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Going Through the Motions: American Bodies in Pharrell Williams's "24 Hours of Happy"

Abstract

The video shot to promote Pharrell Williams's 2013 hit "Happy" is quite unusual: it runs continuously for 24 hours and displays a succession of around 400 people dancing to the song and often singing its lyrics, all aiming at displaying with their bodies and facial expressions the spirit of happiness the song is about. This article wishes to analyze the strategies chosen by the dancers to represent "happiness," the moves, and facial expressions they have selected: on what basis, with what expected or unexpected impact on the viewers. Several issues will be tackled: is there a specific American body language to display happiness? Has it evolved in time? Has this led to similar changes in other parts of the world? Does it imply a pressure to conform, with the related consequences on issues of freedom, or identity? What does the emphasis on happiness in this video and in many recent American publications tell us about the potential transformation of the American body and to what extent is this connected to public policies?

Résumé

La vidéo promotionnelle réalisée pour promouvoir la chanson de Pharrell Williams « Happy » (2013) est pour le moins inhabituelle : elle dure 24 heures et donne à voir, de façon ininterrompue, 400 personnes différentes qui l'une après l'autre dansent et chantent sur la chanson, tout en s'efforçant par leurs attitudes corporelles et leurs expressions faciales de démontrer qu'elles sont « heureuses ». Cet article se propose d'examiner les stratégies expressives choisies par les danseurs pour exprimer un tel sentiment. Plusieurs points seront abordés : Existe-t-il des modalités spécifiquement étatsuniennes d'exprimer un sentiment grâce au langage corporel ? Ces modalités ont-elles évolué dans le temps ? Ont-elles eu un impact sur les modalités expressives dans d'autres parties du monde ? Contribuent-elles au conformisme que la culture populaire étatsunienne est souvent accusée d'engendrer ? Que faut-il déduire de l'importance actuellement accordée à l'expression du bonheur dans la culture populaire comme dans les politiques publiques ?

Keywords

Interculturality, body language, happiness, nonverbal communication, "Happy," "24 Hours of Happy," Pharrell Williams

Mots clés

Interculturalité, langage corporel, bonheur, communication non verbale, « Happy », « 24 Hours of Happy », Pharrell Williams

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Introduction

As a genre, pop music, and particularly Anglo-American pop music such as it has developed since the second half of the 20th century, covers an infinite variety of subjects and moods, from the political to the introspective, the rebellious to the sweet and tender. One category whose popularity has never faded is what critics call "good time music"¹, a combination of upbeat tempo, positive, motivational or humorous lyrics, light orchestration shunning loud, harsh, minor and distorted sounds, and sung by pleasant looking young men and women. There obviously were songs that matched these criteria before World War II ("Happy Days Are Here Again" in 1929, for example), but the genre became systematized in the 1950s with the development of a consumer culture linking material wealth and happiness. AM radio stations, aimed at the teenagers and housewives markets, were instrumental in imposing the genre. The purpose of these songs, apart from generating (or more precisely, in order to generate) substantial sales, is to raise a smile, get feet moving, and lift up the spirits of the listeners. Good time songs are usually short, typically released in late spring since they all vie to become the very lucrative hits of the summer. This has become such an established feature of the category that the band Queens of the Stone Age wrote a song meant to deride it, entitled "Feel Good Hit of the Summer" (2000) whose lyrics are in fact a list of various drugs: nicotine, Valium, Vicodin, marijuana, ecstasy, alcohol, and cocaine. Others tackle the topic in a less ironic way, such as Robin Thicke with his 2013 attempt entitled "Feel Good," The Lovin' Spoonful with "Good Time Music" (1965), The Beach Boys with "Good Vibrations" (1966), The Beatles' "Good Day Sunshine" (1966), The Turtles' "Happy Together" (1967), Simon and Garfunkel's "The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feeling Groovy)" (1967), Bobby McFerrin with "Don't Worry, Be Happy" (1988), U2's "Beautiful Day" (2000), or more recently, Daft Punk's "Get Lucky" (2013). One could of course trace a probable origin of the genre in James Brown "I Got You (I Feel Good)" (1965), with its sexual undertones, an element more or less overt in feel good songs.

One common feature of these songs is that they are meant to entice the listeners to dance, moving one's body being here conceived as a way to feel good through sheer physical exertion, and to display one's feelings. As a rule, dance, besides its sexual implications, is also connected to happy moods. Classical ballets, professional or amateur folkloric performances, the pop choreographies used on music videos or musical TV programs, from *American Bandstand*² to *Top of the Pops*³, all feature broadly smiling dancers, though the smiles are more often of the saccharine type than of the truly happy sort. Only contemporary dance, with its more explicitly arty and intellectual references, has opted for more austere faces.

¹ Similarly, film critics have created a vague, catch-all category dubbed "feel-good movies".

² *American Bandstand* is an American television show aired on ABC between 1952 and 1989, hosted by Dick Clark. It featured teenagers dancing to the most popular songs of the day, either lip-synced by the artists or just played on the sound-system.

³ *Top of the Pops* is the British equivalent of *American Bandstand*. It was broadcast by the BBC between 1964 and 2006. However, in this show, all the songs were performed on stage by the artists, most of the time lip-syncing, sometimes playing live.

The song “Happy” released in 2013 by Pharrell Williams does undoubtedly belong to the “feel good” category (the shortest, and most explicit title ever!), to the extent that it has probably become, in its short existence, the epitome of the genre, topping not only the charts, but also all the various lists of “feel good” songs regularly established by newspapers and websites. And unsurprisingly, “24 Hours of Happy,” the video released the same year to promote it, features dancing individuals, the overwhelming majority of whom smile broadly to the camera.

Happiness

Before going any further, it is necessary at this point to focus on the key notion of this article, “happiness”. As we have just stated, no song could be more narrowly focused by its mere title on the issue of happiness. The lyrics, particularly of the chorus, emphasize three things: the first one is that the narrator states that at the moment of the song, he is happy (“Because I’m happy”); the second, that the co-enunciator (the listener), should join in the physical expression of this happy mood (“clap along...”); third, that happiness is not just a transient, superficial feeling, but a key emotion with far reaching consequences (“happiness is the truth”). It is no longer “love”, as in the 1960s. Love requires a sender and a receiver. One loves somebody. Happiness is centered on the self, which is probably a focus more appropriate for our times. Another closely related term frequently used these days by psychologists, educators, or motivational instructors is “positive emotions/feelings”. Obviously, of the two, “happiness” is the more ambitious. It is also the one with the deepest, most ancient roots in philosophy and religion. In the French versions of the Gospel according to John 13/17, Jesus, talking about humble deeds such as washing one another’s feet, comments: “Si vous faites cela, vous serez heureux”. Interestingly, only the Bible used by the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-Day Saints also states “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.” The other versions use a different turn: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them”, which obviously takes the emotion to a completely different direction. However, both “happy” and the French “(bon)heur” are etymologically connected to good (and sometimes bad) luck and chance, thus pointing to not necessarily positive emotions engendered by material (dis-)satisfaction, significantly remote from the more lofty current meaning.

Pharrell Williams capitalizes on a mood or emotion that has become extremely trendy in Western countries under different guises. Some countries, nations and cities have already taken steps to adopt well-being measures and policies. New positions have emerged in Western companies, indifferently titled “Chief Happiness Officer”, “Happiness Manager”, or “Feel Good Manager”. The American psychologist and educator Martin Seligman has been a relentless advocate of positive emotions and positive psychology. In *Flourish* (2012) for instance, he focuses on what makes a “good life” for individuals, communities, and even nations. However for him, happiness is but one of five core emotions that constitute well-being, along with engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The ambitious “happiness” has been superseded by the trite “well-being” and the complacent “good life”, the mere achievement of a certain level of personal satisfaction. However, this enables him to stress that happiness can be cultivated by identifying and developing some of the traits we already possess, a position on a par with the life-changing attitude advocated and displayed by Williams. For instance, in his 2004 *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Seligman identifies six classes of virtue (Wisdom & Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence), which, when practiced, should lead to increased happiness in most cultures.

Edward F. Diener, another American psychologist, also blends happiness and well-being in his research. Nicknamed Dr. Happiness, he has developed the concept of “subjective well-being” (SWB) to describe the way people evaluate their lives, including their reactions and judgments about domains such as marriage and work. Diener has established connection between high levels of happiness and strong ties to friends and family, and emphasized the importance of working on social skills, and close interpersonal ties in order to be happy.

In his research, Diener defines happiness as “satisfaction of desires and goals”, “preponderance of positive over negative affect”, “contentment” (Diener 1984, 544), and as an “optimistic mood state” (Steel, 140). Once again, such definitions point to interpersonal skills and displays similar to those alluded to by Williams. An interesting point Diener makes and that we shall return to, is that contrarily to Seligman’s claim, SWB may differ across cultures. He claims for instance that the link between self-esteem and happiness is stronger in individualistic than in collectivistic culture (Diener 1995, 655).

Other researchers like Barbara Lee Fredrickson (though she is too a social psychologist) conduct research more directly connected to the physiological measurement of happiness and positive emotions, with an emphasis on their neurochemical dimension. Fredrickson has demonstrated that the negative impact of negative emotions (stress, fear, anger, etc.), which are particularly visible in terms of cardiovascular reactivity, can be quelled faster by submitting the subjects to artifacts generating positive emotions. Would that be the role of the video?

Let us now explore in greater details what these “happy” American bodies in motion suggest.

An Unusual Object

Pharrell Williams is an American singer, rapper, and record producer, with numerous activities outside the music sphere, from graphic artist, and clothes designers, to social activist. He has partnered with a Japanese designer to launch street wear brands, teamed up with Adidas, Uniqlo, and G-Star Raw to create clothes made from recycled plastic found in the ocean, designed jewels, glasses, furniture, and a fragrance for Comme des Garçons, curated art shows at Galerie Perrotin in Paris in 2014 and collaborated with Japanese artist Takashi Murakami for one of his promotional videos (“It Girl,” *Girl*, 2014), worked alongside Al Gore to organize a concert to raise awareness about climate change and pressure governments to take relevant measures. He also runs a non-profit educational foundation, “From One Hand To AnOTHER.” Williams has recorded a tribute to the Black Lives Matter movement, and performed with a gospel choir at Emanuel Church in Charleston where nine black parishioners were shot and killed in 2015. On all accounts, Pharrell Williams is a busy, committed, and successful artist, and such an unusual video as “24 Hours of Happy,” released to promote “Happy,” a song Pharrell wrote, produced, and performed for the soundtrack of the movie *Despicable Me 2* in 2013, was bound to have a major impact, be it only because of the artist’s visibility.

The song itself was first released in 2013 and a second time in 2014 as the lead single for Williams’s second studio album, *Girl*. “Happy” can be depicted as a cheerful, mid-tempo, neo-Motown song, with a catchy beat and “feel good” lyrics (see annex). It indeed topped the popular music and/or dance charts in 24 countries, and has sold 14 million copies worldwide. Critic Holly Williams wrote what is probably its most concise and accurate description: “it’s the kind of song that makes you want to dance and sing along” (np).

The video does exactly this: it shows people dancing and singing along to it. It was directed by the French team We Are from LA, and its creative director was the French Yoann Lemoine. It is available on a website launched by Pharrell for the occasion, and on the website home page, the video is described as “the world’s first 24-hour music video.” Indeed, the video runs continuously for 24 hours and displays a succession of about 360 people⁴ dancing to the song, one after the other, and often lip-syncing its lyrics, all aiming at displaying with their bodies and facial expressions the spirit of happiness the song is about. Williams himself appears 24 times in the video, once at the start of each hour. The arrangement is the same throughout the video: the dancers, in an outdoor or indoor space, somewhere around Los Angeles, are moving forward to a retreating Steadicam camera. Once the song is over, it starts again, seamlessly, with new dancers.

The full-length version of the video has been seen on YouTube, at least partially, 63 million times. The official four-minute edit has been seen, at the time of writing, November 2016, 900 million times. The full-length version was nominated for Best Male Video and Video of the Year at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards. It won the Grammy Award for Best Music Video at the 57th Annual Grammy Awards. Remarkably, the video has given birth to 2,000 tribute versions from 153 different countries, gathered on *We are happy from*, a website launched by a French couple dedicated to these tribute versions. There are also a few parodies notably by Weird Al Yankovic, an American artist who specializes in singing parodies of famous songs.

The very success of this video is the main reason I chose to study it: what does it mean that it has been appropriated by so many people from different cultures all over the world, to the extent that a significant number of them decided to make their own version? How can we look at the dancing bodies, both on the original and tribute videos? What does the success of a popular artifact focusing on “happiness” tell us about the current state of the world for ordinary people?

There are numerous, visible differences between the dancers in the original video: the participants belong to different ethnic communities, there are Whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and everything in between; they are very young to fairly old; skinny to overweight; wearing smart attires or casual wear; there are singles, pairs, families, or whole groups; some are good looking, and others not so good looking; there are hairy and bald dancers, some on foot, others on rollers, or in wheelchairs; and some can dance, while others just can’t. Obviously, the production has been careful to select the most diverse panel of dancers possible, as if to offer a statistically accurate reflection of the current American population (see Schilling).

However, despite these differences, most dancers on the official video resort to a common body language and vocabulary to stage, express, and emphasize the emotion the song is supposed to elicit, i.e., happiness. Writing about the video, Dombek exclaims: “How strange performances of

⁴ Mostly anonymous people and a few celebrities: basketball star Magic Johnson; actor, director and producer Steve Carell; television host, producer, writer, and comedian Jimmy Kimmel; actor Jamie Foxx; Odd Future, an American hip hop collective; actress and singer Miranda Cosgrove; Janelle Monáe, a musical recording artist and actress; actor, director, and writer Whit Hertford; Kelly Osbourne, a British singer-songwriter, and actress; martial artist Urijah Faber; the Brazilian musician Sérgio Mendes; Ana Ortiz, an American actress and singer; musician and singer-songwriter Gavin DeGraw; JoJo, a singer, songwriter, and actress, and of course the minions of the *Despicable* movie themselves!

happiness can be when they all look the same” (94). It is precisely the similarity of the dancers’ expressions that I want to explore, and the misgivings this may generate.

The common language is visible on the bodies, the faces, and the general attitude of the dancers: their movements always include shaking, twirling, shimmying, bending legs and arms (often waving arms above the body), jumping, hopping, shaking hips, while clapping hands or snapping fingers; they smile, laugh, or blow kisses; and more generally, they do not pay attention to the passers-by, focusing rather on the camera, as if to engage the viewers and share with them, more than with the real people they encounter on the streets, their emotions.

We are thus offered a limited number of physical expressions to signify happiness, and hopefully trigger a similar mood with the viewers, expressions which had to be connected, for the purpose of the video, with dancing, but which nevertheless match those commonly used in non-dancing contexts to express happiness: an investment of the whole body into vigorous, seemingly spontaneous and irrepressible movements, and broad smiles. It is possible to connect such expressions to the common belief that nonverbal postures can trigger specific moods. For a while, at the beginning of the 2010s, some researchers even posited that merely assuming “powerful” attitudes could lead to the actual production of hormones such as testosterone related to feelings of power and positive moods. Dana Carney, Amy Cuddy, and Andy Yap were among the most vocal proponents of the theory, until it was scientifically discredited when other researchers could not replicate this seductive hypothesis on follow-up tests.

A thorough survey of the tribute videos reveals a similarly narrow range of standard expressions to stage happiness, whatever their origin, even the videos shot in countries whose expressive means are far removed from those displayed in the United States, such as Kazakhstan, or Taiwan, to name but two. We shall return to this issue later when we tackle the distinction between collectivistic and individualistic cultures. The question, thus, in the context of this publication focusing on American bodies and their transformation, is whether the expressive strategies used in the original and tribute videos to express emotions, here happiness, are specific to the United States, and if these strategies have evolved through time. Obviously, because these videos were meant as tributes, they were bound to “imitate” the original one. But the imitation could have been limited to the spirit of the song, not to the actual motions of the bodies. Thus, the immensely influential “This is America” video released by Childish Gambino in May 2018 has also given birth to a number of tributes (“This is Jamaica”, “This is Canada”, “This is Nigeria”, etc.) but very few of them replicate the complex and spectacular dance moves featured on the original. What they retain is the overall intent, the denunciation a number of social, economic, and political issues through a stylized choreography.

An intercultural context

Communication studies can provide some insights into this question. Their central tenet, based on Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* in which he further develops his theory regarding the evolution of species through a study of the way humans and animals express emotions, is that the facial and body expressions used to convey the seven basic emotions (anger, disgust, fear, contempt, surprise, sadness, and happiness) are universal, pan-cultural, probably biologically rooted and innate (Darwin 1872, Ekman 2003, Ekman & Friesen 1969, Izard 1971). The blind at birth for instance use the same facial expressions to express these emotions as non-visually impaired people, and primates also have displays similar to humans.

This could explain the identical body language with which the dancers choose to express happiness throughout the world, and would displace the origin of this shared vocabulary from purely mimetic behaviors to genetic programming.

However, intercultural and body language research also insists on the extent to which the expression of emotions is culturally bounded and follows what Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen call “cultural display rules” (69), by means of a small number of strategies, used and combined differently according to national or local cultures and circumstances: amplification (exaggeration, intensification), or on the contrary minimization; masking (concealing by means of a different expression); and neutralization, i.e., the blank, poker face.

Besides, in our case, the point is not just to express an emotion, but to express an emotion through dance. Dancing an emotion is more complex than spontaneously reacting to a stimulus (happy news, for instance) via the body. It is a culturally coded display. The directors of the video and the dancers have staged a culturally specific representation of happiness, to the same extent that the song itself, its lyrics as much as its music, is a culturally coded representation of happiness.

On the basis of this perspective, the behavior of the dancers, both within and outside the United States, could be read as the staging of a physical representation specific to the United States. The dancers of the original as much as of the tribute videos would merely be copying, imitating each other, and ultimately, complying (at least within the scope of the videos and of the groups and individuals who shot them), with American behavioral rules, including gestures and facial expressions. We could then conclude that these rules have spread to the whole world, not just the Western one, leading to stereotypical and standardized ways of expressing emotions. And we could easily identify the usual suspect: the soft power wielded by the US entertainment industry, through movies, music videos, and more recently, TV series⁵. Electronic media have indeed been identified as a central influence for spreading around the world culture specific emblems, including facial gestures, to the point that “a number of them are becoming universally recognized, such as come, go, hello, goodbye, yes, and no” (Matsumoto and Hwang, 12), despite the fact that such basic words are physically expressed in radically different ways according to the geographical setting⁶. The influence of US visual culture combined with the hegemony of the English language is so strong that in some studies, when non native English speakers speak in English they spontaneously adopt the conversational distance used by most Caucasian Americans, different from what they would use when speaking with fellow citizens from their home country in their native language (Little 5).

This is all the more true if we follow the analyses of intercultural theorists like Edward T. Hall, Fons Trompenaars, Charles Hampden-Turner, Shalom H. Schwartz, and particularly Geert Hofstede, whose framework for understanding national differences has been widely used and remains extremely influential. A common, fundamental element of their respective works is to organize and classify nations according to a small number of criteria or dimensions, such as their acceptance of authority and power, their tolerance of uncertainty, their future or past-oriented

⁵ See for example Raphaël Ricaud and Alice Byrne, “Soft power: complementing hardpower or compensating for its loss?”, A Round Table, 54^e Congrès de la SAES, Caen, May 18, 2014.

⁶ As an example, one could think of the extremely different movements of the head to say “yes” or “no” in India, Greece or Italy.

vision of the world, their degree of masculinity or femininity, and the relative importance they ascribe to the individual versus the community. Admittedly, these very categories must be used with caution (for a scathing criticism of Hofstede, see for instance McSweeney). However, on the basis of these classifications, cultural theorists have determined that the degree of expressiveness of emotions varies according to the level of individualism or collectivism of a given community. This degree, particularly when positive emotions are involved, is higher in individualistic cultures, and particularly if the display is directed towards out-groups, which is obviously the case with a promotional video posted on the Internet. According to Matsumoto *et al.*, “[In our studies] collectivistic cultures were associated with a display rule norm of less expressivity overall than individualistic cultures, suggesting that overall expressive regulation for all emotions is central to the preservation of social order in these cultures. [...] Individualism was also positively associated with higher expressivity norms in general, and for positive emotions in particular” (134-135). The United States being classified, according to intercultural researchers, as a highly individualistic country, it follows that it is also considered as the country with the highest expressivity norms, a nation belonging to the group of “expressive” cultures, as opposed to the “reserved” ones (to use Matsumoto’s terminology). Barbara Ehrenreich suggests a similar view of the United States when she writes: “Americans are a ‘positive’ people. This is our reputation as well as our self-image. We smile a lot and are often baffled when people from other cultures do not return the favor” (5).

The highly expressive ways of displaying happiness we can observe in the tribute videos, including those coming from cultures described as collectivist⁷, could thus be correlated to the cultural influence of the United States, since otherwise these collectivist cultures would have elected other strategies, probably less expressive, to stage the emotion. If we turn for example to the three (no fewer!) videos shot in the remote town of Semey, Kazakhstan, located in the heart of a collectivistic region, we notice that if the arrangements (cinematic features, choice of dancers, technical knowhow, etc.) are different, the steps and moves reflect the standards set by the original video. Once again, one could argue that these videos are not primarily meant to express happiness, but to be a tribute to Williams’s, hence their similarity. However, I want to challenge this qualification. For what would be the motives of the groups that shot them, if not to express their own emotions, to display “their” happiness? Why this staggering wave of imitations if it was not because worldwide, people have been sensitive (or made sensitive) to Williams’s video and the way the dancers display their happiness, the pleasure to move one’s body? If obviously it is difficult to assess with even a faint degree of certainty whether these behaviors have spread to whole societies beyond the handful of individuals who participated in the videos, the wide range of dancers in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance, etc., seems to testify to the degree they have permeated whole cultures.

However, I would now like to turn my attention to the transformations that have taken place over the last fifty years in the way American people, and particularly European-Americans, express emotions such as happiness or excitement through their bodies, their dancing bodies, and offer them to the gaze of millions of viewers. One way to do this is to watch early musical television programs recorded live, with a dancing audience. While in a few cases (*American Bandstand*, for instance) the producers hired highly skilled professionals or amateurs, who mastered many dance

⁷ For instance, according to Hofstede’s dimensions, Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan, but also several Latin American nations: Guatemala, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama or Ecuador.

steps and routines, from the lindy-hop to the jitterbug, most of the shows recorded in the 1950s using local, non-skilled amateurs, reveal the stiffness, the awkwardness of the young (Caucasian) people as they try to move to the music. A good example of such awkwardness can be seen in the 1958 program called *Seventeen*, aired by WOI television station (Iowa), where local boys and girls are trying to go through the motion of a new dance called “The Stroll”.

Even if in the “Happy” videos, the official as much as the tributes, the expressions, movements, and steps are stereotypical and standardized, owing much to mimetic behavior and hegemonic cultural pressure, the delight, the real joy of the dancers is definitely palpable. Something has changed between the 1950s and the 21st century. We can observe a sense of freedom, of ease, of confidence, which has spread to the whole American society (at least, to those who volunteered for the videos; but the teenagers of the 1950s programs had also volunteered...), and to other parts of the world, including collectivist cultures. A freedom that has to do with hundreds of bodies moving about as they want, with relative ease and lack of concern for what others might think about their bodies and their moves, a freedom that implies occupying public spaces to display intimate emotions. Such freedoms may be worth the price of resorting to externally codified behaviors. It is quite possible that the ease displayed by contemporary youth in front of the Steadicam in the “Happy” videos and their desire to display their “happiness” may have to do with their growing familiarity with technology, as exemplified by the ubiquitous practice of taking selfies, which may make them, in turn, more confident with the representation of their own bodies. However, early movies of African Americans dancing to jazz music in the twenties show a much greater degree of freedom at a time when movie cameras were still uncommon.

Another form of freedom can be read in the dancers’ motions, inasmuch as many are not exactly dancing but rather only moving their bodies, and quite a few display bodies that are at odds not just with the criteria of beauty, but simply of normality established by Western society’s gatekeepers. To a certain extent, the videos reveal they do not just accept whatever body they have, but they rather seem to do without it, as if it did not matter, as if they were liberated from its contingencies, and were realizing Foucault’s utopia, of having “a body without body, a body that would be beautiful, limpid, transparent, luminous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite in its duration. Untethered, invisible, protected—always transfigured” (Foucault 2006, 229).

However, we can also wonder to what extent a sense of freedom conceived as the unrestricted physical display of emotions is not also culturally bounded. Do people from countries with a different economic organization, from other national or regional environments, of different religious persuasions, with a different education, belonging to other socio-professional classes, agree with this conception of freedom? Indeed, the feeling of freedom staged by the dancers, based on external, individual, visible forms and conceived as the unbridled use of the body, the unlimited choice of clothes and hairdos, and a disregard for whatever passers-by or viewers may think could also be interpreted as specific to the political and economic American context, the outcome of cultural and social circumstances. The nature and origins of the forced and voluntary migration processes, the conditions of the settlement, the legal framing of the country have resulted in a conception of moral and physical freedom intrinsic to the United States.

Transforming the Body into an Agent of Control

The fact that the videos are watched exclusively on the Internet, specifically on YouTube suggests four levels of impact: 1. On the people who watched the official video; 2. On the people

who were motivated to shoot tribute videos because they watched the official one; 3. On the people who watched the tribute videos; 4. On the people who were motivated to shoot a tribute video because they watched tribute videos. The interactions between these different layers, from merely watching (passive) to participatory (active) behavior, are complex and ambivalent. Current fandom studies pay much attention to the complex, fluid, up-and-down processes taking place on the Internet, particularly in terms of fan fiction⁸. From the Seventies onward, participatory culture has often been considered as a form of resistance against consumer culture and the culture industry, particularly by the members of the Birmingham University Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Despite being often seriously challenged or tagged as passé, such interpretations of fans' behavior remain relevant, with new, subtler paradigms being developed. Thus Henry Jenkins can write: "The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but by writing over it, molding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media" (2006, 257). I have been tempted in this paper to suggest that the tribute videos under scrutiny could be in part interpreted as a consequence of the cultural clout of the United States. But could we go as far as reading them as Jenkins would have it, as powerful tools to renegotiate cultural freedom? We can reasonably doubt it, inasmuch as the criteria put forward by Jenkins (writing over, amending, expanding, adding perspective) seem in our case to be seriously lacking. Besides, as John Tomlinson wonders, can we still say that cultural practices are "imposed [...] in a context which is no longer actually coercive?" (1997, 173). Tomlinson warns against the cultural imperialism discourse, which he sees as a metaphor for colonialism (1991, 2), while researchers such as Mark Lashley (who worked on lip dubbing online) stress that in most cases (and probably in ours), "What is at work is something far more nuanced than Western culture's dominance over East" (1).

I would however like to conclude by moving to yet another line of interpretation, using once again Michel Foucault's reflections on the body, this time on the way it can be harnessed for political purposes, as a means of control (1975). For ultimately, to what extent do the dancers freely and spontaneously stage happiness through their bodies, in the video as in their daily lives? To what extent are they not coerced by the soft power of the media and of peer pressure into displaying unambiguously positive feelings? Are they free to *not* feel good? And even if they are truly happy at the time of the shooting, do they necessarily want to show it, and to show it like this? The current emphasis on the compulsory display of emotions, the obligatory sharing of the intimate, and particularly the prescription to be happy we have already alluded to⁹, which leads to our time being labeled as one "of happiness studies, happiness summits, and chief happiness officers" (Dombek 90), can be read as signifiers not of happiness, but on the contrary of anxiety. This is what Barbara Ehrenreich recently suggested: "[P]ositivity is not so much our condition or our mood as it is part of our ideology—the way we explain the world and think we ought to function within it. [...] There is an anxiety, as you can see, right here in the heart of American positive thinking" (5). Anxiety raised for instance by the pressure to comply with the currently required emotional states and to signal publicly one's good intentions and integration into the community. In that case, the body would unconsciously, and unwillingly, be turned by the dancers themselves into a means to monitor to what extent this social programming is duly

⁸ See for instance Morgane Brucelle, "Fan culture : résistance et mémétique sur les médias sociaux," PhD dissertation, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier, novembre 2018.

⁹ See for example [Gretchen Rubin's Happiness Project](#) (I thank Nathalie Massip for drawing my attention to this author).

implemented, in line with what William Davies writes of the happiness industry, whose “target is the entangling of love and joy within infrastructures of measurement, surveillance, and government” (122).

The expressiveness of the dancers and the apparent freedom of their bodies would be a mere display, a show, literally, staged only to check the degree of docility and conformity that everyone imposes on everyone, disciplining and objectifying bodies into guardians of social law and order, of social peace, and ensuring the adoption of a common American/Western identity. In that case, the 900 million viewers would act as mutual wardens in the Panopticon world of the Internet, a much more successful one than the actual prison conceived by Jeremy Bentham, for, contrary to Bentham’s project, the current one is, in a Gramscian perspective, self-imposed and “freely” adopted. Both can however be compared in that they are “an individualist enterprise that seems to presage totalitarianism” (Semple 1), which might explain why we can find the same body motions both in individualistic and collectivistic societies (which does not however imply that the development of totalitarian States is restricted to collectivistic societies). Be happy, and make sure you show it, such could be the ambivalent, and ultimately anxiety-provoking, message carried by “24 Hours of Happy”.

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ANNEX

“Happy” (lyrics)

It might seem crazy what I’m about to say
Sunshine she’s here, you can take a break
I’m a hot air balloon that could go to space
With the air, like I don’t care, baby, by the way

[Chorus:]

Because I’m happy
Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
Because I’m happy
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
Because I’m happy
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
Because I’m happy
Clap along if you feel like that’s what you wanna do

Here come bad news talking this and that, yeah,
Well, give me all you got, and don’t hold it back, yeah,
Well, I should probably warn you I’ll be just fine, yeah,
No offense to you, don’t waste your time
Here’s why

[Bridge:]

(Happy)
Bring me down, Can’t nothing
Bring me down, My level’s too high

Bring me down, Can't nothing
Bring me down, I said (let me tell you now)