



# The Theory of Happiness

A Film by Gregory Gan

"Deep in the Ukrainian countryside, the filmmaker joins a group  
trying to discover happiness through mathematical formulas.

**Can they succeed, or do dreams of utopia turn into a veritable nightmare?"**

In Association with  
soundImageCulture

**TRAILER:** <http://vimeo.com/theoryofhappiness/2014>

**WEBSITE:** [www.theoryofhappiness.com](http://www.theoryofhappiness.com)

### CONTACT INFO

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### TECHNICAL INFO:

- Full HD, 82 minutes
- In Russian and English with English Subtitles
- Aspect Ration 16:9
- Exhibition Formats: DVD, Blu-Ray, HDCAM, DigiBeta

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In a remote village outside the city of Khiarkov, Ukraine, a small but passionate group of people are fighting an ideological war. Their weapons? Hoes and shovels, pickaxes and spades turned towards the soil. Their rhetoric? Political poetry meant to enlighten the masses. Their goal? Universal happiness. Began in the late 1980s under the leadership of a now deceased guru of the movement, Yuri Davidov, group members were recruited as teens, and had to renounce alcohol, drugs and sexual intimacy. The farm on which they now live and work, holds a thirty-head cow herd, two horses and a number of pigs. Recruits begin working 16-hour days and write political poetry in their spare time. They call themselves "PORTOS," which stands for a "Poetical Association for the Development of A Theory of Universal Happiness." Debilitated structures and broken farm implements are all given names; the farm is given the name SPARTA, the latrines are called 'Stalin' and 'Yeltsin.' Each member is ranked on a "Pyramid of Happiness." Those who are deemed to be less than 50% happy, are considered non-human. The goal of the organization is to achieve eternal happiness, and enter into eternity.

The filmmaker explores what it means to become a participant, gaining acceptance and making friends, and coming to terms with loneliness and loss. In the process, he meets a number of characters whose tell their story: an overweight young woman vying for acceptance from the leaders, who becomes his confidante, the leader of the sect, who attempts to exercise her authority, the shepherd, the milk lady, the farmhand. Together, they weave a complex story that explores the themes of power and subordination, suffering and happiness.

# Film Information

## Tagline

## Synopsis



## Director Biography & Filmography

## Director Statement

Gregory Gan was born in Moscow, in the former Soviet Union, at the beginning of the perestroika era. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he emigrated with his mother, first to France, and then to Canada, where he spent his young adult life. The experience of migration early in his life inspired Gregory to study anthropology, and subsequently, film, after returning from extensive work and travel in Latin America.

Interest in both anthropology and film congealed in his graduate work, when he began to research the life histories of women of the Russian intelligentsia. In the resulting film, **"Turning Back the Waves,"** (2010) Gregory interviews Gulag survivors and Soviet dissidents, architects and university professors, to understand

When people watch "The Theory of Happiness" for the first time, they are astonished at the overwhelming, claustrophobic interior spaces of the sect, adorned by layers of political slogans on the walls and ceilings.

Consider the thought that having control over an image is a political act. In this light, we must ask what this act means, and whether PORTOS has power over their images, or are overpowered by them. To understand the ideology of the sect, we must first understand their aesthetic.

I have made a film, which in light of these remarks, I also hope will be understood as a political film. Its aesthetic, highlights the clashing dialogue with the sect, which is a deeply personal negotiation with participants about the limits of our mutual comfort. How can we approach interlocutors with empathy, when our aspirations, dreams and life philosophies are fundamentally contradictory?

the way elderly women perceive their past.

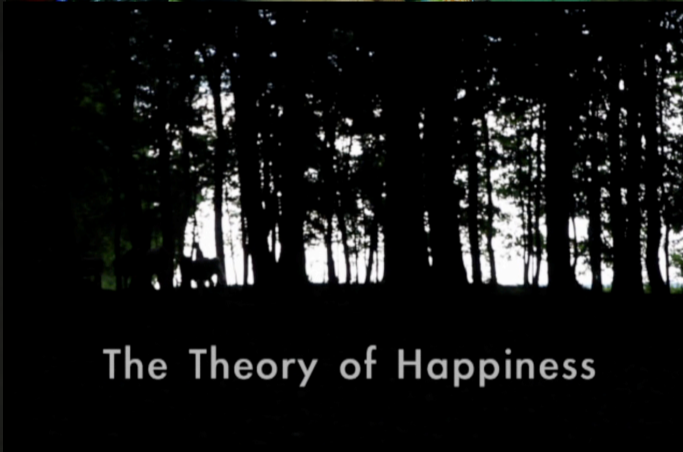
Gregory's subsequent work brought him to SoundImageCulture, a master class in Belgium hosted by artists-anthropologists. That experience inspired the present film, **"Theory of Happiness,"** (2014) especially in the early development stages of the project.

Currently, Gregory is continuing his studies as a PhD student in visual anthropology, developing an ethnographic project on the Russian diaspora, which will also be the focus of his next feature-length film, as a way to understand both a tumultuous period in present-day Russia, and his own displacements and cross-cultural transitions.

Acknowledging this paradox, I explore the relations of power of image production through the inverted gaze of the camera lens.

The film finds no easy answers to the complex scenario that unfolds. But it does allow to make a number of interpretations about the power of images: why, for example, do sect members choose to borrow the symbols of the former Soviet Union, as if to recreate the fantasy of socialist utopia on a small scale? Does the sensory overload contribute to the way new participants to the sect undergo psychological conditioning? In the early 1990s, it was common for people trying to make sense of the collapse of the Soviet Union to send pages and pages of their diaries to newspapers in the hope of getting them published. Should we consider the sect's graphomaniacal tendencies as a coping mechanism for dealing with an already-complicated, overly-dense and fragile world?

# Production Stills



# Principle Cast



**TAMARA KOSTIUK** has been in charge of upholding the ideology of the **PORTOS** sect, ever since the founder and guru of the organization, **YURA DAVIDOV** died 8 months prior. She is in grief over his death, but finds solace in conversations with the filmmaker, **GREGORY GAN** whom she takes as a trainee of the rules and laws of the sect. As a disciplinarian, she can be brash, cynical and even cruel, especially to workers on the farm, whom she considers non-humans.



**SASHA KUROPATKINA** is the newest member of the organization, having arrived to **PORTOS** to work as a milk lady 8 months prior. Because she is still learning the rigid rules of the sect, **PORTOS** members often make fun of her, especially for her demeanor and weight. She idolizes her instructor, **ANDREI PETROV**. However, during the making of the film, **GREGORY GAN** becomes her confidante, and she, in turn, shares her anxieties, concerns and aspirations with him.



**ANDREI PETROV** is the current supervisor of the farm, **SPARTA**, one of **PORTOS'** main endeavours. He works tirelessly, often sleeping as little as 3-4 hours a night. He is soft-spoken and has a monotonous voice, but he is also rigidly ideological. He struggles to teach **SASHA** proper codes of behaviour in **PORTOS**, and at the same time, he gets berated by **TAMARA** for not keeping watch over his student. He is worn out, both physically and emotionally.



**YULIA PRIVEDENNAYA** is a **PORTOS** member in Moscow. Following in the footsteps of several other **PORTOS** members, she is being persecuted for forming an illegal, armed organization, and for violating minors. She is a soft-spoken and articulate speaker, choosing her words carefully. She often communicates with **TAMARA** via Skype, as the Moscow wing of the organization reports daily to Ukraine. During production, **YULIA'S** verdict was announced in court.



**ALEKSANDR NOVODATSKY** is one of several workers hired to the organization as a farm hand. He gathers hay, while recounting his glory days as a biker, a drummer in a punk band and, more tacitly, as a soldier in the Chechen and Afghan Wars. **ALEKSANDR** bypasses the sect's various prohibitions and taboos. He is there to earn money to send to his ailing mother. In a bizarre twist of fate, seconds will determine whether he will live or die.



**GREGORY GAN**, the director of the film, is also a participant as he uncovers his own role in the **PORTOS** sect. He finds himself in an awkward position as a recruit, unwilling to accept certain rules of conduct, and yet, his rebellion does not necessarily yield wanted results. However, he gets much more than he bargained for, as he inadvertently becomes a participant in the unfolding tragic drama that unfolds nearing the end of his stay and production.

# Frequently Asked Questions

How did you meet the sect?

I was initially approached by PORTOS members at a political rally in Moscow in 2009. Several reserved but polite women began to hand me pamphlets, DVDs, booklets. Initially, I ignored the literature, and I only took a closer look at it a year later, when I had already returned to Canada. Everything baffled me, and that is when the idea for the film fomented. I dialed the number and that was how I met Tamara.

How did you gain consent to film inside the sect?

I proposed to make an ethnographic film, which is first and foremost an ethical approach to filmmaking, requiring certain amount of negotiation about what can and cannot be filmed. PORTOS members always knew when the camera was on, and I also gave participants a second camera to allow them to record their own narratives. I screened portions of the film to them while I was still in the field, to allow for a more participatory filmmaking approach. However, despite my attempts to assert that the film was a personal representation of lived experience, PORTOS members still hoped that I was making a promotional film for them.

Did you really become a participant?

In order to offset the time PORTOS members had to invest in the film, I volunteered to work on the farm. In order to do that, I was asked to fill out a questionnaire, which I did. Later, I found out that I was being ranked along with other “newbies”—new entrants to the sect, and soon enough, I was filling out another questionnaire requiring 1,500 questions. In retrospect, I should have been more cautious about my involvement, but there was also a dose of curiosity about what it was like to be a participant. At the time, I did not understand the multiple layers of the ideology of the sect, and I did not consider them dangerous. Now I do.

Can anyone be susceptible to this kind of psychological manipulation?

You really needs to be very psychologically centered not to allow certain things to bother you. I used to work for 16-18 hours per day, doing both film and farm work, like shoveling manure and gathering hay. I was physically and emotionally exhausted. PORTOS members used my weakness to tell me that my family and friends did not care for me, and they were my only true friends. In this kind of isolated context, when you also wish to be accepted, it becomes very easy to lose one’s sense of self.

What were the psychological repercussions of having experienced what you did?

I would label what I experienced post-traumatic stress. When I first left the sect, I felt very insecure and vulnerable. And guilty. I couldn’t shake off the feeling of constant guilt. At the same time, sect members were trying to track me down, and I began to fear for myself and my family. I had to sever all contact, and I only felt relatively at peace when I left Russia. I feel a lot healthier now, and in some ways, more mentally prepared to handle difficult situations.

What message do you want people to take from the film?

This film is a personal story, which I believe touches on wider themes of political ideology. The sect is a microcosm of Bolshevism: putting communal principles above individual’s rights. Although I support alternative modes of living, there is a danger to an isolated intentional community, which can be very abusive. I also see the sect as a byproduct of wider social crises in Russia and Ukraine.

# Credits

Written, Directed and Produced: Gregory Gan

Camera and Sound: Gregory Gan

Assistant Camera: Tamara Kostiuk  
Sasha Kuropatkina  
Andrei Petrov  
and other PORTOS members

Editors: Gregory Gan  
Terezia Mikulasova

Animators: Terezia Mikulasova  
Gregory Gan

Assistant Editor: Lydia Strojn

Sound Designer: Konrad Skreta

Composer: Marc Sabat

## Cast (in order of appearance)

Galia Golub  
Svetlana Druzhinina  
Gregory Gan  
Tamara Kostiuk  
Anton Makarenko  
Igor Chupalo  
Olga Shirokaya  
Tania Lomakina  
Petro Kovalenko  
Sasha Kuropatkina  
Andrei Petrov  
Yulia Privedennaya  
Nadia Chetaeva  
Zhenia Privalov  
Sergei Savchenko  
Boris Savchenko  
Kolia Droblov  
Tamara Kotenko  
Anatoliy Katalo  
Aleksey Donaluk  
Aleksandr Novodatsky  
Petr Viushenko

Produced in Association with: **soundImageCulture**

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Els Opsomer  
An. Van Dienderen  
Didier Volckaert  
Reinhardt Coasert

Lauren VanLaecker  
Erik Pauwels  
Rudi Maerten  
Ilse Jolliet

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Melissa Galway  
Dan Galway  
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