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Agent of Happiness

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Agent of Happiness

Abstract
This is a film review of Agent of Happiness (2024), directed by Arun Bhatarai and Doroty Zurbó.

Keywords
Bhutan, Nepal, Buddhism, Public Policy

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Agent of Happiness (2024), dir. Arun Bhattarai and Dorottya Zurbó

This documentary follows Amber as he and a partner travel across Bhutan interviewing people about their happiness. The Gross National Happiness project, commissioned by the king, has the goal of documenting and measuring the level of happiness of the residents of the country in order to supply them with knowledge that can shape public policy. 75 government workers were hired to do this work after they received training on the questions to ask and how to score them.

Of course, this is a highly subjective exercise, as the individual interviewed or the interviewer has to assign a number to each person’s happiness, based on answers to a variety of questions: How many cows do you have? Donkeys? Chickens? How do you sleep? How would you rate your level of worry, or anger, or depression? Along the way, we learn the stories of several individuals. A woman whose abusive husband has left her has become an alcoholic, and this is a great source of unhappiness for her as well as her 17-year-old daughter. Many people need more money to live, as they struggle just to survive. Widows and widowers miss their spouses, and
young people want a romantic partner. Loneliness and poverty seem to lead to low levels of happiness—no surprise there—and those who have happy families and more money tend to be happier. One rich man has three wives, and lists his happiness at the highest level: he feels good about how he has taken care of his wives and children, and he believes that he does good for everyone. His wives tell a different story, as they complain about his selfishness and his temper, and the fact that he had multiple affairs even with having three wives. Now he spends his time praying, they remark cynically, as he is older and wants good karma for the next life. He is happy, but he has not made everyone around him happy. A trans woman considers herself unhappy as she wants to be prettier, and hopes that she is reincarnated as a more attractive female. Her mother, for her part, is totally accepting of her daughter, telling her that she is beautiful and can be happy with her life; this attitude is all the more impressive because the mother has cancer, and yet she understands the value of appreciating what one has better than most people.

Amber himself is not a happy person, largely because his Bhutanese citizenship was revoked when he was a child due to his Nepali heritage. He continues to apply for citizenship, as many other residents do who share this second-class status, but he does not know if he will ever receive it. He is dating a woman who plans to go to Australia for her education, but he cannot follow her as he cannot get a passport without Bhutanese citizenship. He believes that not being a citizen has impacted his ability to find a wife—he is now 40—and it does seem that his loneliness is a direct result of government policies that discriminate against the Nepali. At the same time, ironically, he continues to gather data for the government so that they can announce the high level of happiness of the Bhutanese people and declare the project a success.
This film shows the folly of trying to measure happiness, but it also shows that it is not something that an individual can totally control. The people who admit to being unhappy have real reasons for their unhappiness, whether it is loneliness, sickness, or poverty. Much of this might be addressed by government policies, but there is no evidence shown of efforts to address these root causes of undesirable social conditions. We are left with the realization that happiness is a luxury that not everyone can afford, although they all deserve it.