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The Pursuit of Happiness

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Proclaimed as an inalienable right from the very first lines of the Declaration of Independence as well as the cornerstone of the American ethos, the 'Pursuit of Happiness' invites us to consider individuals as naturally oriented towards felicity. Yet, contemporary socioeconomic and environmental realities in the United States demonstrate that not everyone has been allowed to embark on the journey to "happiness"—a vague albeit universal term that resists any precise definition.

While the pursuit of happiness may not always be a fruitful one on an individual level, American cinema has nonetheless allowed for the collective *projection* of this thirst for happiness on the big screen. From the Golden Age of Hollywood to the present day, it seems that "the Dream Factory" has incarnated the phantasmagorical and ever-renewed promise of a successful Pursuit of Happiness. One only has to think of Chaplin's little tramp – possibly cinema's first ever truly mythical character—and his many tribulations on screen: no matter how many hardships, rebuffs and humiliations he has to face, he ultimately remains driven by such an inextinguishable desire for happiness that his eternal optimism and goodwill become the token of his universality.

Beyond Chaplin's character, American cinema's enduring comic tradition can also be seen as an invitation to never renounce the Pursuit of Happiness. In his essential volume *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981), Stanley Cavell precisely managed to combine a specific American comedy sub-genre with the paradigm of the Pursuit of Happiness. Yet, happiness on screen does not have to restrict itself to comedy. Conventional happy endings pervade all forms of film genres and fashions and have done so for such a long time that one may feel tempted to consider happiness as no less than the *horizon d'attente* for American cinema as a whole, at least in its classic form.

More than a destination and an end, the Pursuit of Happiness must also be understood as a dynamic principle, a symbolic quest for an ancestral dream. The two protagonists of Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) may stand as emblematic figures of the 1960s counter-culture, they are nonetheless on a quest for happiness—in the wake of Kerouac and other Beat writers—that could even be seen as a possible variation on the oft-quoted "American Dream," a phrase so worn-out that it may sound hollow to contemporary ears, yet one that remains deeply attached to the idea that somewhere, happiness can be found... and thus pursued.

At the founding of the nation, not all Americans were invited to share in the quest for happiness on an equal basis. Enlightenment philosophers had set “happiness” or “felicity” at the heart of modern political preoccupations. Through the implementation of good constitutions, the government was to ensure “public felicity”, the “happiness” of “citizens,, “nations”, or “the people,” and even “mankind” as a whole. On his list of the “unalienable rights” to which all men were entitled, Jefferson gave pride of place to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” next to equality (“all men are born equal”). However, as early as 1776, pursuing happiness was elusive for slaves, and soon, for all African-Americans, even when freed. As a fugitive slave, William Wells Brown told how he tried to reach Canada, the new “country of liberty” where he could at last escape the “Democratic whips”: he was not allowed to pursue happiness and his other rights as an American in the United States. Slaves, African-Americans having to grapple with segregation in the aftermath of the Civil War, women, homosexuals, immigrants and workers: many categories of Americans have since fought to attain some sort of political “happiness,” and to breathe life in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence.

As is revealed by the corollary phenomena of contemporary America, by mass incarceration and the unjustified police killings of African-American citizens, by rising poverty and the mass eviction of deeply indebted Americans out of their homes, whole segments of the American population (mainly the poor) still have no access to the "pursuit of happiness." This has been recently confirmed by contemporary academic studies such as that by Michelle Alexander (*The New Jim Crow : Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2012), and Matthew Desmond (*Evicted : Poverty and Profit in an American City*, 2016).

The goals of this conference are thus to examine this American political promise in contemporary America, to analyze it in the long-term historical development of the United States and to question its relevance and validity today: as inequalities grow, and populist responses are on the rise, is it no longer conceivable to promise collective happiness as well as private fulfillment? Thinking about happiness, and how to pursue happiness, nevertheless helps throw light on the commitment of those groups who have struggled to make sure the rights of women, immigrants, homosexuals, and minorities were safeguarded. As we look back, we cannot but remember the Seneca Falls text of the “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions » which the early feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton read in July 1848, and which stresses the rights guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence, among which "the Pursuit of Happiness."

For its part, has American literature made its own this founding political injunction to pursue and materialize happiness? Or has it instead rejected it, or at least complicated it? Such canonical texts as

promotional pamphlets, the "City upon a Hill" sermon, or Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, although vastly different in purpose and tone, would seem to support the idea that the pursuit of happiness foregrounded by the Founding Fathers was only epitomizing an aspiration coextensive with the American experience. American literature, however, seems to have quickly swerved toward a deep, haunting questioning of what sounded like a national motto. From Charles Brockden Brown to Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson, through James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe, were not writers preoccupied with exploring the territories of an illusory or unreachable happiness? Of an infinite abyss? Such a frenzy of anxiety also runs through Transcendentalist texts, which are sometimes hastily looked upon as being naively optimistic or unaware of the darker shades of existence.

There have probably never been utterly solar writers, whose works sounded like pure celebration, nor authors who had renounced any sense of happiness. Literature, and the arts more generally, rather seem to be occupying a middle ground, a chiaroscuro zone questioning, complexifying, or redefining the "national myth." Thus the notion that territorial expansion would grant happiness to the nation has been called into question (in the novels of Willa Cather for instance). So has as the idea that the historical trajectory of the new country would equally enable any and all to pursue happiness (Harriet Beecher Stowe showed Blacks were denied this dream in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), or that technology could sublimate material power into spiritual achievement (in *The Education of Henry Adams* for instance). Are there words or images that merely capture an untainted happiness, born out of the simple pleasures of summer at Coney Island or of the intoxicating virtue of open spaces? Can one even regard the nature writing tradition as unalloyed celebration, as its detractors are wont to do? Or, is literature instead, as it wards off apocalyptic threats and post-apocalyptic shudders (whether caused by the anticipated vision of an ecological hell or by 9/11 terror), bent on reviving the age-old but vacillating flame, the vanished happiness? Isn't happiness, although gone as soon as it is grasped, forever to be pursued again? In the dizzying, postmodern flurries of a Pynchon or De Lillo, in parodic humor or sardonic laughter, may also be heard a more direct—less historical than existential—concern in the face of the impossible or uncertain quest of happiness.

From the second half of the 20th century, the triumph of television and the entertainment industry has significantly altered the dynamics of the Pursuit of Happiness. All of a sudden, thanks to the miracle of economic prosperity relayed by mass media, happiness could pop up in every household with the simple push of a remote control button, whether it be in a commercial break between two episodes of a soap opera or on the set of a popular game show. Todd Haynes' cinema (*Far from Heaven*, *Carol*) as well as the TV series *Mad Men* have quite subtly managed to demonstrate the illusory nature of

such material plenitude in a seemingly perfect America in the 1950s and 60s. More recently, Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) provided an even sharper critique of the hollowness of televised happiness. Nonetheless, from the early days of the television industry to our contemporary digital age, consumerism and the pursuit of happiness have always coexisted harmoniously.

It may thus be relevant to explore, on the one hand, how hyper-consumerism and the mass media shaped the rhetoric of happiness in the second half of the 20th century, often reducing it to the two keywords "wealth and fame," that is to say the satisfaction of material desires combined with the fifteen minutes of celebrity for all, predicted by Andy Warhol at the dawn of the 1980s. On the other hand, one should also try and assess the extent to which the new media, particularly social networks as well as web communities, can open new ways towards or even redefine our idea of happiness. If it is to be believed that Google can 'solve' death, as *Time* magazine suggested in September 2013, should one also trust the Internet giants with providing us with new roads to happiness? If, as some advocate, transhumanism and post-humanism pave the way for an ever-augmented reality, are we to consider that this will also increase our happiness factor? Or shouldn't one be seeking happiness in a "diminished" reality, by going back to more simple and humble modes of being like those promoted by eco-critics and contemporary Nature writers such as Gary Snyder or Jim Harrison, promoting a slower, Epicurean way of life rather than a reckless flight forward?

What, then, remains of the founding myths? Can anything remain? Will pursuing happiness only have been a universal aspiration touted as a federative basis and project—who can really, seriously, claim to be *against* the pursuit of happiness?—but one that is overly "easy" or "simple," and simultaneously too complex? Shall it only have been, like liberty illuminating the world, a heroic, utopian, Promethean power, but one doomed to become a retrospective, Epimethean vision? Does the pursuit of happiness guide the world? Or does it instead delude it? Can it still act as a motto, a dream, a yearning, can it be rekindled, revived, or reformulated for times to come, or is it irremediably doomed to rest in the cemetery of illusions?