Dancing in-place: the poetical stance of the « Happy we are from » phenomenon

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While ecological concerns are often associated with a search for alternative visions of prosperity like in Giono’s landmark novel « the joy of man’s desiring », a « happiness » research nebula has developed across the academic, NGO and institutional landscapes, sometimes highlighting it as an alternate « sustainable » development target (SDSN, 2012), sometimes examining more closely its various links with places and environments (Brereton et al, 2008).

This paper aims at shedding some light onto an unprecedented amount of evidence generated recently and yet untapped by research. In the start of 2014, countless videos entitled « Happy we are from » were produced by city-dwellers across the world featuring their fellow-citizens dancing on the « Happy » pop song in handpicked places of their towns. This overwhelming grassroot phenomenon goes, we argue, much further beyond its seemingly mundane and anecdotic aspect, to form an archipelago of new materials on happiness, citizens and their habitats, affirming in a language of its own both a sense of belonging and an implicit but strong stance on what is of value.

After an initial « mapping » offering an introduction to these materials and navigating their emerging parameters, we will suggest a first journey into the « Happy we are from » archipelago, following an environmental aesthetics track, and using the notion of the « poetical » as an overarching umbrella to think both the stance and the dance of selected representative « Happy we are from » initiatives. We will conclude by looking at sustainability in the light of its poetical stakes, showing how the poetical language, an « encounter between site and formula » (Deguy, 1998), can help navigate in unique ways the kaleidoscopic facets of « values in place ».

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