



STEVEN HELLER DESIGN 05.09.16 3:33 PM

# *THE HAPPY FILM: FAMED DESIGNER STEFAN SAGMEISTER'S WILD, UNSETTLING PURSUIT OF BLISS*



## The Happy Film: Famed Designer Stefan Sagmeister...[SUBSCRIBE](#)

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**WATCHING DESIGNER STEFAN** Sagmeister's autobiographical documentary, *The Happy Film*, will not leave you significantly happier afterward. But the fast-paced, painfully honest, stressfully contemplative movie, co-directed with Ben Nabors and the late Hillman Curtis, will trigger rushes of insight, empathy and voyeuristic pleasure.

In the film, Sagmeister—the prominent graphic designer known for what I'd call environmental performance typography and whose work appears in museums like MoMA—sets out to analyze, define and capture happiness as a concept, emotion and commodity. But he spends most of the film, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival last month, showing how interpersonal minefields, notably his inability to find and stay in love, impede his ability to achieve happiness. From this discordance emerges a highly entertaining confessional that is as much a reality show as experimental art piece.

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*The Happy Film* started as part of a conceptual design project that includes “The Happy Show,” a museum-exhibition-cum-carnival-midway. Its global tour has attracted more than 350,000 people. But while the exhibit encourages visitors to reflect on their own happiness, the film is infinitely more personal; documentary filmmakers often are characters in their own films, but they’re rarely so candid. Sagmeister’s project captures his signaturechutzpah, sure, but hinges on an intensely personal search for love and happiness that provides poignant insights into his struggle to make lasting personal commitments beyond his professional life.

Sagmeister derives happiness from upending the status quo with his work. He once gained 30 pounds in one month to document, through daily photographs, what a strict diet of junk food does to an otherwise fit body. In one of his

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photograph of his scabs in a promotional poster. *The Happy Film* is like carving into his inner self. He is both investigator and the investigated. And though the movie meant to be autobiographical, “I did not see a lot of things coming during the shooting,” Sagmeister says.

*The Happy Film*, consequently, is not quite the film Sagmeister set out to make. While he always intended it to be somewhat introspective (or rather exhibitionist), he did not anticipate the pain that befell him during production. “It started out as a design project with me in rather fine mood,” he says. “Then my Mum died. Our co-director died. Relationships fell apart.” It sounds like a maelstrom of sorrow, but “I don’t think it is ultimately a sad story,” Sagmeister says. “It’s about what a mess life really is.” And all captured on film, to boot.



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THE HAPPY FILM

*The Happy Film* is divided into three sections, each following Sagmeister for one month as he pursues happiness along one of three paths: Meditation. Talk therapy. Prescription drug therapy. The beautifully photographed meditation scenes are in large part set in Bali, where, after various failed attempts to reach nirvana, Sagmeister falls in love with a former student. Happiness at last. But the relationship quickly deteriorates and sadness sets in. The therapy section records him in sessions with a psychotherapist who questions his ability to commit, despite his recently ending an 11-year relationship. This leads him to renew a relationship with a long-lost love in Austria. That relationship fails too, and depression ensues. In the drug section, a pharmacological therapist monitors his intake of mood elevators. "I love pharma," he notes in the film. Ignoring a warning against making radical life changes until his meds stabilize, Sagmeister immediately falls for and becomes engaged to a woman who allows him to document the rise and fall of their relationship. Those scenes are among the film's most emotionally taxing and uncomfortable to watch. Happiness is when

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designs, and he is fearless in allowing the camera to record everyone and everything. “I had gotten and followed the advice from a very wise (and excellent) film maker to shoot everything and edit later,” he says, recalling, among others, bedroom scenes he left on the cutting room floor. What was essential to the story, and what would spill out, into oversharing, he says, “was on my mind a lot.”



THE HAPPY FILM

*The Happy Film* is not a motivational speaker's guide to wonders of happiness, and that's not what I wanted to see. It is about one artist's search for bliss and the quagmires it led to. But

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moment of bliss, possibly lasting only seconds.

The second is mid-term happiness—well-being and satisfaction lasting hours or days. And the third, long-term happiness, is finding what you are good for in life, a state that can endure for years.

Throughout the filming Sagmeister maintained daily rating lists of his own happiness and it all comes down to this: “All periods of 10 (out of 10) days had something to do with falling in love, all periods of 1 out of 10 days were connected with a relationship ending. Falling in love in my case were connected to the [first and second forms of happiness], work related to [the second and third] type.”

Makes sense to me.

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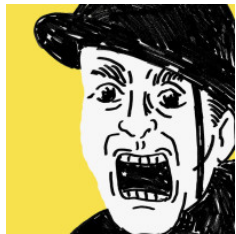
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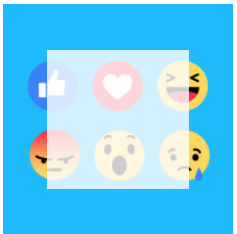
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