27 January 2020 – Lotto Arena - Antwerp
Laudatio for Yuval Noah Harari
By Caroline Pauwels, rector Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Dear Professor Harari,

your excellencies,

ladies and gentlemen,

Yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Yuval Noah Harari has shared with us his ground-breaking insights across this modest time span.

These are global insights regarding the whole world, all of history, and all of mankind.

And our future. The future of Sapiens.

The twenty-one students behind me have all devoured Harari’s work.

You just heard some of them in the video.

Twenty-one students for the 21st Century.

The chairman of the board of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Eddy Van Gelder (here next to me), and I are about to award Yuval Harari with a VUB honorary doctorate.

Thank you, Professor Harari for accepting this award and becoming a Doctor Honoris Causa of our university.

It is an honour, especially in front of your thousands of fans here in the audience.

VUB has a long tradition of presenting honorary doctorates to outstanding and inspiring personalities in recognition of their achievements in academic, scientific or social fields.

Personalities who embody the principles of free inquiry and critical thinking—the values of our university.

Yuval Noah Harari meets these criteria in every respect.

He is not just an exceptional academic. He is also one of today’s most exciting and challenging thinkers.

A thinker who—and this is very important—dares to venture beyond the boundaries of his own discipline.

After all, you’ll never make new connections if you don’t dare to cross boundaries or break down walls.

And that’s what Harari has done.

And that’s one of his greatest achievements.

A thinker who, from his expertise as a historian, involves biology, anthropology, ethics—for instance, his advocacy for a vegetarian lifestyle —and numerous other fields.

All to come to a holistic vision.

What’s amazing is that Harari has managed to bring all this into two compact volumes of 500 pages: *Sapiens: A Brief history of Humankind* and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*.

And for his *21 lessons for the 21st Century*, he only needed another 300 pages.

You might see him as a ‘master of summaries’ who makes countless pages of old and new history superfluous.

But Harari is anything but that.

Because Harari doesn’t summarise history. He expands on history.

He sheds an entirely new light on our human story, and makes us reflect and interpret the historical works we read in a different way.

And, consequently, he makes us look at our own future in a new way.

Yuval Harari has a superpower.

He can zoom out of space and time, without losing his eye for detail. It allows him to see new patterns in our evolution as a species.

At the same time, Harari can zoom in on crucial moments; events with a before and an after that are radically different.

Take as an example the scientific revolution 500 years ago.

This revolution set in motion a massive development, in Europe, and by extension, across the Western world.

And in next to no time— what’s 500 years in a history of two million years? — we have come to where we are today.

At a new tipping point, at the start of a third millennium. According to a chronology based on religious fiction.

Yes, even the values of my university, those of the Enlightenment and of humanism, are, according to Harari, fiction.

Just like the university itself. And just like any other university, organisation or corporation.

I quote Harari: ‘For better or worse, fiction is among the most effective tools in humanity’s toolkit.’

One of Harari’s great lessons is that fiction is necessary to make people work together.

Now, what doesn’t seem like fiction to me, is the power of science.

And the technological progress that has gripped our world like a whirlwind.

We already know now that the difference between the year nineteen hundred and the year two thousand will be much smaller than the difference between the beginning and the end of this century.

YOUR century.

The power of science is already giving hope, strengthening us in our conviction that we can make the world better.

Hans Rosling, the famous Swedish statistician and author of *Factfulness*, talks about *possibilism*.

But is optimism justified?

Can’t science and its technological applications not contribute just as much to the demise of the world?

When Robert Oppenheimer, the nuclear physicist, saw the first atomic bomb explode in the New Mexico desert, he referred to the *Bhagavad Gita*, or if you prefer, to Hindu fiction.

He said: ‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’

The powers we have developed since Los Alamos have only become greater. In a variety of areas.

Professor Harari suggests humans have become *homo deus*: god-like.

We will be able to exterminate virtually all disease.

And even extend the maximum lifespan.

The record holder is still Jeanne Calment, a woman from Arles, who knew Vincent Van Gogh personally as a young girl.

She who died at the end of the last century at the age of one-hundred and twenty-two.

How old will the oldest person be in the twenty-second century?

Artificial intelligence enables us to always make more and better decisions.

AI opens doors to completely new experiences.

But if people and machines keep on merging, will there still be enough of the human left?

For a while now, humans have not been the best chess players anymore.

But what are we still going to be the best at?

A lot will depend on the choices that we make as a society, as a species and also as scientists.

In Professor Harari, we have an excellent guide to show us the new possibilities, but also the great dangers which can come with future developments.

Is this futurology?

No. This is history. A brief history of tomorrow.

That’s why we also want to dedicate this honorary doctorate to the youth of the twenty-first century. You will need to make the right choices.

Choices that will determine not just your future, but the future of our species.

Professor Harari, we are all looking forward to your lecture, but may I first invite you on stage to receive the honorary doctorate from our university.

*READ DIPLOMA*:

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

following the initiative of the academic authorities,

and in consideration of his contribution to the beauty, the power and the wisdom of science,

confers upon Yuval Noah Harari the title of Doctor Honoris Causa

in recognition of his powerful and ground-breaking insights as an historian, thinker and author, into the history of mankind, and of his provocative and disruptive views on today’s society and tomorrow’s world.