

## HAPPINESS BOUND – LESSON PLAN

### Background

The cultural event **100 jours de bonheur**, launched in the spring of 2007, brought together 100 Quebec artists from various backgrounds to address the notion of happiness. The artists presented various works, but surprisingly it was the poets of Quebec and their art that became the focal point of the event.

The project **100 jours de bonheur** was based on an idea by producer Michel Sarao: to put contemporary Quebec poetry on film. In 2003, he invited Monique Simard from Productions Virage to join the project. They decided to ask poets from Quebec and French Canada to write on a single theme. A call for proposals was launched and 50 poets responded to the challenge of composing an original poem about happiness, the topic chosen by the producers. This proved to be a fertile subject and was approached in fifty different ways. Happiness was most often depicted as an object of desire. Elusive and fleeting, it becomes a source of anxiety when absent, yet remains a life force and source of creativity.

From this initiative was born a collective work, *Le Bonheur des poètes*, published in 2007. But as the project developed, it took on unforeseen dimensions as photographers, singers, musicians, radio and television hosts and researchers were invited to participate. Under the direction of Michel Rivard, 11 singers and their accompanying musicians performed new songs inspired by a poem they had chosen from the collection. This concert was broadcast on *Espace Musique*. Radio host Serge Bouchard devoted one of his programs to the subject of happiness. Journalist Michel Venne, through the Institut du Nouveau Monde, conducted an extensive survey about happiness among 2,000 Quebecers. Photographer Gilbert Duclos invited 24 photographers to interpret the poem about happiness that had most inspired them. RDI presented a documentary series in two one-hour episodes on the same topic. Lastly, a DVD called *Le bonheur d'apprendre* was produced, intended for the teaching of poetry at secondary and post-secondary levels.

The film *Happiness Bound* formed part of this vast cultural undertaking of which poets were at the centre – an unusual occurrence. Fifty poems were compiled and 21 were singled out by 11 Quebec filmmakers. Philippe Baylaucq was given the task of coordinating and directing a feature film based on 21 short films. Besides the topic of happiness, what could connect all these individual films? Baylaucq created a continuous narrative thread in the form of snow scenes inserted between the short films. To him this symbolized both the blank page confronting each author and the *carte blanche* given to artists, poets and filmmakers.

The result is a film containing an astonishing range of voices. However, one theme that seems to emerge, or at least recur, is the *absence* of happiness rather than happiness itself. And when there is happiness, it has less to do with well-being and fulfillment than with the hope of not living without it, which itself is a source of despair. The question then arises: to be able to appreciate happiness, must we have known its absence?

## HOW THE FILM CAME ABOUT

Not since Jean-Claude Labrecque and Jean-Pierre Masse (*La nuit de la poésie*, 1970, 1980 and 1991) has anybody dared to put the work of living Quebec poets on film. *Happiness Bound* is therefore an unusual film, even more so given its subject matter, which is rarely broached in poetry, making the project even more exceptional.

*Happiness Bound* consists of 21 short films directed by 11 Quebec filmmakers. Each film was inspired by a poem selected from the 50 used in the project. The filmmakers were given *carte blanche*, which they welcomed as a real gift. The result is a great range of approaches, some of the short films being rather like documentaries, others like small experimental films, and some fiction.

The obvious problem of such an approach is fragmentation. Philippe Baylaucq, whose job was to unify the whole, avoided an episodic approach and created instead a harmonious piece rather than a series of short films. He connected them by inserting images of snow, ice and water between each one, punctuated by poets' reflections on writing and happiness.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FILM COURSES

The division of *Happiness Bound* into 21 short films makes it easy to use in a class. We suggest a three-step approach.

<b>BEFORE THE SCREENING</b>
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A – A specific type of film

- 1) Collective films projects: background

Present a definition and brief history of collective films projects in Quebec and elsewhere.

- Short history of the cinematographic approach: Collective films projects and “sketch” films.
- Examples of collective films with some excerpts (*Paris vu par...*, *Montréal vu par...*, *New York Stories*, *Cosmos*, *View From the Summit*, *Fantasia*, etc.).
- Collective films projects from Quebec: history and examples.

## 2) About this approach

Ask students to think about the advantages and disadvantages of the form used in *Happiness Bound*.

- Some points to consider about the advantages of this approach: a multiplicity of viewpoints on the same theme helps you delve deeper into the subject; original cinematographic treatment; more room for experimentation (picture and sound).
- Some points to consider about the challenges of such an approach: risk of repetition in form or content; difficulty establishing a coherent narrative link between the films; risk that the feature film becomes uneven or patchy.

B – Original film subjects: poetry and happiness

### 1) A rarely discussed subject in film: poetry

Ask students to think about the point of putting poetry on film.

- Ask the class to make a list of films on poetry.
- Note the various preferred cinematographic approaches used to represent the subject.
- A Quebec collective film to use as reference: *Les nuits de la poésie* by Labrecque and Masse.

## 2) How to film happiness

Ask students to think about creating a film on the theme of happiness.

- Think about the idea of a single topic: multiple viewpoints, convergent or divergent?
- Have the students read the 21 poems selected by the different filmmakers and ask them to find images that seem appropriate to illustrate 10 of the poems.
- Then ask the class to associate poetic images with film images.

### **DURING THE SCREENING**

You can watch *Happiness Bound* in several ways: in its entirety, of course, but also in segments or partially, in which case you could just watch a few of the short films.

Because this is about creating images from poetic texts, it would be useful to have entire or partial screenings without sound, to see which poem corresponds to which short.

#### A - Subjectivity in the treatment

- 1) Illustrate the subjective element in the interpretation of the subject
  - With the texts in hand, present some of the short films without their soundtrack, and ask the class to find which images relate to the texts.
  - Give the titles of the poems and then ask the class which poems correspond to which images, without the sound.
  - Ask students to identify the transitions between the short films, without the sound.
- 2) Relationship between perception of the text and how it is filmed

- Ask students to decide for themselves which images best evoke the selected poem.
- Ask them which ones appear to be discordant or not fit the meaning.

#### B – Film language

- 1) Identify the links that form the narrative thread of the feature film.
  - Visual and sound elements.
  - Can you clearly identify the narrative thread without the sound?
- 2) Find the elements of film language
  - When viewing the entire film: find at least one element of film language for each of the 21 short films.
  - Indicate several elements of film language for a specific short film.
  - Note which elements connect the film to fiction and which connect it to documentary.
  - Distinguish instances of poem recitation from instances where the poems are acted out (dramatized).

## C – Cinematographic content

- 1) Ask the class to identify contrasts and antitheses. For example, Barbeau's film, based on D. Kimm's poem, takes place in a brothel, where we would expect some degree of coarseness. But instead we find a true encounter between a man and a woman.
- 2) Ask students to note the various shooting locations: urban or rural; unexpected locations; open spaces; closed spaces; unusual locations (e.g. in the final short, director Kim Nguyen films in a Montreal location that will be demolished to make room for condos.)
- 3) Ask students to pick out variations in tone. Did the filmmakers who chose to illustrate more than one poem tend to select texts with a similar or different tone?

## AFTER THE SCREENING

Students name some films that have affected them a lot, as well as the most touching short film. Is there a connection?

### A- Appreciation

- 1) Expressing a personal point of view
  - Ask students to come up with elements they spontaneously appreciated in the film as a whole and in the various short films.
  - Then ask them to list cinematographic elements they enjoyed (visual treatments, lighting, editing, camera movement, narration, etc.).
- 2) Exercising critical judgment
  - For the short films or cinematographic elements indicated, explain what they bring to the poem.
  - Each student chooses the poem and the short film that most touched them. Is there any connection?

- Indicate any formal differences between the short films (urban, rural or nature shoot; poem whispered or acted out dramatized; animation or realistic setting, etc.).
- In light of what Baylaucq told us about his intent, what is the significance and impact of the images used between the short films?
- Do the students see the theme of happiness in the short films? How does it fit (or not) their own visions of happiness? Does one short in particular match their idea of happiness?
- What motivated the filmmakers to respond to this challenge? Denis Villeneuve told us that: “Cinema is perhaps the most publicized of the arts, whereas poetry is at the other end of the spectrum. I enjoyed embracing poetry with the camera and putting it in the spotlight.”

### 3) Suggested assignments

- Ask the class to write a review of the whole film.
- Ask the class to write a review of two of the short films.
- Ask students to devise and write a script for a short film based on their favourite poem.
- Ask students to think of an alternate narrative thread for the feature they just saw.
- Ask students to choose a certain number of poems and apply images to them.

## THE POETIC SIDE

When producers Michel Sarao and Monique Simard took the rare and unusual step of appealing to all Quebec poets to write on the theme of happiness, 50 responded to the challenge and submitted original pieces. In May 2007, the publishing house *Les Écrits des Forges*, under Jacques Allard’s direction, published a collection of the poems called *Le Bonheur des poètes*. These were the poems that would later served as inspiration for



all the other artistic endeavours of the **Cent jours de bonheur** event. Nobody expected a cultural event of such magnitude to be based entirely on poetry!

From these fifty poems, 21 were chosen by the *Happiness Bound* filmmakers, who saw in them a new source for their creativity. Several of the directors were of the opinion that film could raise the profile of poetry, an art form rather out of favour these days. For them it was important to remind people that poetry exists, that it is alive and well and relevant.

But poets and filmmakers have often observed that happiness isn't always self-evident. These poets found that writing on the theme of happiness could be a real challenge. Danny Plourde, winner of the Félix-Leclerc poetry prize, admitted he initially found the idea a little "tacky," only to realize later that it led him to places he would never have dared go otherwise. The first task for the filmmakers was to truly inhabit the poets' work. While happiness may be hard to put into words, poetry is even harder to illustrate. How do you make a film about happiness when the word itself is not even part of the text from which you are creating images? Or when it is the fleeting, ephemeral, aspect of happiness that needs to be captured? In short, how do we depict its very absence on film?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR LITERATURE COURSES

*Happiness Bound* is made up of 21 short films that can be screened individually, making it easier to use in class. It would be helpful to acquire the anthology of poems *Le bonheur des poètes* to see not only the 21 poems chosen by the filmmakers, but also those not chosen. We suggest a three-step approach in understanding the poetry.

### BEFORE THE SCREENING

A – An original writing topic: happiness

Provide background information about the film *Happiness Bound*.

1) The Cent jours de bonheur event

- Poets as the focal point of a cultural event
- Writing to order.
- Happiness as a theme: points to consider about the challenges of writing about it.

2) The poets

- Introduce the poetry anthology *Le bonheur des poètes*.
- Introduce some of the poets from the group.

B – Reading the poems

To prepare for the screening, ask students to read the poems chosen by the filmmakers.

1) The filmmakers' choices

- Points to consider: how does one choose? Can the poems be used to make a coherent film?
- Ask students to read some poems that were not selected by the filmmakers: would the students have made the same choices?

2) Read the poetry

- Ask students to jot down some images that come to mind when reading the poems chosen by the filmmakers.
- Ask them to think about a connecting theme to link the 21 poems.

- Expressing a personal point of view: Ask students to choose their favourite poem from those used by the filmmakers. Coax them into precisely defining which images come to mind when reading this poem.

### **DURING THE SCREENING**

The film *Happiness Bound* can be screened in its entirety, partially or in segments.

#### A – Screening without sound

- 1) Since this is about putting poetry on film, an interesting first approach could be screening it in whole or in part without the sound. With the texts in hand, students can try to identify which poems are being screened.
- 2) Ask students if they recognize the recurring images that act as a thread connecting the various poems.
- 3) Ask students if some images resemble the ones they wrote down before the screening.

#### B – Screening with sound

- 1) Points to consider: Ask students if they think the filmmakers made good choices in their selection of images; ask them if any of the filmmakers' images resemble any of those they jotted down before the screening.
- 2) Ask the class to pay attention to the recitation of the poems; what do they think of the spoken or dramatized poems?
- 3) Expressing a personal point of view: Ask students to explain why they preferred a particular short film.

### **AFTER THE SCREENING**

#### A – Class discussion

Comparing thoughts about the notes taken during the screening with those taken while reading the poems. Topics for discussion:

- 1) Ask students to go back to the poem they said was their favourite before the screening.
  - Does their favourite short film correspond to their favourite poem? How does the answer to this question influence the interpretation of the poem?
  - Can a poem dictate the images to some extent?
  - Which verses seem to have inspired the filmmaker to create his/her own visual mood?
- 2) Ask students to examine how the poem is put on the screen.
  - Is there a strong sense of narrative?
  - Do the poems gain or lose meaning when they are spoken or acted out?
- 3) Ask students to pay attention to the film's narrative thread.
  - Did they recognize that the images of snow and nature are a connecting link between the short films?
  - Explain that the director-coordinator wanted to convey through the images of snow the notion of the blank page or *carte blanche* given to the poets and filmmakers. Was it a good choice? Did it work?
- 4) Ask students to express their personal opinion about the impact of each short film.
  - Which short film was most successful at expressing a poem?
  - Did some poems gain in meaning when put on screen? Did some lose meaning?
  - Ask students to think about the following idea: Does attaching specific images to a poem impose a unique vision?
  - Discuss the following statement by H el ene Dorion: "Everyone uses and ultimately inhabits language. In poetic writing there is a kind of displacement [...] And this displacement is an essential aspect of poetry." What does she mean by "displacement"?
  - Did students find this notion of displacement in their favourite poem? In their favourite short film?
- 5) Discuss the theme of happiness.
  - What does the film as a whole convey about happiness?

- Does this match the impression that emerges when reading all 21 poems?

#### B – Suggested assignments

- 1) Compare two short films that differ in their narrative interpretation of the poem in question (e.g. a whispered poem and a declaimed poem; a poem recited in voice-over and one on camera).
- 2) Compare two poems that describe happiness in a diametrically opposite way.
- 3) Explain what is touching about their favourite poem. Does it illustrate a certain notion of happiness, or does it contradict their personal vision?
- 4) Compare their favourite poem to the filmed interpretation. Is it satisfactory? Did it add to the impact of the poem or diminish the symbolic impact?
- 5) Ask students to ponder some selected verses.
- 6) Ask students to think about the meaning of these words by Hugues Corriveau: “[poetry] is expressed in a language that the poet might not have any greater command over than the reader.”
- 7) Ask students to think about the meaning of the following: “To me, poetry is first and foremost a quest, a search for meaning.” – Denise Desautels. Is this idea relevant to the topic of happiness?
- 8) After reading the poems, ask students to think about the notion of happiness as the absence of unhappiness.
- 9) Creative writing: ask students to write a poem about the impressions the images made on them after they watched a short film screened without sound.