Live Like Slaves* (Yannis Youlountas 2013); and *Building Communities of Commons in Greece* (Personal Cinema Collective 2016), as well as *Skoros: Anti-Consumption in Crisis* (Andreas Chatzidakis/Athina Souli 2015) about an anti-consumerist collective in Exarcheia in Athens: all explore new forms of self-organising and solidarity not only as temporary patches to the crisis but as a means of shaping a different future. Moreover, subthemes and currents within these works explore the role of state and police repression and violence, which have been central in managing the crisis from the top and in dealing with resistant citizen responses. In short, these themes cover the political economic bases of the crises, the privatisation of everything, the social implosion, but also the new social organising that is emerging, and the rise of a new social and political awareness emerging in the ruins of a post-democratic state⁴.

4.5. Aesthetics and Cinematography

It is difficult to categorise radical documentaries in terms of Nichols' (2010) six genres of documentaries. Some, such as *Debtocracy* and *Catastroika*, assume an expository tone. *Mute* may be considered poetic, while *Non Omnis Moriar* can be seen as performative while also including poetic elements⁵. No single definitive genre can be discerned, as most of the documentaries combine observational elements with interviews and participatory techniques, often using a narrator to connect the various elements. One of the most striking aspects of these documentaries is their high-end production values. These documentaries are professionally produced in the sense that the participants in the production are highly skilled in media-making processes, and a lot of skill, thought and effort has gone into researching, filming and editing the material. Stunning and poignant images, often from historical events, elections, strikes, riots and mass protests, are used to support and illustrate events and arguments explaining these events. In-depth research and multi-perspectival interviews with a multitude of witnesses and participants, from politicians to academics, from journalists to migrant workers, from old people to the younger generation, make these documentaries strong and convincing in the construction of their arguments and assertions. In most cases, radical documentaries abstain from giving voice to formal sources such as politicians or other authorities. For the filmmakers, formal sources are part of the same system that they are trying to expose and overturn. In this sense officials are only quoted in order to be exposed. In contrast, radical documentaries have gained access to people and sources such as solidarity networks, homeless people, activists and others that would never appear on national mainstream media. While they are not all equivalent in terms of their aesthetics, a common thread across these documentaries is a concern

⁴ The documentaries listed here are indicative but not exhaustive of the field. See the blog <https://greekdocsblog.wordpress.com/> for a continuously updated archive (see also Lekakis, 2017).

⁵ The title, *Non Omnis Moriar*, is a verse from Horace's Ode III.

with allowing the emergence of the voices of those who can explain the current predicament, the voices of those who are systematically silenced, marginalised and ignored, and the voices of those who have taken things into their own hands.

4.6. Distribution and Reception

The distribution and reception of these documentaries has been phenomenal, given their political position and lack of any ties to marketing and promotional companies and networks. The majority rely on social media, and are available to view online on YouTube or Vimeo, although they are further supported and distributed by activist groups, independent spaces and other grassroots initiatives that may host them in their online sites or organise social events around them.

Most have several thousand views. For example, *Debtocracy* has over 400,000 and *Catastroika* over 150,000 views on YouTube, while smaller productions such as *Athens: Social Meltdown* have over 70,000 views on Vimeo. *This is a Coup*, which enjoyed the support of the well-known journalist Paul Mason, has over 50,000 views in the few months since its release. *Golden Dawn: A Personal Affair*, which was released in May 2017, has amassed 40,000 views in five months. While these numbers are impressive⁶, they are still lower than the views generated by, for example, popular music videos or uploaded talk shows. However, we contend that the success of these documentaries should not be assessed exclusively on the basis of their popularity in views but rather on the basis of their success in inaugurating a different way of 'doing media' that is more connected to the social body than adhering to professional media and news values that generate more views.

According to Chatzistefanou, "distribution networks, just like TV channels, are controlled by the businessmen we like to investigate"⁷. The free distribution of these documentaries is an important element of alternatives to traditional media distribution, as in this manner creators and producers refuse to participate in the commodification of information. While they request donations and ask for acknowledgement of or credit to the filmmakers, documentaries are not bought and sold for profit, and they can often be freely embedded in other sites on a Creative Commons Licence. Some producers, for example Chatzistefanou and Bardakos, use Vimeo's on demand service, where documentaries can be streamed for about €3, which is seen as a form of continued crowdfunding and a means by which audiences can support the producers.

Frequently, radical documentaries are shown during festivals, solidarity events, or even during local gatherings in neighbourhoods. In this manner, radical documentaries are embedded in everyday life. Another important aspect of radical documentaries concerns the international public they have created. At a time when Greece was in the focus of global media, these documentaries allowed for a different perspective to emerge, while also creating important channels of communication for the experiences of neoliberal crisis in other contexts. So, all these documentaries have English subtitles, while some also appear in other languages, such as German, French and Spanish.

This analysis shows that these documentaries, understood as assertions relying on veridical representations, involve a political economy of production and distribution that

⁶ To give some context, documentaries uploaded by the mainstream Michani tou Chronou (Time Machine) that produces historical documentaries have an average of about 50-60,000 views on YouTube.

⁷ Interview, 22.5.2014

operates beyond notions of profit and return on investment. Firmly relying on collaboration for their financing and production, these documentaries are easily accessible to everyone. The veridical representations they involve explicitly thematise aspects of the crisis, its precedents and determinants, its impact on society and, crucially, the post-crisis future. All this indicates that radical documentaries can be seen as belonging to the solidarity economy, which constitutes a new mode of economic organising revolving around notions of collaboration and operating for social benefit rather than for profit.

5. The Political Role of Radical Documentaries

This section examines the political functions these documentaries serve, which are ultimately what makes them radical. Three main elements can be seen to emerge from the above analysis: firstly, that these documentaries are firmly oriented towards society itself; secondly, that they allow for a multiplicity of voices, typically those silenced by the mainstream media; and thirdly, that they bring together and connect a society under assault. It may therefore be argued that the most important political role of these documentaries is that of acting as a binding factor for the social body. This is where we can locate the radical potential of these media forms: in their ability and often explicitly-stated political intention to achieve a return to the social body, a rediscovery of the common, and a contribution towards a new kind of social reproduction. In all this, they point to new possibilities regarding the role of the media in the neoliberal post-democratic context, moving beyond a role as a mediator and legitimator of government towards being an inextricable part of the social body itself. As such, this field can be seen as part of wider efforts towards 'commoning', or, as Haiven (2004) puts it, the process of building spaces where people can reproduce social relationships and lived experiences based on shared values.

One of the most destructive effects of neoliberalism, as discussed in the earlier sections, has been the dissolution of the social: the privatisation of everything public and the individualisation of everything social. What is then left to the public and to society? Radical documentaries, as part of the radical media sphere in Greece, are recuperating the public from the state, the private sphere and the market. They do so by publicly and collaboratively thematising the key aspects of the crisis, neoliberalism and the post-democratic state; by exposing the systematic ways in which the crisis has progressed, and therefore absolving and relieving people from the collective guilt that has been imposed on them; by giving voice and legitimating grievances and frustrations of people, dealing with affective traumas of social implosion, and connecting struggles (for example, connecting the anti-austerity struggle with the refugee support and anti-racist struggle); by showing the brutality used by the neoliberal state and its police and mainstream media; and by highlighting more productive and socially just ways of producing and organising. The explicitly social organisation, thematisation and orientation of these documentaries show that this radical sphere acts as a kind of social glue, bringing and holding society together.

As argued by Rakopoulos (2013; 2014; 2015), a key factor in the success of the solidarity and cooperative movement is that of trust, which in his work was found in the affective and family bonds between participants. This factor, however, may prevent such initiatives from scaling up, keeping them small and localised. Radical documentaries can be seen as creating new social bonds through enabling people to recognise commonalities and others' suffering and survival. Radical documentaries can also be used to scale these kinds of recognition because they can be seen by many people. Recognition forms the basis for the restoration of social bonds, and it constitutes an

important antidote to the blaming, divide-and-rule strategies of the mainstream media, which typically blame various social groups, foreign migrants and so on, thereby turning society against itself. While, therefore, mainstream media are part of the ways in which neoliberal social reproduction occurs through transmitting neoliberal values and dogmas, radical documentaries enable a new kind of social reproduction, which transmits social values of togetherness, trust and social justice, not only in their themes, but also in the collaborative ways in which they are produced and in their free distribution.

The collaborative elements of these documentaries, as well as the multiplicity of voices they host, is not only in stark contrast to commercial mainstream media but also fulfils a key ethical requirement for the media, as stated by Couldry (2010): that of voice. Voice, for Couldry, refers to the voicing, the telling and retelling of stories by those affected by neoliberalism, in ways that challenge neoliberal logics. In terms of the thematisation of the crisis and neoliberalism, this is precisely what these documentaries do. They offer narratives of the historical, political and economic bases of the crisis, the shocking stories of some of those rendered most vulnerable, and the encouraging stories of those who seek to do things differently. As argued by Lekakis (2017), independently-funded media offer a dense contextualisation of a complex socio-political landscape with felt consequences at the level of everyday life.

Given that documentaries are truthful assertions, their producers are not mediators in the sense of positioning themselves in between the top or social elites and the public, nor do they assume the 'voice of God', as it were, but are themselves part of the society they report on, as they experience and are affected by the same issues, albeit from their own social positions. Their lens and focus is firmly on society, and they do not mediate so much as participate; they offer their work and their own voice, and they amplify the voices of a society that suffers and that seeks to self-organise. In this manner, radical documentaries and, more broadly speaking, the radical media sphere, may allow for smaller initiatives to scale up through rebuilding the social bonds broken by neoliberal crisis, and through a different kind of mediation within and between societies.

Radical documentaries do not end when people leave cinemas. Instead, their story and impact begin exactly the moment after their ending, when the seeds of creative disobedience towards hegemonic narrations have started to take root. During public screenings, audience and contributors form a bond that widens their understanding of society. A brochure produced by the *Athens from Beneath* documentary is enlightening regarding the purpose of the documentary, beyond relating the sad stories of the new underclass that has emerged in Athens: "The purpose of our effort is to contribute to building a large and diverse human community that cares deeply about the issues of humanism and social solidarity, that will join us and will be the beginning of a broad humanitarian movement". Solidarity was more than present in the premiere of the documentary, since one of the participants in the film, the founder of "Social Kitchen - the Other Person"⁸, had organised a small feast outside the cinema, distributing free meals to all.

In his classic discussion of radical media, John Downing (2001) locates these in between social movements and the broader public sphere, and identifies two key and political functions. Firstly, radical media can have a Leninist political function, in which social and political change is pursued through an agit-prop mode of agitating and propagandising. Secondly, radical media can be based on a self-management mode, where their main political function is prefigurative: to practice and live in a socialist

⁸ This is a solidarity initiative distributing free food to people in need.

manner in the present, as the “continuous realization of freedom” in the here and now (Wieck 1979, in Downing 2001, 71). In a recent article, Robé, Wolfson and Funke (2016) discuss the practices of the Philadelphia-based Media Mobilizing Project, which allows working-class people to experiment with different modes of production, distribution and exhibition of documentary video projects, which in turn contribute to the forging of renewed class subjectivities. Adding to these discussions, research on tactical media has shown the political value of *ad hoc* media interventions in opening up spaces for contention and criticisms of dominant ideologies and dogmas (Kluitenberg 2011).

Greek radical documentaries follow this genealogy, but also move beyond its main premises, because they do not address the government or the political sphere but rather the social body itself. Rather than propagandising, they offer voice, and instead of radicalising the subjectivities of those producing media, which, as we argued, are already radicalised, they focus more on reaffirming the social bonds that have been assaulted during the crisis, seeking to rehabilitate the traumas and to discuss and participate in new forms of social being and organising. Finally, although documentaries are *ad hoc* media efforts, they have important tactical functions: if we see them as a sphere rather than isolated instances, they, along with other radical media, are seeking to fill in the gap left by mainstream media, which are increasingly irrelevant to the experiences of the average citizen⁹. It is in this manner that we can see these documentaries as contributing to a new theorisation of the role of the media in a post-democratic context. This can be seen more as serving the immediate and pressing needs of society, and, through this, holding the social body together, reaffirming the social bonds that keep societies together and resisting the individualisation, negative solidarity and intense competition imposed by neoliberal dogma and policies. As such, this radical sphere is taking part in processes of commoning, or reclaiming a common space for a new kind of social reproduction.

6. Conclusions

It is difficult to find any positive stories coming out of Greece at this historical juncture. The economic crisis is continuing unabated, the hope promised by the government of Syriza has turned into despair and the bailout terms have become even more stringent in demanding the privatisation of everything. All these have taken a horrible toll on society, while in addition the refugee crisis has further exacerbated the pressures put on the social body. This is the context within which documentaries are produced, and this is the social body that they seek to restore. Such documentaries should not be seen as working in isolation with a view to agitate for social change or to radicalise identities, nor should they be understood as part of specific and organised social movements. Rather, they are part of broader developments in Greece seeking to deal with and manage pressing concerns. Similar to the solidarity networks described by Rakopoulos, which have emerged in order to deal with the needs of citizens for food, health and other goods and services, radical documentaries have emerged in the gap created by the failure of mainstream media in order to address the citizens' needs for understanding the crisis and to restore social bonds.

In a context where mainstream media have made themselves irrelevant, facing historic lows in trust and credibility, radical documentaries have emerged outside the commodification of information. In this, it is not only a question of finding voice within the mainstream but of participating in the creation of a new media sphere that operates

⁹ A recent report on news consumption in Greece has shown dramatically low figures for trust, placed at 23% for news organisations (Neuman et al. 2017).

with a very different set of values, working for benefit and not for profit. In short, radical documentaries, alongside other radical media, seek to recuperate the media through engaging professional media workers, journalists, film directors, academics and actors; through reclaiming media know-how; through radicalising the financing, production and distribution by refusing to participate in commodification processes; and through recreating commonalities by thematising the common, the public, and responsibility towards others.

Throughout this article, we purposely assume a positive and optimistic tone to counter the depression that has engulfed Greece since Syriza's U-turn in 2015. The tone we have adopted should not be taken to imply that the field is without its problems. Indeed, some of the problems encountered more broadly in the solidarity economy include that some people take on more work than others, creating tensions and antagonisms within initiatives that are meant to be collaborative; equally, there is chronic underfunding and precarity, accompanied by a general fatigue, given the continuous deterioration of life conditions in Greece. Additionally, overt antagonism from the state has created legal loopholes and difficulties for such initiatives – for example, Vio.Me has been subjected to continuous lawsuits – alongside punitive taxes. The problems we encountered here were similar to those identified by Sandoval (2016) in her work on cultural cooperatives: resource inequality, precariousness and competition. For the radical documentary form more particularly, another issue is that it may be corrupted by other media and political actors, who co-opt the form for their own purposes. For example, during our research we came across some Greek documentaries on YouTube with topics ranging from blatant racism and anti-Semitism to wacky conspiratorial theories. Notwithstanding all this, we follow Raymond Williams, for whom “[t]o be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.” (2016, 118). We look to radical documentaries as contributing to making this come true.

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