



HAPPINESS

GRADES 6-12
CLASSROOM GUIDE

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TEACHING THE FILM:

Happiness is an observational documentary film about the introduction of television, Internet and electricity in a village in northern Bhutan, through the eyes of a nine-year-old boy. A class screening of the film may complement a global studies or media studies curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will give students a window into a very different experience of childhood and will challenge them to think critically about the role of technology and media in their own lives. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as family relationships, agrarian lifestyles, and Buddhist religion.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **Happiness**. Support

materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

ABOUT THE FILM

High in the snow-capped mountains of Bhutan, a mother leaves her son at a monastery to be raised as a monk. Peyangki would rather play than study, like most nine-year-old boys, and he is wont to slip away from the unpopulated cloister to turn cartwheels in his red tunic. While the wide-open outdoors is sufficient to distract the boy from the centuries-old routine of prayer and rituals, more sedentary (and, perhaps, deleterious) temptations encroach: Electricity is finally reaching the village, and with it television and the Internet. Now, modernization isn't precisely the same thing as progress, for something is lost amid technological advances. Such is the wisdom of experience, which Peyangki has yet to acquire. When he accompanies his uncle on a journey to Thimphu to sell a yak and buy a TV, the lad is understandably thrilled, enticed and a tad confused by the manmade items he encounters in the capital, from mannequins to junk food. Back in the village, the eerily unilluminating light from the flickering fluorescent screen portends the end of a self-contained way of life. Does Peyangki realize the future is in the balance? Balmès illuminates the seduction of technology--as well as its rapid encroachment--on an ancient way of life with an observant eye, reminding us how complicated and bittersweet the effects of progress can be.

Thomas Balmès (France/Finland, 2014)
75 minutes, Bhutanese with English subtitles
Grades 6-12

Recommended Subject Areas:

Art/Media
Global Studies
Social Studies

Key concepts / buzzwords:

Buddhism
Bhutan
Consumerism
Development
Himalayas
Isolation
Media
Poverty
Rural Communities
Television



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

Happiness is an observational documentary with a pace that matches the pace of life in rural Bhutan, where the film is set: it is slower and more abstract than most films that students are used to watching. You may want to discuss this with students before viewing the film and ask them to compare the pace of mainstream media with the pace of daily life.

- Do stories that you watch on TV or on the Internet generally happen faster, slower, or about the same speed as they would unfold in real time?
- What is the difference between real time and media time?
- Why do media makers alter the time frame of a sequence of events or a story?
- Why might a filmmaker choose to slow the pace of a film?

POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Character and Story

- 1) Describe Peyangki.
 - Who is he and where does he live?
 - What is Peyangki's life like in the beginning of the film?
 - What are his responsibilities?
 - Why is Peyangki sent to live in the monastery?
 - How does his life change at the monastery?
- 2) What does Peyangki do for fun?
 - Is Peyangki happy?
 - What does the monk who teaches Peyangki think is the path to happiness?

WHAT IS THE
 DIFFERENCE
 BETWEEN
 REAL TIME
 AND MEDIA
 TIME?

- What do you think happiness would look like for Peyangki?
- 3) What is Peyangki's experience when he travels to the city?
 - What ordinary things was Peyangki seeing for the first time?
 - What was Peyangki's reaction to commerce, technology and consumerism?
 - How do you think you would react if you lived your whole life without electricity, Internet, or TV, and then you traveled to a modern city?
 - Do you think Peyangki will choose to return to the city?
 - 4) What does Peyangki's mom think that his sister, Choki, does for work?
 - What does she actually do for work?
 - Why doesn't Peyangki tell his mom the truth about Choki's career?
 - What would you have done if you were Peyangki?
 - 5) What is life like for the adults in the film?
 - What are Peyangki's mother's priorities?
 - Describe Peyangki's uncle.
- How do you think life will be different for these people once TV and electricity come to the village.

Context

- 1) **Happiness** begins with a public announcement from the King to the people of Bhutan. The King warns the youth of Bhutan that the Internet and TV contain materials that are both harmful and useful. What does he mean by this?
 - What elements of popular and media culture might be harmful to the youth of Bhutan and to the country as a whole?



- What can the Internet and TV bring that are helpful?
- What benefits would you see in your life if you removed TV and the Internet?
- What would you miss?

2) Describe the lifestyle and the landscape of the village of Laya, in the Himalayas.

- Do you think that Laya is an easy place to live?
- What do you think are the challenges of living in a place like Laya?
- What do you think would be special or wonderful about living in Laya?
- How do you think the village will change with the introduction of electricity?
- Do you think the changes that come will be for good, for bad, or a combination of both?

3) What is Peyangki learning at the monastery?

- What are the basic beliefs of the Buddhist religion, as practiced in the mountains of Bhutan?
- What values does Peyangki's teacher pass on to his students?
- How do you think Peyangki's teacher will react to the changes that are coming to the village of Laya?
- Can traditional Buddhist values exist alongside technology and development?
- How do other religions approach challenges posed by a changing culture?

4) What do the people of Laya think about TV before electricity arrives in the village?

- Do you think their opinions of TV will change when they get used to it?
- What do the villagers watch when they get TV?
- Why do you think they chose those programs?
- If you could step into the film and share your

insights as someone who has grown up in a media-saturated culture, what would you say to them?

5) Why do you think the villagers, and Peyangki's uncle especially, are so intent to buy a TV immediately?

- Why is the TV so important to them?
- What system of commerce do they use to purchase the TV?
- What system of transportation do they use to bring the TV back to the village?
 - What do you think will be the role of the TV in their household and in the social structure of the village as a whole?
 - How do you think TV will change the villagers' social habits?

6) In his announcement, the King of Bhutan said that Internet would be coming to the country as well as TV. What impact do you think Internet will have on a village like Laya?

- How is the Internet different than TV?
- Do you think that people will enjoy the Internet in the village of Laya?
 - What would you tell them about the Internet as a medium, if you had a chance to talk to them before it arrived?

WHY IS THE TV SO IMPORTANT TO THEM?

Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1) What kind of film is **Happiness**?

- How would you describe this film to a friend who was thinking about watching it? What did you think of the pace of the film? Was it too slow? Why do you think the director chose to create a slow-moving story?

2) What did you think of the imagery in the film?

- Did you enjoy the pictures?



- What did you notice about the size of the people compared to the size of the landscape?
- What did you notice about the insides of the houses?
- Do you think that the cinematographer did a good job capturing the visual landscape of the village of Laya?

3) How did you feel at the end of **Happiness**?

- What were the people watching at the end of the film?
- Do you think they were really all watching the same thing?
- How do you think the filmmaker set that up?
- Why do you think the director chose to show the light of the TV on the villagers' faces?
- Do you think there is a message in this film?
- What do you think the director wants the audience to think about after the film is

- You may want to collect these short videos as a graded assignment or watch them together as a class.
- For more information about filmmaking exercises in the classroom, and a useful worksheet outlining different shot types and camera angles, visit FilmEd.sffs.org.

2) Journaling Activity: Reflect on the film.

- What were your impressions of **Happiness**?
- What do you think was the purpose of this film? Why did the filmmakers choose to tell this story?
- What do you think Peyangki is up to right now?

Imagine his life several years after the introduction of TV and electricity in the village of Laya.

3) Research and Experiment: What is it like to live without media?

- First, interview your parents or grandparents.
- Ask them what was it like to live before the Internet and before we had such ubiquitous access to media.
- What has changed now that we are wired and connected?
- Next, try to go without media for one full week.
- Avoid watching TV, going online, or texting with your friends.

- What does it feel like to be without media? What thoughts do you have? Are you bored? Can you move through boredom to another feeling?
- Keep a journal through the experiment to document your experience.
- In a follow-up discussion, reflect on the King of Bhutan's statement early in the film. Which elements of media culture are "useful" and which are "harmful"?

TRY TO GO
 WITHOUT
 MEDIA FOR
 ONE FULL
 WEEK

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) Filmmaking Exercise: Shoot your own short, observational documentary.

- Choose a landscape/location that you find interesting. It might be a place in your school, a park in your neighborhood, a busy sidewalk, the inside of a mall, or any scene that you would be interested in watching for five minutes.
- Film your landscape from five different vantage points, staying still in each spot for at least one minute. Try to choose locations where you have wide, medium, and close views of your landscape.
- Edit your footage into a short documentary. Title it with the name of your location.



California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grade 6:** Standard 1.9 Identify persuasive and propaganda techniques used in television and identify false and misleading information.
- **Grade 7:** Standard 1.8 Analyze the effect on the viewer of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism; identify the techniques used to achieve the effects in each instance studied.
- **Grade 8:** Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's Henry V with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- **Grades 11 & 12:** Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 8-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) **Medium:** the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) **Author:** the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) **Content:** the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) **Audience:** the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) **Purpose:** the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM	<p>All Media Is Constructed.</p> <p>How is the message delivered and in what format? What technologies are used to present the message? What visual and auditory elements are used? What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</p> <p>Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>All Media Is A Language.</p> <p>What is the subject of the media message? What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content? What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response? To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</p> <p>Who receives the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message? What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message? How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</p> <p>Why was the message constructed? Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How? To what extent does the message achieve its purpose? What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895 The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

1900-1920 Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

1926 John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

1929 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

1935 Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

1960s The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

1988 The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

PRESENT DAY The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Map of Bhutan: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/asia/bhutan/>

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More information about the Layap people of Northern Bhutan:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Layap>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/tribes/layap/>

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BBC News article: “Bhutan’s Technological Revolution”

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/click_online/4065071.stm

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Life in the Himalayas, HimalayanVoices.org: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/tribe/tribes/layap/>

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Overview of the Buddhist practices native to the Himalayas:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Himalayan_Buddhism

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Resources for watching and making films in the classroom:

<http://filmed.sffs.org/>

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REVIEWS

The Hollywood Reporter

2/6/2014 by Stephen Farber

Director Thomas Balmes captures a vanishing way of life in remote Bhutan in this Sundance cinematography award-winning documentary.

The encroachment of the modern world on traditional communities is a theme that has been explored in numerous films, both fiction and non-fiction. In *Happiness*, one of the world documentary competitors shown at Sundance this year, director Thomas Balmes travels to a remote village in Bhutan that is just about to have electricity installed. The film won a cinematography award for its stunning images of this Himalayan mountain community, and it paints an evocative, memorable picture of lives in transition. The movie should be a hit at many other festivals.

The movie begins in 1999 with footage of the king of Bhutan approving the introduction of television and the Internet in his country, to the cheers of enormous crowds. But the village of Laya has been slow to join the party. With just 900 residents, mainly yak herders, the mountainside village has missed out on this modern technology. Now, for the first time, crews are laying cables in the town. Balmes's focus, however, is on one nine-year-old boy, Peyangki, who is sent by his mother to study at the local monastery because she cannot afford to raise all six of her children after the death of her husband. At the monastery the boy will receive food and shelter, but his future there is not guaranteed. There were once nine monks living there, but the number has been reduced to three, and the elder monk who instructs the two boys is going to be departing soon. So we sense that this tranquil way of life is about to become extinct,

as new technology extends its tentacles even into these remote regions.

As the title suggests, the film aims to celebrate the beauties of a simpler, unadorned life. Scenes of the boys running around the quiet monastery have unmistakable allure. But the film also understands the attractions of modernity. In one episode, Peyangki travels with his uncle to the closest city and discovers the excitement of urban life. He sees his first mannequin outside a store and stands rapt in front of a row of TV screens. While in the city, he meets his older sister, who is now working as a dancer in a nightclub. Some of the scenes in the film, like this meeting with the sister, seem staged and rehearsed rather than simply recorded. Many documentarians manipulate the footage they find, but this directorial control seems a little more overbearing in a few scenes of *Happiness*. Nevertheless, Balmes demonstrates a sharp eye for cultural contrasts. He and cinematographer Nina Bernfeld capture the majesty of the isolated rural settings and the energy of the urban circus with equal agility. The musical score by the British rock group British Sea Power enhances the lyrical intensity of scenes set in Laya. Even at just 77 minutes, the film sometimes dawdles, but it provides a vivid glimpse of a vanishing way of life.