

## Synthèse de documents de type Centrale OU X-Cachan : 4 heures

1) Synthèse de type **Centrale** : vous rédigerez en anglais et en **500 mots** environ une synthèse des documents proposés. Vous indiquerez avec précision à la fin de votre synthèse le nombre de mots qu'elle comporte. Votre travail comportera un titre comptabilisé dans le nombre de mots. Un **écart de 10% en plus ou en moins** sera accepté.

2) Synthèse de type **X-Cachan** : vous rédigerez, **en plus de la synthèse du dossier en « 600-675 mots »**, un **texte d'opinion d'une longueur de 500 à 600 mots**, en réaction aux arguments exprimés dans l'éditorial figurant en fin de dossier.

**Vous écrirez une ligne sur deux et veillerez à soigner la présentation de votre devoir.**

**Cinq documents** vous sont proposés dans un ordre aléatoire :

○ un article intitulé "What do we mean when we call art 'necessary'?", de Lauren Oyler, paru dans *The New York Times Magazine* le 8 mai 2018;

○ un article intitulé " 'Antigone of Syria' ; Tragedy of old and new" paru dans *The Economist*, le 28 novembre 2014;

○ un article intitulé « The cult of Jeff Koons », de Jed Perl, paru dans *The New York Review of Books*, le 25 septembre 2014;

○ « Campbell's Soup Cans », une œuvre d'art de 1962 de l'artiste américain Andy Warhol (1928-1987)

○ un extrait de la préface de *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, roman de l'auteur irlandais Oscar Wilde, publié en 1890.

### **What Do We Mean When We Call Art 'Necessary'?**

About a year ago I met up for the first time with a woman I knew only online. Articulate and funny, she is a brilliant writer who studied literature in graduate school. So I was surprised that, when I mentioned a recent novel I liked, my new friend responded with head-shaking resignation. "I can't see how anyone justifies talking about books anymore," she said. Our nation was so overwhelmed with causes demanding attention and action, she suggested, that it had entered a state of constant emergency, whereby pursuits both personal and political must be pitted against one another to determine which are essential.

A turn toward socially conscious criticism, ushered in by the internet's amplification of previously ignored perspectives, has meant that culture now tends to be evaluated as much for its politics as for its aesthetic successes (or failures). Certain works — usually those that highlight the experiences of marginalized groups, or express some message or moral about the dangers of prejudice — have been elevated in stature. It's an overdue correction that brings with it an imposition: No longer just illuminating, instructive, provocative or a way to waste a few hours on a Saturday, these works have become "necessary." The word is a discursive crutch for describing a work's right-minded views, and praise that is so distinct from aesthetics it can be affixed to just about anything, from two-dimensional romantic comedies to a good portion of the forthcoming books stacked beside my desk. Necessary *for what* is always left to the imagination — the continuation of civilization, maybe.

The disproportion of the descriptor is made clear when it's invoked to transform two very long, idiosyncratic theater productions into compulsory interventions in the issues they reflect: The New Yorker's Hilton Als called the revival of Tony Kushner's eight-hour play "Angels in America" "brilliant, maddening and necessary. (...)

What has become truly necessary is stating the obvious: No work of art, no matter how incisive, beautiful, uncomfortable or representative, *needs* to exist. (...) The prospect of "necessary" art allows members of the audience to free themselves from having to make choices while offering the critic a nifty shorthand to convey the significance of her task, which may itself be one day condemned as dispensable. (...)

The relationship between art and politics has always been fraught. During the French Revolution, the German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller observed that "utility is the great idol of the time," and he proposed that art, with its ability to expand the mind, could be a route to meaningful freedom. Later critics seized on the idea's lurking elitism. The revolution eventually led to Napoleon, and from the fallout, which included the formation of a middle class with a taste for uncomplicated art and the money to pay for it, rose the bohemian movement in favor of "art for art's sake" — and against the demand for meaning or morality in culture. (...)

Art is infinitely adaptable; it accommodates activism naturally. When used to describe specific works today, however, "necessary" constrains more than it celebrates. If we can access only the essential, we may start to crave the extraneous — which, through this increasingly distracting yearning, may feel essential, too. Next to stories of grave injustice, the movie "Paddington 2," about a bear that wears a red hat, is still considered an "an inviting, necessary bit of escapism" by Vanity Fair. (...)

An art museum is not a nail salon, but codifying an exhibition, novel or film as "necessary" is a similar camouflaging maneuver that saddles an aesthetic pursuit with moral weight. Often it is burdensome to the audience, the work and the artist alike. When New York magazine's Matt Zoller Seitz calls the mini-series "Waco" "necessary and sometimes powerful," he separates the work's role from its ability to stir emotion, and in turn protects the show from any qualitative assessment. (...)

Along with obligation and requirement, "necessary" can also suggest inevitability, even predestination, the sense that a work is both mandatory for the audience's political education and a foregone response to the world as it is. There are many noncomprehensive adjectives we can apply to good art: moving, clever, joyous, sad, innovative, boring, political. But good art doesn't have to be any of these things, necessarily; what we want out of it is possibility. To call a work "necessary" keeps the audience from that possibility and saps the artist of autonomy as well. That it's frequently bestowed on artists from marginalized backgrounds pressures these artists to make work that represents those backgrounds. Worse, it subtly frames their output as an inevitability, something that would have happened regardless of creative agency, and thus suggests that these artists are less in control of their decisions and skills than their unnecessary counterparts.

*The New York Times Magazine*, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018

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## **"Antigone of Syria": Tragedy old and new**

"I HAVEN'T smiled in two years—this is the first time," beams a middle-aged refugee. Thirty Syrian women are standing in a large room in St Joseph University in Beirut as an energetic British/Iraqi actress directs their movements. They are rehearsing "Antigone of Syria", an adaptation of a tragedy by Sophocles, in a workshop run by a British/Syrian production company—and none of them have acted before.

The tale of Antigone's defiance against state repression retains a similar political relevance today to when it was written down 2,500 years ago. While the workshop is as much about empowering female refugees as it is about the production, the choice of play in the context of the Syrian conflict is striking. A tragedy of familial love, female courage, resistance against the state and blurred moral lines, it acts as a reminder that the role of the state, and of women within the state, is in momentous flux in Syria.

The tragedy tells of Antigone's defiance of her uncle, Creon, in performing funeral rites for her brother Polynices. Polynices had attacked the city of Thebes in order to take the crown from his brother, in accordance with their agreed rotation of power. But both brothers die in battle, leaving Creon as king. According to the law of the polis (state) ordained by Creon, Polynices must be left unburied outside the city walls as a traitor, carrion for the dogs and birds. Antigone breaks the law, though, because she considers the unwritten law of the oikos (home)—that you should bury a relative's body with the proper rites—more important. She faces being buried alive for ignoring Creon's ruling.

Questions at the heart of "Antigone"—can kinship exist without the support and mediation of the state, and can a state exist without the family as its support—may equally be asked of Syria. Hafez Assad, father of Bashar Assad and totem of a secular Syria until his death in 2000, tried to cultivate a sense of nationalism among his subjects by emphasising the family unit. Early pictures of his mother and sons form part of the cult of Assad and helped place the family at the centre of the state.

The play's directors focus on two themes—Antigone's defiance of Creon and her relationship with her brothers. The tragedy of losing two brothers sadly resonates among many of the actors. Fadia Ouati has lost both sons to the war in Syria. She brought her daughter to the workshop so they could try to shake off their grief, and now describes herself as "feeling 30 years younger".

Many of the women asked that the adaption should refrain from overt political references, despite the similarities to the situation in Syria. But ahead of the performances there are signs of a shifting mood: some women who had refused to be photographed are becoming more relaxed, confidence levels are rising, and others are becoming more eager to confront the political similarities directly. The impact stretches beyond the room. Many of these women had not left the refugee camps in Beirut for two years. Now, they are starting to explore the city that has become their home.

"Antigone" has long been used as a vehicle for political expression. Bertolt Brecht's adaption, "Antigonemodell 1948", written in the shadow of the Holocaust, sets the prologue in a Berlin air raid shelter and gives Creon a Hitler-like aura. In Luis Rafael Sánchez's "La Pasión según Antígona Pérez" (1968), Creon is the dictator of a fictional Latin American nation, with Antigone a freedom fighter. And Athol Fugard's version, "The Island", engages with the penal system of Apartheid South Africa.

Here in Beirut the issue is not ultimately politics, however. The women learning to act in the bare room are drawn together by an environment that nurtures freedom of expression, forges bonds of trust between people of different backgrounds, and provides an opportunity for placating emotional turmoil with ancient, yet sadly resonant, words.

*The Economist*, November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014

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## The Cult of Jeff Koons



Imagine the Jeff Koons retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art as the perfect storm. And at the center of the perfect storm there is a perfect vacuum. The storm is everything going on around Jeff Koons: the multimillion-dollar auction prices, the blue chip dealers, the hyperbolic claims of the critics, the adulation and the controversy and the public that quite naturally wants to know what all the fuss is about. The vacuum is the work itself, displayed on five of the six floors of the Whitney, a succession of pop culture trophies so emotionally dead that museumgoers appear a little dazed as they dutifully take out their iPhones

and produce their selfies.

Presented against stark white walls under bright white light, Koons's floating basketballs, Plexiglas-boxed household appliances, and elaborately produced jumbo-sized versions of sundry knickknacks, souvenirs, toys, and backyard pool paraphernalia have a chilly chic arrogance. The sculptures and paintings of this fifty-nine-year-old artist are so meticulously, mechanically polished and groomed that they rebuff any attempt to look at them, much less feel anything about them.

Anybody who has taken Modern Art 101 will be able to give you some general idea of how we arrived at the point where a ten-foot-high polychromed aluminum reproduction of a multicolored pile of Play-Doh holds center stage at the Whitney—and is hailed by Roberta Smith, one of the chief art critics at *The New York Times*, as “a new, almost certain masterpiece.” What we are seeing at the Whitney is the mainstreaming of Dadaism and in particular of the readymade, the ordinary and frequently mass-produced objects that Marcel Duchamp reimagined as art objects, including, early on, a bicycle wheel, a bottle rack, and a urinal. [...]

If you listen in on conversations in the galleries at the Koons show—whether a museum lecturer speaking to a group or a more knowledgeable visitor giving some friends the lowdown—you invariably find that the Whitney's overwhelmingly middle-class audience is being told that Koons presents a sly critique of middle-class values. Of course everybody can also see that he is having his way with commercial culture—and with us. Koons knows how to capitalize on the guilty pleasure that the museum-going public takes in all his mixed messages. He knows how to leave people feeling simultaneously ironical, erudite, silly, sophisticated, and bemused. [...]

But in the art history departments where Krauss and the somber style of *October* magazine still reign more or less supreme, Koons is now regarded, like it or not, as a part of the history of our times.

In *The New Yorker*, Peter Schjeldahl, certainly a man of discriminating tastes, basically announced that there was no way of arguing with his success. Koons is “the signal artist of today's world,” Schjeldahl wrote. “If you don't like that, take it up with the world.” “In my observation,” Schjeldahl writes, “Koons's most ardent detractors skip aesthetic judgment of his art to assert a wish that it not exist.” When Schjeldahl regards Koons's overblown baubles, what he sees is an authentic aesthetic response to the mind-bending pressures of a global consumer society. Our Gilded Age, so Schjeldahl may imagine, precipitates—empowers, even legitimates—this high-tech kitsch vision. But does it follow that those of us who do not respond to the work are in denial—that we are, whether consciously or unconsciously, delegitimizing a legitimate aesthetic? Is Schjeldahl suggesting that the very existence of the work forces some sort of aesthetic embrace? Must it be appreciated simply

because it exists (and sells for so much money)? And where does this leave the average museumgoer, whoever that mythical being might be, who has been told even before walking through the doors of the Whitney that whatever scruples he or she has are suspect?

Nothing is left to the imagination in Koons's work. That, so I believe, is the source of the almost limitless fascination he exerts. His elaborate matter-of-factness makes him a populist of sorts. Koons is a recycler and regurgitator of the obvious, which he proceeds to aggrandize in the most obvious way imaginable, by producing oversized versions of cheap stuff in extremely expensive materials. [...] No wonder the people in the galleries at the Whitney look a little dazed. The Koons cult has triumphed.

Jed Perl , *The New York Review of Books* , September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014 (abridged)

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## “Campbell’s Soup Cans”, Andy Warhol, 1962



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## Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde, 1889

The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.

Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope. They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty.

There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.[...]

The moral life of man forms part of the subject-matter of the artist, but the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. No artist desires to prove anything. Even things that are true can be proved. No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style. No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything. Thought and language are to the artist instruments of an art. Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art. From the point of view of form, the type of all the arts is the art of the musician. From the point of view of feeling, the actor's craft is the type. All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital. When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself. We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely.

All art is quite useless.

## Texte d'opinion (deuxième partie du sujet X-ENS)

### **In defence of uselessness**

OPINION – June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018 by Marcel O’Gorman, *TheRecord.com*

At the recent True North conference, former Governor General David Johnston gave a history lesson on innovation to a crowd of hundreds. Johnston is a storyteller, and in this case, he chose the invention of the foghorn as a fable about how innovation happens in Canada. In the course of his colourful speech, he used the word "useful" several times. "Make something useful," he told the attentive audience of tech innovators.

But the conference wasn't about making something useful. It was about making something good, and that requires thinking beyond the profits and efficiencies that drive innovation.

As an English professor at the University of Waterloo, I have often felt the supposed uselessness of my own discipline. True North provided an opportunity to put that uselessness to work. For one thing, I was invited to participate in the writing of a Tech for Good Declaration. This earnest document is an attempt to show that the tech community is serious about its responsibility to behave ethically and inclusively. But learning how to be ethical and inclusive requires stepping outside of the useful STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields.

In 1939, educational reformer Abraham Flexner published an article in Harper's entitled "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge." Flexner asks in his essay whether the "conception of what is useful may not have become too narrow to be adequate to the roaming and capricious possibilities of the human spirit." We should be asking the same question today here in Waterloo Region.

Flexner was defending pure research, work not driven by profit, and not only in the STEM fields but in the arts and humanities as well. Note that Flexner wasn't talking about STEAM, which is often a pitiful attempt to make the arts useful by wedging an A (for arts) into the STEM machine. He was talking about individual disciplines that promote curiosity, creativity, and critical reflection.

More recently, Italian philosopher Nuccio Ordine has described the uselessness of the arts and humanities as a form of resistance, "an antidote to the barbarism of profit that has gone so far as to corrupt our social relations and our most intimate affections." The "barbarism of profit" is painfully visible in the recent privacy scandals at Facebook. But it also rears its ugly head whenever a tech company or an educational institution puts profit, based on a narrow conception of innovation, above all else.

I was asked to talk about "AI and Ethics" in my keynote at True North, but I hesitated at this suggestion. All too often, ethics are an afterthought with no place in tech research and development. Ethos, on the other hand, which is well-known concept in "useless" academic disciplines like philosophy and rhetoric, is at the very heart of things. Ethos determines why someone is motivated to develop a technology like artificial intelligence in the first place. What are that person's attitudes and aspirations? Are they guided by hubris, by profit, by utility? Or are they guided by other motives that exceed the narrow definition of innovation?

The perplexing question of what is good, of how to live the good life, is an ancient question that has been asked by philosophical thinkers for thousands of years. It's by asking these sorts of useless questions that a person develops an admirable ethos in the first place, an ethos that is guided by what is good for others and not just for oneself. An ethos that asks: Who is left out? Who is in need? An ethos that asks: What are the consequences — social, psychological, environmental — of my technological innovations?

Rather than putting all its effort into leaping ahead, maybe the tech community could slow down, look around and consider its ethos. This could involve looking at other communities in the region, from the Grand Valley women's prison in south Kitchener, to the Old Order Mennonite farms in North Waterloo, keeping in mind that all of this is on land that was once promised to Indigenous people. There is much to be learned and gained by taking a slow and careful sideways glance, rather than thrusting forward enthusiastically.

All too often, I hear Waterloo Region being referred to as a "Silicon Valley of the North." But why would we ever wish this upon ourselves? A recent story in *The Guardian* describes why a well-known Silicon Valley pastor resigned from his church. To put it in his words, "I believe Palo Alto is a ghetto of wealth, power, and elitist liberalism by proxy, meaning that many community members claim to want to fight for social justice issues, but that desire doesn't translate into action." Waterloo Region can be better than Silicon Valley. Waterloo Region can be good. But it's going to take a lot of useless thinking to get there.

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