

## Book Review

MUSIC EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF VIRTUALITY AND POST-TRUTH, PAUL G. WOODFORD (2019). E-Book.  
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## Abstract

This text presents a review of the book *Music Education in an Age of Virtuality and Post-Truth*, by Canadian University Professor Paul G. Woodford (2019). The book stitches John Dewey's pragmatism together with George Orwell's ideas about mass societies, in order to understand the impact that certain actions of 21st century politicians can have on the field of Education, the Arts and the Humanities. In conclusion, similar examples of politicians from Brazil and Latin America are offered, supported by the ideas of Newton Duarte<sup>2</sup> and what he called *The Curriculum in times of Belligerent Obscurantism* (2018).

**Keywords:** Music Education, Virtual, Post Truth, Arts, Newton Duarte, Trump

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## Introduction

Why I write?<sup>3</sup> This question refers to the title of the first chapter of the book *Music Education in an Age of Virtuality and Post-Truth*, taken from the title of a 1946 text by George Orwell. Authored by Paul G. Woodford, Professor at Don Wright Faculty of Music from Western University, Canada, the book reviewed here has a political stance that is also present in other works by the author, such as the well-known *Democracy and music education*, published in 2005.

To answer the initial question of the title, the author takes up the four main motives Orwell describes in his text. They are: "1) sheer egoism, 2) aesthetic enthusiasm, 3) historical impulse and 4) political purpose" (n.p.).

By focusing mainly on the last motive, which has political intentions in his discourse, his text should not be regarded as neutral, since not even the schools are, as the author will confront throughout the book. Woodford cites Orwell to justify concentrating his thinking and writing on the fourth motive, for that is where the relationships of meaning, justice, and truth would be most evident.

The book is structured in an introductory part and divided into eight chapters subdivided into short sections with their own subtitles.

## Music education in times of virtuality and post-truth

Lack of critical thinking within US schools is the central theme of the introduction and chapter 1, which also has three sections that seek to contextualize the music education landscape and the role of the professional working within 21<sup>st</sup> century educational institutions. In the first section there is a kind of call for teachers to be motivated and politically engaged to challenge growing neoliberalism within educational institutions that focus on outcomes rather than teaching-learning processes. Digital devices, virtual courses and distance education are already teaching models where there is less need for face-to-face student monitoring, and this fact is one of the criticisms that the author makes to the teaching of music focused on performance, or technical execution, especially at times of virtuality and post-truth.

We are then presented with a study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),<sup>4</sup> an institution that is also popularly known as the "Rich Group," because it involves the richest nations in the world and is directly related to the creation of quality indexes in schools and universities in these participating countries. In this study, there is a devaluation of music as a curricular activity, because it proved inconclusive the contribution that the arts make to other areas of knowledge, considered more useful and economically relevant. The author raises a question about teaching that predominates in many institutions, where technique and repertoire are studied exhaustively, in contrast to the little reflective activity on the persuasive power of music

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3 ORWELL, 1946.

4 OECD: [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

and how it can shape our perception of the world. Confronting the common sense that regards the field of Art and Humanities as unprofitable and economically uninteresting, Woodford presents a 2013 study that analyzed 702 professions and their susceptibility to replacement by machines in the near future. The professions of artist, teacher, and musician are relatively low in probability of substitution, since they all involve social intelligence and persuasion, which, the author suggests, could hardly be adapted to complex algorithms.

Our ability to care about each other and their problems is what sets us apart from machines, so music education should engage students in meaningful, ethical and morally justifiable activities, so that, according to John Dewey's ideas, they serve to enhance the human condition in an emotionally and intellectually moving experience. The end of the first chapter uses a metaphor that links the profession of music teacher to an infantry music used by the British army in the seventeenth century to communicate with troops in the field, entitled "The Last Post." This originally served to communicate to the troops that the camp was safe for the night and that the next day they would communicate again, but more recently the same music has been used in funeral ceremonies, and the analogy acts as a joke about what it is to work in this field today. Some would use the metaphor in the context of funerals, but Woodford prefers to tease the reader and say that the profession of musician is secure in a future of transformation, but only if there is a political engagement about how much music represents in our society and can help promote "camp safety".

In the second chapter there is a further explanation of this misperception of the importance of art for both the economy and the social development of a nation. For this, the author uses arguments that will investigate from the economic participation of Art in Canada's GDP to the neoliberal structures that govern the model of democratic citizen formed in 21st century schools. Supported by a study showing that the culture industry accounted for more than 3% of the Canadian economy in 2014, the author confronts those who still consider art to be less economically relevant than other areas and reinforces by demonstrating that jobs in the music field fluctuated in times of crisis as much as other professions cited in the same document. Reinforcing the economic purpose of music, the author follows a rather Orwellian line to question what kind of student we are forming in this society, which, from the last major capital crisis in 2008, began to coordinate institutions for measurement and design of education from economic terms primarily. Again John Dewey's ideas intersect with Orwell to understand how a particular ideology, which usually has primarily economic interests behind certain curriculum structures, can influence a society and its conception of reality and what is acceptable. As an example, the use of music teaching in schools in Nazi Germany is cited as a tool for indoctrination and control of what is valued as culture. Thus, the extension of criticism to the performance-focused teaching model, coupled with the understanding that all art is accompanied by ideological values, makes the author resort again to Orwell, who warns that a society that narrows his thinking will result in a deformed citizenship, which is incapable of protest or resistance.

To answer which model of citizenship the author refers to, the third chapter features one of the sections entitled "Three Models of Democratic Citizenship," where the first model is based on discipline and hard work and in no way questions the status quo, but instead, helps to sustain the prevailing power structures in democratic capitalist society. The second model has a conservative conception of citizenship, where the citizen, instead of voluntarily distributing food to the homeless, is concerned with being someone socially engaged, the kind that organizes a collective distribution of food in their community, for example. The third model of democratic citizenship, more oriented to social justice and, therefore, less frequent in schools, is similar to the second, because it understands the historical roots of the lack of income distribution. However, this model aims to position itself in order to promote political debates to guarantee freedom, inclusion and social responsibility. The author further explores how the lack of definition of the term "democracy" can be purposeful, since every system that affirms itself as democratic, is afraid will have to stop using the term if it is tied to some meaning. As a conclusion of the chapter, Woodford confronts the music education classrooms again, but this time criticizes even the more participatory and student-focused methods, such as the use of improvisation and composition. These, according to the author, besides being misinterpreted by the society where they are applied, as they do not carry the values of the traditional canons of western classical music, reinforce stereotypes of privilege and the so-called culture of shyness, which the author says exists about the field of music education. Woodford concludes by quoting Dewey again when he discusses the purpose of education, which is to educate citizens prepared to face the state propaganda apparatus and the plutocracy of the rich.

In the fourth chapter of the book, we can look back over Canadian state policies, such as what former Prime Minister Stephen Harper called conservatism during the 2006-2015 period, as well as continuing to describe this type of personality of politicians who play with public opinion and propaganda to construct their form of government action. An example of how public opinion can be shaped by the particular interest of certain politicians is what Woodford called the aestheticization of politics, where these representatives, like Harper, use some of the influential features they are able to display, or conceal, to dribble and shape public opinion in their favor. Harper, as described by the author, uses a political stance of criticism of the art sector, arguing that it does not dialogue with the ordinary taxpayer, a fact that we can verify quite similarly in other governments in the Americas. With this position, politicians stand as if they were ordinary people, not privileged people who had access to a differentiated education, at least, in contrast to the so-called ordinary citizens. Thus, the author reveals that the real interest in criticizing the arts and even the specialists in various areas, as this type of politician described by the author, conceals the desire to tame them, since they are capable of translating or producing much of the popular imagination about what the symbols of a nation really mean. The author further complements that the arts are often interpreted as dangerous and thus dispensable in neoliberal educational systems focused on generating results. According to Woodford, Western society has adopted standardization of

the curriculum as a profit-generating tool to justify funding by the financial institutions that maintain it and writes about an alliance between universities and their supporting foundations, once interested in the knowledge being produced and now focused on economic outcomes as the main goal. Criticizing this kind of education focused on standardizing students, making them mere adults in training, acquiring skills and abilities to use in the modern world, Woodford concludes that we are contributing to the creation of highly competent and skilled 22-year-old students without the slightest sense of purpose or meaning in life, or even how to look for one. Formerly associated with the contestation of the current model, often driven by the knowledge acquired at this stage of life, our youth, according to the author, is reduced to collusion with and insertion into the capitalist democratic system, preferably as soon as possible.

Further exploring the term “virtuality” within the context of 21st century society, the author brings the concept of the “death of reality as we know it” (n.p), for now we no longer exist only in this tangible reality here and now. At the same time as we practice our existence, we have representations that coexist in virtual realities that have their own rules, such as social networks, for example. We can see a lot of similarity between the ideas proposed by the author and Orwell’s novels, be it 1984, Animal Farm or even *The Handmaid’s Tale*<sup>5</sup>. The latter, also cited by Woodford, is a fiction written by Margaret Atwood in 1985 about a society where some women were enslaved to bear children for the wealthier classes in the name of God and the economic good of that civilization.

Finally, the author concludes the book with two final chapters that focus more on neoliberal theory and challenge one of the main arguments made by Francis Fukuyama in the book *The End of History and the Last Man*, from 1992, where he argues that neoliberal democracy would be the last state of all civilizations still in development. Woodford points out that Fukuyama did not foresee events such as the 2008 recession and the emergence of figures such as Donald Trump, who, through a reality show, gained notoriety for the general public and, from there, began to walk a path that has led him to The White House. He argues again that Trump comes to the presidency using arguments such as that education was loosely rigid, that his country was dominated by immigrants and other forms of violent discourse that are in some ways representations of popular opinion in the United States. According to the author, we would be in a moment of crucial change, especially in times of anger, which ignore the ability of the Art and Humanities field to dialogue with other disciplines and, therefore, demonize them.

## Final considerations

Using examples of how culture has the soft power to shape a society, the author cites some politicians who have used it to their advantage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although professionals from different parts of the world are cited expressing their opinions, little attention is paid to the growing neoconservatism of Latin America’s neoliberal agenda. In this context, it should be noted that this review was previously submitted to the au-

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5 ATWOOD, Margaret, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

thor of the book prior to his final remarks, during his recent presence at the XXIV National Congress of Abem, in Campo Grande/MS, from November 11 to 14, 2019. Thanks To this exchange of information via e-mail and accepting criticism and suggestions from the author, some episodes similar to those described in the book will be reported, but now in relation to the political representations of Latin America and especially of Brazil, where I write from.

Something very similar to what Woodford reports about Trump's popularity and how it was driven by a reality show has been happening in Brazil with the current president and his many controversial appearances in mass media vehicles, especially after the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, in 2016. At that time, the current president of Brazil, who was then a deputy and took part in that controversial and historic vote, praised in his speech the figure of one of the greatest torturers of the military regime who had tortured even the president about to be ousted. As it turned out, this episode only valued the figure of this politician, who, from then on, came to be seen as the carrier of ordinary citizen's speech, outraged by the country's policies plunged into corruption scandals and in a deep financial crisis. From this period, the other so-called left-wing governments in Latin America began to experience an increase in their political crises. We can bring some examples, such as the election of the declared neoliberal government of Mauricio Macri, in Argentina; the growing embargoes facing the Venezuelan government; the extreme intensification of the crisis that became popular revolt in Bolivia at the time of writing this text; In addition to the complete bankruptcy of the so-called Chilean "neoliberal laboratory", which also witnesses moments of strong tension and popular struggle to recover a portion of what was given to private enterprise.

Finally, Professor Newton Duarte, thinker of Education in Brazil, in his article "The curriculum in times of belligerent obscurantism", brings reflections that closely resemble the panorama described by Woodford. Specifically about the model of the Common National Curriculum Base, about to be implemented in Brazil, Duarte mentions that the supposed freedom that this model offers to young people leads them to "accept as natural and indisputable that we live in the only possible and desirable type of society" (2018, p.143). With this type of curriculum, we will continue to train young people who continue to obey the life projects provided by the educational system, because, according to Duarte (2018, p.143), "society projects are forbidden, but individuals are free to dream about an abundant life and to fight tooth and nail to be part of the successful group."

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