

Happiness and Are You Lost in the World Like Me? A Brief Philosophical Analysis of Steve Cutts' Animated Films

Paulo Alexandre e Castro

Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

Steve Cutts is a young English illustrator/producer who, despite being 25 or 26 years old, has already worked for large multinationals such as Sony, Toyota or Coca-Cola. His genius is evident not only because of his natural talent for drawing, but also because he uses simple programs like Adobe Flash or After Effects to create his animations, and the result surprises us. And it surprises us with the satirical, daring, carefree and ironic tone with which it presents the human universe, with its ambitions, desires, sadness, miseries. This paper examines two of his animated films, and explores a philosophical vision about the hypermodern society and the myth of happiness.

Keywords: Steve Cutts, happiness myth, hypermodern society, capitalism, animated films

Brief Introduction to a Major Theme

Steve Cutts in his animated films, namely *Happiness* and *Are You Lost in the World Like Me*, presents the human animal that created an unequal world, succumbing to the values dictated by a global economy. The beginning of *Happiness* presents this unbridled race lived in any metropolis, in which the shapeless mass of workers could send us back to Fritz Lang's metropolis universe or to a platonic underground of which we will only have shadows. Steve Cutts gives us the dimension of happiness in this other Black Friday race, where the deepest meaning of the word humanity is forgotten. It can be said that the topic is not new; remember Georges Perec's classic novel, *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1965), in which the young couple is torn between intellectual aspirations and the pleasures dictated by consumer society, and it is certainly not by chance that two years later, the emblematic work of Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, appears. A society where nothing seems to fill the void dictated by purchase. That is showed in a scene where a man drags himself around carrying the 4K TV and easily jumps to buy a sports car that instead of providing him with the adventure of free driving and carefree attitude, puts him in a traffic jam in the city. It is the uselessness of (the sold as) useful Ordine (2016).

The (Hypermodern) Happiness Myth or the Obligation to Be Happy

The seduction of the idea of happiness, or rather, what is presented as a categorical imperative—no longer Kantian although obeying the same logic and laws—read as “you have the obligation to be happy”. In *Happiness* we see the illusion that happiness provides: it requires living in the present, not expecting the future. Hedonism gains place in ecological and political militancy, in the exercise of citizenship, since hedonism is the new religion of modern society. This exaltation of happiness is clearly evident in this animation by Steve Cutts in which almost all products begin with the word happy. Drunk to exhaustion, we don't stop and demand a

“happimed”—a drug that gives us back a rosy world, with rainbows and unicorns, that leaves us hovering in a promised horizon of well-being, in another sensoriality as if opening the doors of perception as Aldous Huxley would say. Gilles Lipovetsky (2007) tells us that we are in the presence of a turbo-consumer, fast, voracious, energetic, vertiginous, which Paul Virilio had already noticed—the vertigo of the moment. The instant is by definition fleeting, ephemeral, and does not stop at itself. The spirit that animates the turbo-consumer has infiltrated to the core and has also disturbed our personal, family and professional relationships, and maybe that’s why we need psychic comfort, or to use the terminology in vogue, inner harmony. The philosopher tells us:

The hyperconsumer is no longer just avid for material well-being (...) but wants subjective growth, as witnessed by the flourishing of techniques derived from personal development, as well as the success of oriental knowledge, new spiritualities, manuals that promise happiness and wisdom. [and continues the French philosopher] The materialism of the first consumer society has gone out of fashion: we are now witnessing the expansion of the market for the soul and its transformation, balance and self-esteem, although the pharmacies of happiness proliferate. (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 10)

Are we, then, lost? The second animation by Steve Cutts gives us the dimension of the abyss where we are heading towards, from the very beginning with the phrase “these systems are failing” but also with the final image. Happiness has a modern face, it’s called technology, it’s called screens. We live immersed in technology, with our eyes glued to the screens, like a crowd of zombies. We prefer violence to the inertia of the void that runs through us, we accept the gratuitousness of violent images, and therefore we do not provide any help to anybody but we do prefer filming, we aim the technological weapon as someone who wants to record the instantaneity of the unrepeatable moment that will be eventually repeated on social networks until exhaustion. According to Olivier Mongin, we have entered a “natural state” of accepting violence. The very experience of violence has metamorphosed into a kind of occupational therapy, a catharsis for modern times; we watch violence whenever we want without violating ourselves (physically or psychically), as George Steiner says:

Open and democratic societies are therapeutic. They seek to alleviate pain and lessen hatred, striving in particular to provide relatively innocuous substitutes and channels for the latter. Authorized aggression in the free market and in sport is a glaring example. Fictional violence is within everyone’s reach. Television addicts, particularly in North America and Western Europe, will have watched from early childhood thousands of hours of murders, assaults, rapes and humiliations. The spiral of graphic brutality in the media and on the Internet is perhaps currently going out of whack. (Steiner, 2001, p. 145)

As we have mentioned earlier, social relations, which include labor, community and family relations, are subject to the mercantilist technologization dictated by this hyper-modernity and, in this sense, they become valid under the scrutiny of the appearance mediated by images. As Goffman mentioned, once the reality with which the individual finds himself committed is momentarily ungraspable in its totality, the individual will have to make use of the available appearances. Paradoxically, the more the individual finds himself engaged in reality (to which perception does not give him access), the more his attention will focus on appearances (Goffman, 1991, p. 291).

Technology has invaded the territory of our mind and taken our time. We make selfies—not without photoshopping them first—to post them, as if this validates the greatness of the spirit or brings us closer to the aesthetic sublime, and hopping to achieve countless likes that legitimize our existence. And we forget, literally, we forget what made us move forward, language. We forget the contents, the grammatical forms, the terms, because we dare to redefine, as if we were gods on Olympus, entertained playing with puppets, we dare to

redefine language, as in the origins. Communication has been transmuted (at least since Marshal McLuhan), but not even he would have foreseen the dangerous replacement of a universe of words by Lol's and smiles. Symbolic representation imposes itself as an affection—a dangerous path that leads to nowhere, which forces us to smile. Happiness requires indications, suggestions, notes. Let's borrow for this purpose the movie *Shrek*. Despite the classic story of the hero accompanied by a plump, bacoco companion (a kind of re-invention of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza), who saves the princess by destroying a dragon, there is a subversive humor in the background, with humorous deviations typical of Brecht. It is the current society that we find there portrayed when, during the wedding ceremony, signs are raised saying, “laugh!”, or “respectful silence!”. These are references to modern customs and rhythms, to pop culture, including here some sarcasm full of irony about vanity, when, for example, the sleeping beauty waits for the kiss and hurries to fix her hair. As Zizek says: “no wonder the final sequence of the film consists of an ironic version of the song ‘I’m a Believer’, the old hit by the Monkeys from the 1960s—it’s the way we are believers today: we enjoy our beliefs, but at the same time we continue to practice the faith, ie, we continue to give ourselves to it to support, without saying so, our daily actions” (Zizek, 2003, p. 197). Imprisoned in a system that has not only dehumanized us but wants to remove all legitimacy from life, whether from the environment or from animals. We play like bored gods. The fluorescent rabbit that appears in a gray and inhumane scenery of men, approximately at minute 1:39, constitutes the perfect metaphor and takes us to Eduard Kac’s Alba rabbit—genetic manipulation as an art form, bioart. And then still, technology in the search for love. That image of me that is no longer reflected in the calm waters of our essence but is deflected into a social network, to appear on a screen, where someone, somewhere is willing to scroll through the display of faces and bodies, waiting for a match that reinvents technological love. And we have one last touch of make-up, perhaps botox, to board the medusa raft that Géricault portrayed in his most famous painting in the 19th century.

In Sort of Conclusion

Lipovetsky knows that happiness is paradoxical: we have never had so much to feel so little: “the market offers more and more means of communication and distractions, but anxiety, loneliness, inner insecurity are also more and more common, we produce and consume more and more, but that does not make us happier” (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 287). Steve Cutts helps seeing that. But one should remember Aristotle: in order to be happy, man has to enjoy different external goods without difficulty, but because man is in his essence *politikon*, he wants the goods in which feel pleasure in sharing the common good, knowledge, wisdom. Happiness for the ancient Greek is *Eudaimonia*, that is, the state in which man feels inhabited by a *Daemon*, as a good genius. So, happiness is the balance between virtue (*Aretê*) and Wisdom (*Phronesis*). Modernity needs to recover the historical and *sapiential* length of civilization, not in order to create a new imperative but in order to not waste humanity in us.

References

- Goffman, E. (1993). *A Apresentação do Eu na Vida de Todos os Dias*. Lisboa: Relógio d'Água.
- Lipovetsky, G. (2010). *A Felicidade Paradoxal. Ensaio sobre a Sociedade do Hiperconsumo*. Lisboa: Edições.
- Mongin, O. (1998). *A violência das imagens ou como eliminá-la?* Lisboa: Editorial Bizâncio.
- Ordine, N. (2016). *A utilidade do inútil. Manifesto*. Matosinhos: Faktoria K de Livros.
- Steiner, G. (2001). *Errata: Revisões de uma vida*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água.
- Virilio, P. (2000). *A Velocidade de Liberdade*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água.
- Zizek, S. (2006). *A Subjetividade por Vir—Ensaio Crítico sobre a Voz Obscena*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água.