

# ***Land of Salvation:* A Cinematic Journey Through the History of the Fight Against Tuberculosis**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents *Land of Salvation*, an 18-minute docufiction film created in 2024 as part of the Sotiria Museum's curatorial design. The museum is housed within one of Greece's most historic pulmonary hospitals, a former sanatorium for tuberculosis patients in Athens.

Structured around three axes—*Museum Collection*, *Sotiria Archive* and *Monumental Space*—the study investigates how cinematic narration and museological practice can reinterpret the history of tuberculosis in Greece. By giving visibility to patient voices and focusing on trauma-informed heritage, it examines how a difficult medical past can be reframed, contributing to collective healing.

The conception and script of the film were grounded in long-term research on the *Museum Collection* and the *Sotiria Archive*, which preserves belongings left behind by former patients from the 1940s to the 1970s. Filming, captured immediately before the exhibition's installation, took place in the museum, a restored yet empty space. Drawing on four narrative characters, the film aligns with a broader shift in medical museums toward more human-centered storytelling, while also prompting reflection on unconventional monuments, which are often overlooked or contested. Although produced within a specific framework, the film aims to stimulate additional research and to serve as an open platform for further reflection.

**Keywords:** Land of Salvation, Sotiria Museum, Sotiria Archive, Medical museology, Tuberculosis trauma, Collective healing, Dissonant heritage, Cinematic storytelling, Memory of space, Docufiction.

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## Introduction

The present work emerges from a long-term collaboration between the authors, whose distinct areas of expertise have contributed to the museological planning and exhibition design of the Sotiria Museum since 2015. This ongoing partnership has fostered a shared curatorial vision and enabled the convergence of complementary research interests. In 2024, this collaboration extended into the realm of visual storytelling through the docufiction film *Land of Salvation*, with scriptwriting and directing also undertaken by the authors. The film recounts the history of Sotiria as a space shaped by both institutional significance and intimate memory. It reflects the intersection of the authors' academic and creative practices, offering a new perspective on the ways in which space, memory and medical history can be interrelated.

Sotiria, meaning *Salvation* in Greek, was the first sanatorium for tuberculosis patients, founded in 1905 through the initiative of Sophia Schliemann, the wife of archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (Katis, 1984, p. 46). For decades, it remained Greece's leading tuberculosis treatment institution. As the disease declined in the 1970s, it transformed into the General Hospital for Thoracic Diseases, commonly known as Sotiria Hospital (Katis, 1984, p. 113). Most recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it played a crucial role as the country's primary reference center (Zavallis, 2020).

As one of Greece's most historic medical institutions, efforts have been underway since 2005 to rescue historical artifacts and preserve them in a dedicated museum. After years of preparation and its successful inclusion in a European Union funding program in 2018, the Sotiria Museum is now set to open.



Aerial view of Sotiria Hospital during the 1970s, showing the expansion of facilities as tuberculosis care transitioned toward modern pulmonology

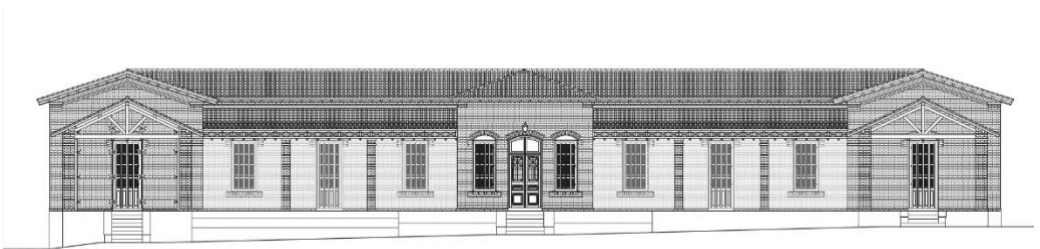
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At the heart of the permanent exhibition is *Land of Salvation*, the 18-minute short film that echoes the exhibition. More than just a title, *Land of Salvation* functions both literally, as it marks the actual place and metaphorically, as it embodies acceptance, healing and ultimately, salvation from social exclusion and death.

In this context, the present study raises critical questions at the intersection of cinema, medical museology and untold human stories: In what ways can cinematic storytelling and curatorial practice recover and amplify patient voices and lived experiences long marginalized in the history of tuberculosis? And how might a museum-based film function not only as an instrument of heritage preservation but also as a means of encouraging collective healing processes?



The Military Pavilion in the late 1930s, which now houses the Sotiria Museum  
© Sotiria Museum Collection



Architectural proposal for the façade restoration of the Military Pavilion  
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Interior view of the museum – Section: The history of tuberculosis



Museum installation featuring the film *Land of Salvation*

## The film's axes

The creation of the film is based on three main axes: the *Museum Collection*, the *Sotiria Archive* and the *Monumental Space*.



Museum Collection



Sotiria Archive



Monumental Space

### The three axes of the film *Land of Salvation*

The objects in the *Museum Collection* date from the late 19th century to approximately 1980. The collection comprises medical instruments and equipment; photographs related to the Schliemann family, notable historical figures and everyday life at the hospital; documents associated with key actors in the fight against tuberculosis; scientific, historical and literary publications; hospital furniture and functional objects; medical and nursing uniforms; and a range of audio and audiovisual material. These primarily medical and historical items serve as tangible evidence of achievements in the fight against tuberculosis. They also illustrate the transition from Phthisiology to Pulmonology and the transformations the hospital underwent alongside scientific progress (Grigoriou & Dimitriou, 2019, pp. 1000-1002). A significant part of the *Museum Collection* was designated as a listed monument in 2015 (Hellenic Republic, 2015).



Book collection



19<sup>th</sup> century piano



Iron Lung



1940s surgical tools



Portable respirator



Artificial pneumothorax

Artifacts of the *Museum Collection*

as material witnesses of both scientific progress and lived experience

© Andreas Santrouzanos

The *Sotiria Archive* mainly consists of suitcases and parcels containing personal belongings, documents, correspondence and photos of indigent tubercular patients who ended up at Sotiria between 1940s and 1970s. Many remained there for extended periods, months or even years and after their deaths, they were never claimed by relatives, likely due to poverty and the fear of social stigma. Their belongings were probably stored away by ward nurses and remained forgotten until a wall demolition in 2015 brought them to light (Grigoriou, 2021, p. 214).

The archive holds a unique place within the museum and in the broader history of tuberculosis, offering an invaluable perspective from the patients themselves. It reveals intimate stories of separation, love and survival, particularly during the difficult years following World War II. Beyond individual experiences, it sheds light on everyday life within the sanatorium, portraying a resilient, self-sustained community. It not only preserves personal narratives, but also records medical practices, the impact of historical events on scientific progress and the social position of those affected.



Personal belongings and documents from the *Sotiria Archive* revealing intimate patient stories and illuminating the social stigma  
© Andreas Santrouzanos

Among the most moving documents preserved in the *Sotiria Archive* are the letters exchanged between patients and their families or friends.

A letter dated April 16, 1947 (inventory no: ASD 13.1.1), written by a patient to a friend, blends descriptions of everyday life at the sanatorium with urgent requests for medicine:

After the surgeries I returned home, but soon I had to leave again. On New Year's Eve I suffered a hemoptysis and from then on, my troubles began. Now I am at Sotiria, in a pleasant building opposite Goudi and near Lycabettus Hill. I have good company here, with a garden full of pine trees around us. We spend the days with various games and with the radio to keep us entertained.

The patient then appeals for access to a new treatment:

You should also know that there is a medicine called streptomycin. I know it is expensive, but could you send me twenty bottles? My address is: Sotiria Sanatorium, 7th Clinic, 2nd Floor, 11th Ward.

Another testimony dated May 28, 1953 (inventory no: ASD 6.69.3), comes from a young wife writing to her hospitalized husband. In it, she expresses both the daily anxieties of family life and the hope for recovery:

As I write to you, I had just come back inside, when your letter was handed to me. You cannot imagine the feeling I felt until I reached home. My eyes filled with tears when I saw a couple with their little boy beside them and thought of our misfortune... But praise be to God, perhaps a better day will come and we too will know happiness.

The letter continues with references to medical examinations and the fear of relapse and infection:

You write to us that you had a scan and the doctors told you that the old illness has returned, that the blood you coughed up comes from the same spot and that there are some shadows on the right side. They also say there may be concern in that area too. You tell me that your sputum test was negative. Please tell me the plain truth, because, as you know, we have a small child and I have his clothes mixed together in the trunk I had prepared for you when you were here. And you should ask about the clothes you were using for cover, whether there is any danger with them, or if I should put them aside.

As the only archive of its kind in Greece, it fills a significant gap in the country's history of the disease, a gap underlined by the historian of tuberculosis, Yannis Stogiannidis, who points out that personal letters written by patients to their loved ones became a vital part of daily life in the sanatorium, offering both emotional relief and a means of maintaining social bonds during isolation. The study of this correspondence can uncover who the patients were, what issues concerned them and how they and their families perceived the contagious nature of the disease. These letters provide a unique opportunity to explore the patient's perspective and

to bridge the institutional reality of the sanatorium with the social world (Stoyannidis, 2015, pp. 9-10).

For all these reasons, following conservation and documentation procedures, the *Sotiria Archive* was declared a listed monument in 2022 (Hellenic Republic, 2022).

Finally, the *Monumental Space* constitutes the third axis of the film. It once accommodated the very stories now narrated and today endures as a site of remembrance. The listed building, constructed in 1913, displays morphological characteristics associated with the late 19th century. It incorporates elements of Central European architecture, such as wooden roofs and chalet-like features, as well as design principles drawn from country houses, adapted here to meet the requirements of a sanatorium demanding well-ventilated and sunlit facilities (Grigoriou & Dimitriou, 2019, p. 994). Notably, the pavilion includes a linear covered balcony extending along the entire southern façade, a configuration particularly prevalent in sanatoria in the United States during the first decade of the 20th century. Initially serving as a clinic for soldiers with tuberculosis, the building remained in operation until 1969 (Anagnostopoulou, 2013, p. 718).



Still from the film – The actress in the *Monumental Space*, opening the patient's parcels

## The characters

Based on real individuals and historical events, the film blends elements of documentary and fiction, with patients serving as central characters. Following extensive archival research, four individuals —two women and two men— from the 1940s through the 1970s were selected. The selection aimed to reflect gender balance, offering perspectives on illness from both male and female experiences during a period marked by pronounced gender inequality. This commitment to gender-balanced representation reflects ethical concerns around the visibility of diverse subjectivities in historical trauma. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, social codes of male and female behavior shape how suffering is experienced, expressed and remembered (Kaplan, 2005, p. 43).



Stills from the film – The four main characters, during four different decades

All characters are presented anonymously, in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), as outlined in Regulation (EU) 2016/679 and with applicable national legislation (Greek Penal Code, arts. 365–366, 2019). As Bill Nichols reminds us, ethics in documentary filmmaking aim to minimize potential harm and safeguard those represented. Even when identities are concealed, the filmmaker’s responsibility extends to preserving the subjects’

dignity and ensuring that their depiction remains respectful and ethically accountable (Nichols, 2017, pp. 68–69).

The first character, a young woman admitted in 1940, narrates her long-term hospitalization during a period of war and social silence around tuberculosis. Her testimony weaves together institutional memory with historical insight, referencing key figures in the development of Sotiria as well as the introduction of innovative treatments and infrastructure that gradually transformed the hospital into a center of healing.

The second character, a man admitted in 1942, offers a deeply personal account of life during the World War II. His experience reflects both the hardship of the era and the intense social and political ferment within the sanatorium. His narrative also includes references to significant cultural figures who were hospitalized at Sotiria and whose presence left a lasting imprint on its collective memory.

The third character, a family man admitted in the early 1950s, highlights the emotional burden of being separated from his wife and young child. His letters convey concern, longing and a cautious sense of hope, reflecting the broader shift in tuberculosis care as new medical treatments became available.

The fourth character, a woman briefly hospitalized in the 1970s, offers a retrospective voice that reflects on Sotiria's transition into a modern thoracic hospital. Her narrative reinforces the feeling of hope and connects past and present by acknowledging the creation of the Sotiria Museum and the role it plays in preserving the institution's historical and emotional legacy for future generations. To summarize, the narrative was structured to form a timeline of memory spanning four turbulent decades, shaped by medical advancements, warfare and profound social change. An additional selection criterion was the richness and diversity of material available for each individual, which allowed for the reconstruction of their lived experiences. These accounts were further contextualized through archival sources from multiple institutions and complemented by bibliographic research, enhancing the historical depth and accuracy of the film's narrative.



Stills from the film – Visual timeline of memory spanning the 1940s to the 1970s  
 Archival sources and cinematic storytelling are combined to narrate  
 four decades of tuberculosis experience

### Research methodology and cinematic approach

The script and realization of the film *Land of Salvation* emerged from the systematic documentation of the *Museum Collection* and the *Sotiria Archive*, within the framework of the exhibition design.

Although the documentation and research of the *Museum Collection* began in 2014, leading to the museological and museographical study of 2015–2016, the process continues today, as new objects are added and existing records enriched. The collection now numbers about 1,000 registered objects and is inventoried electronically in three sections: objects, photographic archives and books.

The *Sotiria Archive* comprises more than 20,000 items, including suitcases, 300 patient parcels, personal belongings, photographs and administrative - hospital documents of patients hospitalized between 1937 and 1981, most of them destitute men from rural areas (Grigoriou, pp. 216–217). Its organization was a lengthy process due to the sheer volume of material, until reliable conclusions could be drawn and part of the archive incorporated into the permanent exhibition. Documentation began with personal belongings, catalogued as a separate section, before parcels were opened, numbered and recorded both as whole entities and by their contents. This work produced a dedicated archive catalogue by type, parcel and patient name, with brief descriptions of contents and hospitalization dates.

Reading the patients' letters further enriched the research with insights into the disease, daily life in the hospital and the broader historical context of the period.

In parallel, research into the history of tuberculosis and of Sotiria Hospital led to the creation of a distinct museological section, based on the *Sotiria Archive*, where selected material was arranged thematically (life in the sanatorium, relations with family, religion and science, political beliefs) and chronologically, illustrating the outbreak and gradual decline of tuberculosis.

These steps created the conditions for the film's script. As mentioned above, the four characters were selected determined by the completeness of the material, chronological coverage and gender balance. The script closely follows historical events while drawing on the letters to bring to life the patients' thoughts, hopes and anxieties, as well as the atmosphere of a society that rejected —and to some extent still rejects— those burdened with stigma. The narrative, constantly shifting between despair and hope, never reveals whether the characters survived, focusing instead on the conditions of their lives inside the hospital. Only the final character, a woman from the 1970s, discloses her survival, linking the history of tuberculosis to the present-day Museum.

Subsequently, filming took place during a transitional moment, just after the museum's restoration, while the space was still empty. In this in-between state, emptiness became part of the film's narrative power. The building itself emerged as a silent witness, resonating with Henri Lefebvre's view of space as a socially produced and historically layered construct, shaped by past actions, social relations and memory (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 73).



On set – Filming in the restored space

The use of emptiness and controlled lighting reinforced the atmosphere of memory and absence

Objects from the collection were presented in chronological order to create a visual timeline of memory. Carefully illuminated and filmed individually, through the cinematic lens, each one became a protagonist. The narrative was deepened through the presence of an actress, embodying the role of a researcher and interpreter of remembrance. As she reads, stories from the archive begin to take shape in her imagination and, through her, the voices of the past are brought to life. This approach resonates with Laura U. Marks' description of cinema's ability to animate historical archives and transform inert materials into volatile presences that intervene in the present (Marks, 2000, p. 201).

At the same time, this cinematic treatment aligns with Giuliana Bruno's conception of film as a modern cartography, a sensory practice of memory that sets recollection in motion through space. Bruno describes how cinema transforms images into architecture and renders space affectively inhabited. Through its tactile and temporal qualities, film creates a geography of lived and living space, where memory is not just represented but spatially and emotionally reactivated (Bruno, 2018, p. 25). In this light, the film constructs not merely a visual archive but an embodied one, a spatialized terrain of memory and emotion.



Still from the film – The actress performs as a researcher,  
reading letters from the archive

The editing combined these elements: filmed sequences, archival images and a voice-over narration, forming a visual collage. Through the rhythm of repeated motifs and the breathing-like cadence of four musical segments, the viewer is immersed in a cycle of emotion. In this structure, editing functions not

merely as a technical procedure but as a core compositional element that shapes the film's expressive logic. *Land of Salvation* adopts a mode of continuity where the cuts are guided by rhythm and emotion. This approach aligns with André Bazin's perspective, which sees editing not as an external intervention but as something organically embedded within the spatial and temporal fabric of the cinematic form, a structuring device that supports narrative flow while preserving the viewer's engagement with the reality of the image (Bazin, 2013, p. 10).

Equally important, music plays a vital role in the video: composed by the renowned Greek band *Diafana Krina*, whose distinctive poetic and melancholic sound has long explored themes of loss, illness and inner struggle—including tuberculosis in earlier work—the music acts as a connective tissue between past and present. Far from being a background element, it functions as an emotional undercurrent that guides the viewer's experience, imbuing the visual narrative with a temporal depth and lyrical sensibility.



Still from the film – Final long still shot of waiting objects  
This cinematic moment functions as an intentional landscape,  
symbolizing closure, remembrance and continuity of memory

In the final scene, the museum objects wait to be installed, like patients once waited for treatment, capturing a threshold space between presence and absence, silence and voice. At this moment, the final, long, still shot provides a sense of peace, as if everything is finally in its rightful place. According to film theorist Martin Lefebvre, narrative films often feature intentional landscapes: spaces whose

meaning emerges not immediately, but through the viewer's interpretive engagement and attribution of intent. This effect is reinforced by loose narrative structure, long takes and relative stillness, all of which encourage a contemplative gaze and allow space to become expressive over time (Lefebvre, 2006, pp. 30–31). In this way, the final cinematic moment functions as an intentional landscape: a repository of memory, history and emotional presence.

### **Why this film matters?**

In summary, *Land of Salvation* aligns with current shifts in medical museology, as practiced by the pioneers of the field, Ken Arnold, Samuel Alberti (Arnold, 2004, p. 167) and their successors. These shifts emphasize more human-centered perspectives, focusing on personal stories and critical thinking and on the value derived from medical and scientific knowledge by recognizing its cultural complexity and bringing it into the public sphere (Whiteley et al., 2017, p. 60). In this regard, the primary objective was to emphasize the human side of the disease and give voice to those who had been condemned to a state of eternal amnesia. In this way, the film resonates with the theory of reviving collective memory by reclaiming traces of lives that belong to dissonant heritage, heritage that 'hurts,' reflecting unresolved or painful events and challenging our current identities (Sharon Macdonald, 2009). It also draws on the theory of trauma-informed heritage, offering a safe space for recovery and healing, while cultivating post-traumatic resilience, both in the present and with a proactive outlook toward the future (Feakins, Barrett, & Bower, 2024, p. 860).

As Foucault notes, archives are not merely collections of documents but structures of power (Foucault, 1969, p. 107). In this context, historical records assumed a different role, shifting focus from scientific or medical achievements to the emotional and personal experiences of those who lived through the disease. This reframing invites a re-evaluation of what is considered worthy of preservation. To illuminate these experiences, the project drew on theories of empathic storytelling and the healing museum model, which incorporates processes aimed at restoring emotional and spiritual balance (Van Noy, 2007, p. 4). These approaches seek to deepen the emotional connection between the public and historical narratives, encouraging both personal reflection and the emergence of latent memories. Given that the history of tuberculosis remains within living recollection,

the film holds the potential to activate these buried experiences, positioning their recognition as a vital component in the broader process of healing.

### **Scope and future research**

This study is focused on a single institution and its specific collection, within a defined historical period and concerning a segment of the hospital's patients reflected in the *Sotiria Archive*, as well as shaped by the interpretive nature of docufiction. Within this framework, the choices made are deliberate, presenting the film not as a neutral record but as a situated, ethically responsible act of storytelling that seeks to balance historical fidelity with emotional resonance.

At the same time, these limitations create opportunities for further research. The given methodology can be applied comparatively to other hospitals, archives and marginalized patient communities, opening new ways of addressing dissonant and trauma-informed heritage. Indeed, the dissemination of *Land of Salvation* has already paved the way for similar initiatives. The Region of Thessaly has already approved the funding of a program for the digital and cultural promotion of the sanatoria of this area (Kontogianni, 2025). This project foresees extensive research on four such institutions and includes the production of a short film, inspired by *Land of Salvation*, which will bring to light the history of these institutions for wider audiences.

Furthermore, following its official opening, the Sotiria Museum aims to establish itself as a center for research on the history of medicine and tuberculosis and as the principal repository for archival material that is currently dispersed and not yet institutionalized. In this way, the museum may serve as a nucleus for similar initiatives in the future, ensuring continuity between heritage preservation, academic research and creative practice.

### **Conclusion**

Filed within a meaning-laden monument, *Land of Salvation* reimagines the past, unfolds in the present and gestures toward the future. It creates a space within the space: a cinematic environment that brings together memory, architectural heritage and personal stories.

It flows through time as a living legacy, a testament to resilience and remembrance and restores visibility and dignity to forgotten lives.

When visitors encounter the film alongside the museum's artifacts within this evocative setting, they experience what Pierre Nora defines as a *lieu de mémoire*: a memory space where material, symbolic and emotional dimensions converge (Nora, 1989).

Looking ahead, the next goal is to bring this film beyond the museum walls—to festivals and wider audiences— so that *Land of Salvation* may continue contributing to the shared work of collective healing.

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