The Humanities in the Platform Society

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In 2011, Apple co-founder Steve Jobs started one of his product presentations by saying that "it's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough, that it is technology married with liberal arts, with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing" (Apple 2011). Jobs's words are interesting, in three respects: First of all, they testify to a belief, especially prevalent in Silicon Valley, that computer technology facilitates people's creativity, and, more in general, holds an emancipatory potential. This belief has roots in turn-of-the-1970s counter culture. Think here of Stewart Brand's "Whole Earth" network (whose mix of ecology and hacking culture was an important inspiration for Jobs) or of the poem "All Watched over by Machines of Loving Grace" (handed out by its author in the streets of San Francisco during 1967's "Summer of Love"), which dreams of a "cybernetic meadow where mammals and computers live together in mutually programming harmony" (Brautigan 1967).

Second, Jobs's words illustrate that large tech companies like Apple, Google, and Airbnb think of themselves as businesses not merely driven by profit, but also by a vision of humanity. Other than Apple's ideal of a technology married with the liberal arts, one can think of Airbnb's vision of a world in which people "belong anywhere," Google's corporate credo to "do no evil," Microsoft's call for a Digital Geneva Convention, and Facebook's dream of a "Global Community."

Third and finally, Jobs's ideal of a marriage between technology and the humanities compels one to reflect about the role that the humanities play in the study of the *platform society*, a society in which for-profit online platforms increasingly mediate—and in doing so transform—practices, spaces, and social relations until recently deemed public, private, or intimate.

As far as this role of the humanities in the platform society is concerned, urgent questions that come to mind are: What methodological and conceptual frameworks do the humanities offer in response to technological developments that transform all domains of human life, and that perhaps even transform the very understanding of what it means to be "human"? How do digital and online technologies enter humanities research, not only in the emerging field of the digital humanities (which adopts quantitative methods in its approach to inquiries of study traditionally associated with the humanities), but also by transforming archives and the ways people write and interact

with texts, images, and moving images? To what extent is the ongoing integration of traditional humanities disciplines into newly-formed interdisciplinary institutional forms a development spurred by digital technologies, not only because these technologies generate new questions that demand new approaches, but also because new technologies facilitate new networks of scholarly exchange? How do the humanities engage the development that many people's writings and images nowadays function doubly as marketable data for online platforms, from pictures shared on Facebook and messages sent through Gmail to student papers submitted on Turnitin? And finally, the question most crucial for the project proposed here: *How can humanities research contribute to a more critical understanding of the platform society*, in which online infrastructures platform developed by major tech companies are integrated into all domains of life*?*

Project I'm working on responds to this last question by analysing the visions of humanity tech companies develop in the *discourses* they develop their platforms. The project's premise is that tech company discourses are not mere by-products of the platform architectures and algorithms themselves, but should be understood as an integrated part of the development of online platforms as new infrastructures that reconfigure people's practices, spaces, and relations. This premise is embedded in a more general understanding of practices and discourses as processes that develop in a continuous dialogue. That is to say, practices and discourses do not stand in simple cause-and-effect relations (in which transformations in practices precede certain discourses, or vice versa), but they stand in a relation of mutual determination. In the case of this project, this means that tech discourses should not be understood as mere branding strategies for previously-developed technologies. Instead, the vocabularies, images, and modes of understanding that tech companies produce and disseminate as part of their brands are an integrated part of their platforms. Tech companies depend on users that trust their platforms, if only because most platforms are "fuelled" by user-generated data (Van Dijck et al. 2018). In an attempt to generate that trust, the major tech companies present their platforms as neutral spaces for human interaction, addressing people not merely as consumers but also as a "public," as their digital "citizens," or as a caring "humanity." My project aims to grasp the ideological underpinnings that define the discourses through which tech companies seek to generate that trust. *What is the vision of human life that inform tech company discourses?*

For example, and to return to Apple:

Shot on iphone: Apple's World Picture

In 2015, Apple launched its iPhone World Gallery campaign, which over a time-span of two years featured photos from hundreds of iPhone users from around the globe displayed on billboard ads in over 70 across the globe. The photographs are absolutely stunning, to paraphrase Steve Jobs. From a lonely tree in a desert landscape to a waterfall cascading into a lush valley, from air bubbles trapped in a frozen lake to a sky-full of hot air balloons, from strawberries to sunflowers,

from a black-and-white dog caught in light and shade to an equally monochrome play of lines in an underground passageway, from "a reflection on a damp sidewalk" to "the gesture of a child" . . . . In some cases these photos appear as giant standalone billboards high up in urban space, like here in NYC, or along the highway, like here in San Francisco. In other cases, the photos are part of a series that cover a subway platform or even entire station, or that keep the pedestrian company on their sidewalk travels.

My question of analysis is simple. What do these images have in common other than they were "shot on iPhone 6" (without the indefinite article)? Browsing through the campaign, a picture forms in the mind's eye of a world that, above all, is there for our contemplation, a world full of beauty, beauty in small things (a reflection, a lady bug, a lone surfer ashore watching a sunset), and beauty in sublime vistas, like on this billboard in Minneapolis. A world of beautiful people also, because in 2016 the World Gallery had a follow-up of portraits: portraits of men, women, and children simply being human and being in the moment, much like all of the World Gallery's photographers behind their phones, who were present with the beauty of the moment when they tapped their screens (or clicked the volume buttom, which functions doubly as "shutter" operator). With the exception of this picture of balancing fishermen in Myanmar, we do not see people at work in the World Gallery, or people depicted in their home situations. There are no pictures of everyday life. Instead, Apple shows us a serene timeless world, captured in high definition. It is a little bit of a cold world view, I should add, a worldview that, precisely in its universal right here and right now, lacks what Roland Barthes has called *punctum*.

What strikes us, moreover, is that we hardly find groups of people in Apple's campaign and in the few photos in Apple's World Gallery with more than one person, those persons appear as individuals scattered in the cityscape. The few exceptions are the fishermen and the spectators at the balloon show. Finally, even though the World Gallery includes a lot of portraits, we do not see selfies. This last fact also struck the two anonymous pranksters behind the alsoshottoniphone6 counter-campaign, which for a few days in 2015 in the streets of San Francisco juxtaposed Apple's serenity with a series of weird selfies framed in the World Gallery style. However, the city of San Francisco took down the posters, while online Apple killed the alsoshotoniphone blog with a cease-and-desist order due to copyright infringement.[1] Clearly, Apple doesn't want people to poke fun at the beauty of its world picture.

Finally, what strikes perhaps most in the iPhone campaign, and what makes it so blatantly brilliant in its ideology, is that Apple does not even make the remotest reference to the digital age. There is hardly any technology in the World Gallery, no phones, no screens, no media, no solar panels, no windmills (like in this contemporary Dutch landscape I shot on my iPhone), no cars also, not even self-driving or shared ones. The only means of transportation we have are the hot air balloons, a bunch of peddle boats, and an Alaskan train. There is no reference, in other words,

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1. http://alsoshotoniphone6.tumblr.com/

to the platform society and as such the images contrast starkly with the increasingly smart urban centers in which they are put up. We only have the lonely mindful photographer and, in the case of the portraits, their beautiful mindful subjects, all existing in a timeless right here and right now.

It is this blissful gaze of the mindful subject that connects Apple's world pictures. As Jeff Wilson writes in *Mindful America*, in American mindfulness the technique of mindfulness meditation is isolated from the larger Eastern cultural-religious set of practices and worldview in which it originated. Mindfulness, he writes, is "thus transformed so that it delivers cultural benefits desired by Americans."[2]

Looking at the new American Dream as it is constructed by corporations like Google, Airbnb, and Apple, one sees a subject in control: in control of their life and their profiles, and in control of their attention. Mindfulness in its recent Western and self-declared secular manifestations involves the promise that its practitioner is on the way of becoming a centered subject who experiences a true connection with the world and themselves. In this instrumentalized Western sense of the term, mindfulness is an ideology, an ideology 2.0, that exactly like the more old-fashioned ideologies, helps sustain the material relations of production and consumption. Mindfulness is a mindset, or survival technique, for precarious atomized existence in late capitalism that lets people believe they have a *true connection* with the world, even though their job and housing contracts tell a different story. Finally, as Apple's world picture illustrates, mindfulness is an exercise in being alone, and even when people come together for mindfulness practice, say in a yoga class, then they do so in order to be alone. In this respect it is no coincidence that commercial yoga studios and Apple stores feel so much alike.

Kabat-Zinn's understanding of mindfulness may seem similar to Suzuki's, but it is quite different. Whereas Suzuki, in an almost-but-not-quite tautological fashion, defines mindfulness *as* everyday life without prescribing a quality of attention with which that everyday should be lived, Kabat-Zinn develops a mindfulness *for* everyday life that tells the practitioner "to be present" in all their waking moments. In Kabat-Zinn's discourse mindfulness thus becomes a state of attention one *brings to* activities like taking out the trash or doing the dishes, *in order to* transcend the fear and the pain.

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2. Wilson, *Mindful America*, 6.