



## The Virtues of Being A Killjoy, or Towards a Critical Approach to the Study of Happiness

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### **Abstract:**

Recent debates in the academic study of affect, one could argue, are sustained by the tension of two oppositions, in particular: the opposition between affect (as a prelinguistic intensity) and ideology (as primarily linguistic manipulation) and the opposition between so-called "bad" affects (shame, disgust, fear) and "good affects" (love, happiness, excitement). This study, which is primarily a theoretical inquiry, seeks to complicate those divisions by examining the "bad" dimension of supposedly "good" affects, and also the ways in which affect, rather than undermining the coercive power of ideology, might in fact collude with it and guarantee its smooth functioning. I focus my attention on happiness, and I attempt to formulate a theoretical grammar that enables a truly critical inquiry, which I suggest, is often made difficult by the universal consensus that happiness is in of itself something good and essential in the formation of a meaningful life. This study is part of a larger project the aims to explore the role of happiness in the Philippines, and this paper represents an attempt to theorize how a thorough inquiry on happiness may be pursued.

**Key Words:** happiness; affect; cultural politics of emotion, psychoanalysis, critique

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *1.1 The Turn to Happiness*

Many scholars have noted that there is at the current moment an increasing concern about well-being and happiness in the so-called developed societies of the West (Ahmed 2010, Burnett 2012, Davies 2015). Self-help publications dominate the

American book market. Also, in the UK, the British government under David Cameron has declared that GNW (Gross National Well-being) is just as important as the GDP (Cooper 2012). Designated variously within scholarship as the "happiness turn" (Ahmed 2010), "happiness industry" (Frosh 2011), and "happiness agenda" (Burnett 2012) this "modern obsession" (Burnett) seems to be a response to the pervasive malady of depression afflicting Western societies.



Yet, as the West suffers from this social malady of depression and loneliness, the Philippines, in contrast, insists that it is a happy space, populated by happy people: that it is “more fun in the Philippines.” Rather than considering this, however, as a celebratory moment (for we have managed to avoid being inflicted by this oddly Western confined malady), I would like to suggest that there are insidious connections between Western self-definitions of being a depressive society and the Philippines’s claim to being a characteristically happy space. In a world that is arguably being slowly homogenized by globalizing processes, I suggest that in contrast to the so-called depressive societies of the West, the Philippines attempts to mark a unique space within a globalized world, by strategically defining itself as a happy place, populated by happy people. I suggest that this self-fashioning is reactive rather than independent of what is happening in the West. It is a new mode of self-exoticizing in a time when the marketing of cultural difference as exotic is slowly becoming incompatible with the new ethic of multiculturalism in the West.

As an initial inquiry into the aforementioned concerns, I attempt to formulate a theoretical grammar that would be able to create conditions whereby a thorough inquiry on happiness may be implemented without restraint. I attempt to treat happiness as a hostile object of thought, to actively reject its characteristic mute resistance to demands for an explanation. Often confused with “feeling good”, happiness does not have to explain itself. As a concept linked to the idea of a meaningful life (and thus directs so much of life’s movements), it is strange that happiness remains evasively silent. Happiness owes us an account of itself if only to understand why so many lives are seduced to orient themselves towards it.

## 1.2 Unhappy Critical Resources

I would like to suggest that *unhappiness* is an important component of any critical inquiry on happiness. If there was one insight that I have learned in this study, it is that understanding happiness necessarily means also understanding unhappiness—that indeed, unhappiness offers

conceptual tools through which a thorough inquiry on the question of happiness may be fruitfully pursued. Thus, rather than be paralyzed by frustration, what I attempted to do was to think of moments of unhappiness not as signaling limits but rather as opening possibilities of critique. In the process of researching on happiness I have come to realize that my own work is in many ways undergirded by questions of happiness. That my work can only proceed if it moves towards certain goals and even results that might promise happiness. That happiness structures the very mode of inquiry that I use to analyze it. Happiness is, as theorist Lauren Berlant proposes, a form of “cruel optimism.”

## 1.3 Towards a Critical Theory of Happiness

In this study I develop a theoretical framework towards the study on happiness that draws insights from rather “unhappy critical resources”: the “melancholy science” and the concept of the “nonidentical” of the philosopher Theodor Adorno, the “unhappy archives” of cultural critic Sara Ahmed, and the generally pessimistic theories of Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis. I draw on these “unhappy critical resources” to suggest that the compulsion to be happy comes from the very same system that we might accuse of creating conditions of unhappiness. We are very much aware of the unhappy condition of unfreedom, but we are nevertheless instructed to be happy, and we do so, to use the words of Herbert Marcuse, in “happy submission.” Happiness in this case is produced and reproduced by larger social structures, institutions, and economies, targeted at collectivities rather than individuals.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Theodor Adorno’s Melancholy Science

In constructing a theoretical grammar on happiness I begin with the work of Theodor Adorno. It might be rather odd to begin with Adorno, indeed, an identifiably unhappy theorist. In fact, he claims that Philosophy, understood as the teaching of the



good life, is no longer possible in the age where everything has been thoroughly commodified. Accused by his critics of being paralyzingly pessimistic and excessively elitist, what could his melancholy science tell us about happiness apart from a predictable call for its total rejection?

For Adorno, happiness is not the mere product of clandestine ideological manipulation. He rejects the idea that happiness is sustained simply by stupidity and misinformation but part of the very rationality of the system that moves toward total administration. In fact, ideology has abandoned pretension, and is no longer false-consciousness; rather, it is direct domination. We are very much aware of the unhappy condition of unfreedom, but we are nevertheless instructed to be happy. Happiness in this case is produced and reproduced by larger social structures, institutions, and economies, targeted at collectivities rather than individuals. It is important to note that for Adorno as with other thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School (authentic) happiness cannot be collective. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer clearly articulate what is to be the general position of the Frankfurt School: "Life in the capitalist era is a constant initiation rite. Everyone must show that he wholly identifies with the power which is belaboring him...Everyone can be like this omnipotent society; everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness."

## 2.2 Sara Ahmed's Unhappy Archives

Sara Ahmed, in her important book *The Promise of Happiness*, constructs what she refers to as an "unhappy archive" with the aim to "offer an alternative history of happiness...by considering those banished from [the conventional history of happiness], or who enter this history only as troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy" (17). Her unhappy archive emerges from feminist, queer, and antiracist histories and political engagements. What Ahmed's analysis shows is that happiness can be utilized to conceal antagonisms in the domain of the political. She shows how the "success" of British multiculturalism is attached to notions of happiness:

"Integration becomes what promises happiness (if only we mixed, we would be happy), by converting bad feelings (un-integrated migrants) into good feelings (integrated migrants)...The un-integrated migrant is linked to "bad feelings" because he or she "holds onto the unhappy object of differences...The melancholic migrant is one who is not only stubbornly attached to difference, but who insists on speaking about racism, where such speech is heard as laboring over sore points. The duty of the migrant is to let go of the pain of racism by letting go of racism as a way of understanding that pain" (133).

## 2.3 Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan

Psychoanalysis is generally not concerned with happiness. Freud and Breuer famously wrote that they simply wished to "transform hysterical misery into common unhappiness." The father of psychoanalysis had a terribly pessimistic world-view and his few (and rather scattered) comments about happiness in his work registers a very forceful skepticism. In summary, Freud's views on happiness are as follows: (a) happiness results from satisfaction of instincts, (b) the pleasure resulting from untamed instincts' gratification is greater than that associated with civilized sexuality, (c) happiness is always episodic and incomplete, (d) it is difficult to be happy because powerful forces causing unhappiness are inherent in being human, (e) happiness is subjective and there is great individual variation in seeking it, and (f) psychoanalysis cannot promise sustained happiness.

Lacan offers us an interesting way to think about the relationship of happiness, reality, and phantasy. Rather than fantasy providing a hallucinatory realization of desire that could no be realized in reality, fantasy rather instructs us how to desire, it sets the coordinates of our desire, effectively concealing the subject's symbolic castration. Thus, fantasy is not opposed to reality; on the contrary it is what structures reality and organizes our desire.



### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing from the aforementioned unhappy critical resources, I develop three axioms by which to approach happiness.

*Axiom 1: Happiness sets up a fantasy scene.*

Phantasy is thus responsible for libidinal organization: directing and orienting the movement of desire by staging objects as desirable, as “happy objects”. Fantasy teaches us how to desire.

*Axiom 2: Happiness is Intersubjective.*

Again, this axiom is fairly obvious and could easily be confirmed by our experience of happiness: that our happiness has a relation to the happiness of another—whether we are happy for another or whether the other is happy for us.

There is a sense here that happiness is fragile—that it requires some kind of external support to verify its authenticity. We demand that other be happy for us; we also feel pressure to feel happy for others (even if we sometimes have to fake it); otherwise we risk being accused of being a killjoy or a hater.

*Axiom 3: Happiness is linked to objects.*

Drawing from the work of Sara Ahmed, I suggest that lives are structured by happiness through what she calls “happy objects.” “Happy objects” could be literally material objects (a piece of paper with several zeros printed on it could make me happy). It could also, like in the psychoanalytic usage of “love object” or “object of cathexis”, refer to people, ideas, concepts. Proximity to “happy objects” is presumed to produce happiness. Happy objects seem to offer what Sara Ahmed calls “the promise of happiness”.

### 4. TOWARDS AN INADEQUATE CONCLUSION

I would immediately like it to be known that I am not completely satisfied with what this study

has accomplished so far. Ironically, this study continues to be a source of my own unhappiness, a result of what I consider to be glaring yet necessarily unavoidable inadequacies. It seems that many of the difficulties that I have encountered in this project stem from the definitional problems that are intrinsic to any inquiry into happiness. Indeed, it has almost become a ritualistic gesture for scholarly accounts of happiness to begin with an expression of frustration about such definitional difficulties. To think of happiness involves the messy process of mapping the multiple trajectories of desires, their movements, which are not always uniform in terms of pace, direction, importance. They may, depending on a constellation of reasons, collide, collude, reorganize, some may mysteriously vanish, but may also make surprising returns. They do not necessarily have an organizing logic apart from the fact they move towards various locus points of happiness that are scattered all over the expansive edifice of fantasy. These difficulties have convinced many that happiness is that which exceeds the jurisdiction of thought. Indeed, there are those who think that happiness dwells in the murky regions of the ineffable, outside the domain of cognition, and with its characteristic mute resistance, exasperates and frustrates thought. As a concept linked to the idea of a meaningful life (and thus directs so much of life’s movements), it is strange that happiness remains evasively silent. Yet, in this study I suggest that we must demand that happiness provide us an account of itself if only to understand why so many lives are seduced to orient themselves towards it.

I also found similarly dispiriting the almost universal consensus that happiness is in and of itself good and thus should be exempted from critique. Sure enough, happiness is often described as the penultimate object of human desire. Thomas Jefferson famously declared that it is in fact “self-evident” that men are “endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights” that includes “the pursuit of happiness.” But seemingly democratic, happiness can sometimes appear suspiciously selective, residing in certain places and more accessible to certain people. For example, rarely are activists portrayed as happy. We are used to hearing about angry feminists, but not happy ones. Call someone out for being homophobic or sexist, prepare yourself then to be



accused of being a killjoy. As Sara Ahmed posits: “Happiness profiles hence profile a certain kind of person...The face of happiness...looks very much like the face of privilege.” (2008: 9).

In this study I suggested that *unhappiness* is an important component of any critical inquiry on happiness. If there was one insight that I have learned in my research on happiness it is that understanding happiness necessarily means also understanding unhappiness. Indeed, unhappiness offers conceptual tools through which a thorough inquiry on the question of happiness may be fruitfully pursued. Thus, rather than be paralyzed by frustration, what I attempted to do was to think of moments of unhappiness not as signaling limits but rather as opening possibilities of critique. In the process of researching on happiness I have come to realize that my own work is in many ways undergirded by questions of happiness. That my work can only proceed if it moves towards certain goals and even results that might promise happiness. That happiness structures the very mode of inquiry that I use to analyze it. Happiness is, as theorist Lauren Berlant proposes, a form of “cruel optimism.”

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