— Geert Lovink

NOTES ON THE PLATFORM CONDITION

'Go down into the underground, and pass from the hyper-virtual, fleshless world to the suffering flesh of the poor.' Pope Francis— 'I can't believe video games are real.' Sarah Hagi— 'We are not afraid of ruins. We who ploughed the prairies and built the cities can build again, only better next time. We carry a new world, here in our hearts.' Malatesta— 'All science begins with fiction.' Speaking Truth to the Platform— 'Every time I think I've sorted out my life, capitalism collapses.' Juliet—'Anyway, it's always the others who die.' Marcel Duchamp— 'The internet is a metaphysical horror game, not a representational machine.' @bognamk— 'I thought the dystopic future would be more exciting.' So Sad Today— 'You read one email, you've read them all.' Andrew Weatherhead— 'Flood the channels with content' Cue instruction— 'Once I was mine. Now I am theirs.' Shoshana Zuboff— 'Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible.' CIA manual— 'All this time I thought I was a nomad, now I'm just a runaway.' Sybil Prentice— 'Recession is when your neighbour loses their job. Depression is when you lose yours.' Nicolas LePan— 'Internet is the God that failed.' Johan Sjerpstra— 'We're Not Bored. We're Boring.' Snapchat saying.

PLATFORM FEVER

In this social media age, all students dream of launching a platform. The desire implies an entrepreneurial aspiration that many are not even aware of. This is how artists, activists, designers and geeks imagine they will find their audiences and become rich and famous. Everyone seems to benefit: producers, customers, founders. The robust software platform as *Kulturideal* has replaced the website and related web design studio as the model start-up. We long to harness value instead of losing ourselves in the tangles of the network. The platform dream has further consolidated a venture capital mode of operation – rapid and accelerated growth. It is aimed at becoming a 'unicorn': market domination and, ultimately, monopoly. While few platforms will make billionaires of their creators, the excitement of the lottery, or of a ruthless Darwinist strategy, still attracts many. Elon Musk's appeal has not yet faded. The celebrity obsession is such that pop critiques of capitalism cannot challenge our lasting faith in the right to become a billionaire, quickly. We all want to run our own platform, regardless of what we are longing for.

Platforms create marketplaces – simple connectors of supply and demand. Marketplaces bear little, if any, of the cost of production, yet they are rarely neutral. They are not merely 'service providers', as in many cases

the platforms are significant players in their own markets. In terms of revenue, these are not technology companies but advertisement giants.[1] Platforms do not merely stage, organise and regulate markets, they also command outsized influence over neighbouring businesses and even over wider ecologies. Think of the road congestion and air pollution created by empty Uber taxis, or of the environmental costs of the various different ways of acquiring and delivering consumer goods. The core of the capitalist rationale remains socialising costs while privatising profits under the banner of personal choice and convenience.

An internet platform turns hegemonic the moment it is no longer 'becoming' – the moment it closes down in order to make 'behavioural modifications' to its userbase. The internet simply is. Its name is rarely mentioned anymore. The study of the internet, as a whole, is obsolete. Instant connectivity is omnipresent, even in places with little access. According to Marc Steinberg, platforms have become universal translation devices.[2] We scroll down never-ending, ever-changing pages and move away from the previous static understanding of 'new media' as archives and databases, towards a regime of temporary liveness, and transactions. 'Only one room left!'.[3] A cruel metamorphosis.

The platforms that we want to own and control are aspirational media for the users who visit in search of something. But unlike the rational, cold and empty search engines, formerly designed by IT engineers and library scientists, today's psychological platforms offer personalised, fuzzy information for the swiping dazed and confused. We do not know what we

want, but we want it so much.

INTIMACY AND EXTRACTION IN THE PREMIUM MEDIOCRE

Platforms as gated 'safe spaces' know us intimately. They can tell us what we might like in accordance with our own tastes, preferences, previous orders, search histories, and likes. Platforms remember us. They know how to comfort us and how to trigger us. We messy humans hate to have to start from scratch. *Dear token, please save my settings for me.* After all, we're not cold scientists, interested in objective knowledge. We like to save time, take shortcuts, and we appreciate that the machine acknowledges our weak spots and holds our memories for us. It can talk to us, telling us how close the Uber driver is; or the price of comparable products elsewhere; or what another user, who recently logged in, is sharing. We're petty, and we break down easily. Our busy multitasking lives are on the brink of collapse anyway, all the time. This is why we find comfort on the platform, our new virtual domicile, formerly known as the homepage.

In 2017 Venkatesh Rao introduced the concept of 'premium mediocre', which he associated with cruise ships; artisan pizza; Game of Thrones; The Bellagio; and anything branded 'signature'. 'Premium mediocre is food that Instagrams better than it tastes.'[4] Post-democratic internet culture continues to become less overtly trashy. The platform is a smooth, quasi-safe environment that is constrained, slightly upbeat, but quietly so: no yelling. The environment induces us to feel less and to swipe faster. This is my reading of Rao's concept. We pay a premium fee, with the promise that – one day – we may ourselves get paid. Premium can be read as a goal in life. It's what lifts us up, out of vulgar everyday existence (formerly known as 'the free'). In preparation for the success to come you surf the internet on the lookout for your next partner, the one idea that can be yours, that skirt you need to have. In exchange, you temporarily suspend your deep cynicism. Sincerity in a

fake world means staying true to one's profile, neatly summarised in the Venkatesh-Rao-for-dummies formula: 'Great minds discuss ideas; mediocre minds discuss events; small minds discuss people. Premium mediocre minds discuss bitcoin.' Ultimately, our desire is for our platforms to become premium mediocre.

Zadie Smith once told an interviewer that her novels are about 'the challenge of actually being human, and not avoiding the responsibility of being human, which is very heavy.'[5] This is precisely the challenge we project onto platforms: that they should not be detached tools, indifferent, cold systems, but more like a kind of portable pet. A soul mate. The platform should be a safe place, a dreamy wannabe world in which fluid comfort is preferred over dragging complexity. Please, I tell my phone, limit my choices, whisper to me what I want. Take Facebook's childish interface. It is destined to stay the same, while changing every few seconds without the viewer really noticing. The problem here is that there is nothing to think about or to remember. Whereas billions spend hours every day on Facebook, only a very few of us would be able to reconstruct the particular appearance of the webpage, or to remember what, precisely, happened there. (It looks blue, is inhabited by random friends, and it has a newsfeed and updates.) This construction is not naïve. The data extraction itself largely happens out of sight (many streams of information are combined by workers in offline datacentres), and yet we remain hyper-aware of our privacy. This is not a contradiction. The act of giving away sensitive information is a private one. We know that adverts are personally targeted. In fact, we feel pleased to be addressed as unique individuals. This is why we're not victims. We do not need to be informed, let alone liberated.

THE INVISIBLE PASTORATE
Aspiration brings about an endless succession of prototypes, versions, and abortive or forgotten attempts. The numbness of the digital state of affairs reflects this. It is never real or material. It hovers somewhere between the proposal and the point of expiry. We resent

objects that are unable to simply be in the world. Hi-tech cannot merely exist, it is always on verge of 'notworking', when the battery dies, or the software-as-service subscription runs out and the connection is no longer available.

In the meantime, internet theory has all but disappeared into the grey zone of password-protected, peer-reviewed journal articles. This siloing can be seen as diametrically opposed to the 'toxoplasma of rage' mode of dissemination, wherein the more controversial information is marketed, the more it is discussed. We could contrast the platform condition with Michel Foucault's description of pastoral power. Interesting here is what Foucault calls the paradox of the shepherd. 'The duty of the pastor (to the point of self-sacrifice) was the salvation of the flock; and finally, it was an individualising power, in that the pastor must care for each and every member of the flock singly. Because the pastor must care for the multiplicity as a whole while at the same time providing for the particular salvation of each, there must necessarily be both a "sacrifice of one for all, and the sacrifice of all for one, which will be at the absolute heart of the Christian problematic of the pastorate."[6]

Today's power has shifted from church and state to corporations. The aim is no longer to redeem people. Tasks which the state previously understood as belonging to it have been outsourced. These include the process of gathering knowledge about the population at large – about users, formerly known as individuals. Both population and user are taken care of, via markets, on the platform. We should read this as a design challenge and see geeks, administrators, designers, marketers, tech entrepreneurs, and behavioural scientists, as today's shepherds.

However, their explicit task is to remain invisible – and non-accountable. Their guidance is experienced in the abstract, as algorithmic governance.

It would be possible to examine how the political power of today's social media platforms is fundamentally theological. (Mark Zuckerberg's repetitive and empty references to the Judeo-Christian term 'community' would be an ideal reference here.) Equally, one could examine how subjects form themselves through the addictive repetition of numbness: returning time and again to a platform, purposelessly. We are part of that electronic herd, and we need that reaffirmation. Why, then, is this interrogation of the present so difficult for us?

EVERYONE THEIR OWN PLATFORM!

Platforms are dynamic systems through which a multitude of users can arrive quickly at the transactions they came for. We could freeze-frame Uber or Tinder, but that wouldn't improve our understanding of how they work: if we were to return the next day, or even five minutes later, the site would appear fundamentally different, offering different services and prices, or blackmailing users with non-existent urgency and scarcity. We're nervous and in a rush, and the platforms are designed to exploit these human conditions. This view breaks with the 'remediation' thesis as we're no longer dealing with digitised versions of heavy, static media objects such as photographs, paintings, rolls of film, paper books or newspapers, but with tiny, fragile data trails that pop up, leave a trace (likes, transactions, page views), and then disappear again. Rapid changes on the platform pulverise the fixed status of the file.

What Europeans call new regression and Americans neo-feudalism both describe the return to earlier stages of psycho-capitalist development. In her review of McKenzie Wark's *Capital is Dead*, Jodi Dean contrasts digital platforms to water mills. 'Platforms are doubly extractive. Unlike the water mill peasants had no choice but to use, platforms not

only position themselves so that their use is basically necessary (like banks, credit cards, phones, and roads) but that their use generates data for their owners. Users not only pay for the service but the platform collects the data generated by the use of the service. The cloud platform extracts rents and data, like land squared.'[7] Dean describes the tendency toward 'becoming-peasant, that is, to becoming one who owns means of production but whose labor increases the capital of the platform owner'. This is, she says, a neofeudal structure. Here, platforms are seen as meta-industrial infrastructural networks, parasitic in nature, driven by higher forms of exploitation and extraction. Both platform workers and users are regressive eighteenth-century pre-industrial figures, almost proletarians, the entreprecariat (as Silvio Lorusso coined them), who are stuck in stressful, depressive pseudo-jobs which feel neither productive nor satisfactory.
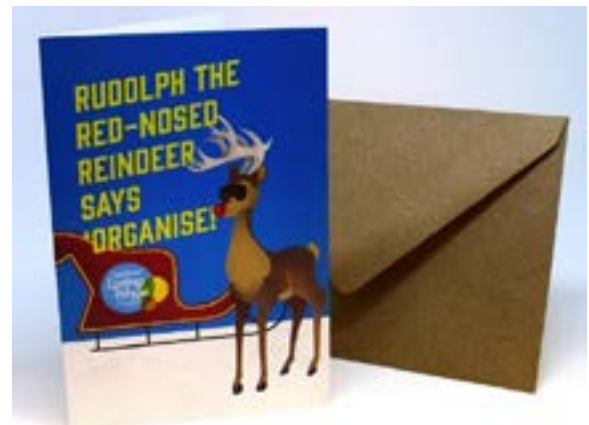
All we can hope, in this situation, are peasant revolts. Where is the twenty-first-century equivalent of the skilled, self-educated, and most of all, self-conscious worker who understands the need to organise? This leaves us with the desire to leave behind the (neo)feudal stage and fast-forward to the classic, early twentieth century strategy binaries. Revolution or reform of the platform-as-form? Rejection or adaption? Abolition or 'civilization'? Should platforms be dismantled or appropriated? According to accelerationists, platforms are technological expression of planetary computation, that is, they are constructs which can

be reprogrammed for post-capitalist purposes. The platform structure itself remains unquestioned – rather, in fact, its efficiency, smoothness, and scale, are embraced: Everyman Their Own Platform.8 This discussion has yet to begin, and there is much time to make up, after this last lost decade during which we have failed to discuss alternatives while mindlessly installing every available app.

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Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic and author of *Uncanny Networks* (2002), *Dark Fiber* (2002), *My First Recession* (2003), *Zero Comments* (2007), *Networks Without a Cause* (2012), *Social Media Abyss* (2016), *Organisation after Social Media* (with Ned Rossiter, 2018) and *Sad by Design* (2019). In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. His centre organizes conferences, publications and research networks such as Video Vortex (online video), Unlike Us (alternatives in social media), Critical Point of View (Wikipedia), Society of the Query (the culture of search), MoneyLab (internet-based revenue models in the arts). Recent projects deal with digital publishing and the future of art criticism.