Argumentative Painting

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ABSTRACT: I contend that certain non-verbal paintings such as Picasso's *Guernica* make (simple) arguments. The modern study of visual argument has mostly focused on partially verbal media such as ads, posters, and cartoons, rather than non-verbal, classic art forms like painting. If a painting's argument is reasonably good, it would be a source of cognitive value. My analogical approach is to show how pertinent features of viable *literary* cognitivism can be applied to non-verbal painting.

KEYWORDS: argumentative literary fiction, literary cognitivism, painting, visual argument

1. INTRODUCTION

My thesis is that certain non-verbal paintings such as Picasso's *Guernica* make (simple) arguments. If this is correct and the arguments are reasonably good, it would indicate one way that non-literary art can be cognitively valuable, since argument can provide the justification needed for knowledge or understanding. For topic manageability, the focus will be on painting, but findings should be applicable to comparable visual art forms, notably, sculpture (e.g., Wall Street's erstwhile '*Fearless Girl* facing down *Charging Bull*'). The approach will be to identify pertinent features of viable literary cognitivism— something that is relatively easier to characterize—and then to show how they or close analogues can be applied to non-verbal painting. After that, potential objections will be considered.

Although such issues as the role of diagrams in mathematical proof have a long history of study (Dove, 2002; Larvor, 2013), the modern general study of visual argument began in earnest only in the mid-1990s. Most attention since then has been devoted to partially verbal media on the order of ads, posters, and cartoons, rather than nonverbal, classic art forms like painting (Kjeldsen, 2015; Groarke, et al., 2016). Here I attempt to address this lacuna.

2. TWO REQUIREMENTS OF LITERARY COGNITIVISM

It is generally held that *literary* fiction is more nuanced than non-literary fiction; it has a greater richness and complexity of such things as character development, plot, or fine description, and also somehow shows insight into human affairs. How it might show or facilitate such insight is the central question of literary cognitivism. Literary cognitivism

is usually[1] defined as the view that literary works can be a source of knowledge or understanding—a definition that is itself pretty vacuous since of course there is science in science fiction, history in historical novels, etc. Literary cognitivists and anti-cognitivists are all concerned with *fictional* literature because, tautologically, nonfictional literary works (e.g., in history or biography) may yield knowledge. So a critical requirement of literary cognitivism should be that the relevant knowledge is provided significantly *in virtue of* the distinctive essential feature of literary fictions, that is, their fictionality. Let us call this *the fictionality requirement*.[2]

A second requirement is that the knowledge stems primarily from the content of the work, not from the auditor or what the auditor brings to the work. This is because, as Gibson suggests (2008, p. 575), something can be learned from anything if we auditors are clever enough, e.g., what we have learned about climate change from variations in glaciation, which hardly constitutes a reason to believe in 'glacial cognitivism'. "Cognitivism is, again, about what goes on in artworks and not in the mind of the consumer about art (except in a secondary, derivative sense)" (pp. 584-585). Following Gibson (2009, sec. II), let us call this second requirement of literary cognitivism *the textual constraint*.

A *non-argumentative* way in which fictional literature may satisfy both requirements is the notion that fiction provides a necessary 'safe zone' in which to deal with striking or upsetting ideas, such as the effects of senseless murder in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (cf. Hakemulder, 2000, pp. 11, 150). Or, to take a favorite example, consider our different reactions to Tony Soprano's misdeeds and their fallout versus those of a comparable actual criminal. As one might say, *you can't learn if you're scared; rather, you flee the theater*. Analogously, consider contemplating *Guernica*, which you might want to view many times, versus a purely mimetic (undoctored, un-Photoshopped) photograph of a similar scene of horror, which you might not want to view at all. Generally in contrast to reality, art allows the auditor choice in how to assimilate it, as in the case of viewing *Guernica* or choosing to read a novel lightly or deeply.

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[1] See, e.g., Gibson, 2006, p. 439; Mikkonen, 2013, pp. 3 & 11; Davies, 2016, p. 377; Harold, 2016, ch. 33; Kajtár, 2016, p. 330.

[2] I give an extended argument for this requirement in Plumer, 2021; cf. Green, e.g., 2010, p. 352 and 2016, p. 286ff.; Maioli, 2014, p. 625; Alcaraz León, 2016. It seems to me that a necessary condition for a work to be a piece of fictional literature is that at least some of what is depicted is not supposed to be true, and indeed, some is not true. This condition is not sufficient because it is satisfied, e.g., by lies. False but sincere legal testimony is not a counterexample because although it is 'fiction', it is not literary fiction. As Friend argues (2017), it will not do simply to say that literary fiction does not refer to the real world or is an 'invitation to imagine', because something like "the *Reality Assumption*: the assumption that everything that is (really) true is also fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work" (p. 29) is indisputable, and practically all discourse invites one to imagine (p. 31). Thus, the approach I take in understanding fictionality is a fairly 'objective' one, in contrast, for instance, to a relativistic account whereby fiction and nonfiction are uber-genres determined by cultural context, as argued by Friend elsewhere (2012). It would take another paper to explore what has gone wrong here: "I hesitate to say that it is *inconceivable* that a work of fiction could be entirely true" (Friend, 2012, p. 190; cf. Currie, 1990, p. 9).

3. HOW LITERARY FICTION CAN BE ARGUMENTATIVE

The point of this section is to indicate *argumentative* ways that literary fiction can satisfy both requirements of viable literary cognitivism, and in general, how literary fiction can be globally argumentative. It is not to suggest that an argumentative painting would necessarily exhibit one of these argument patterns.

Normally, the notion that certain literary fictions, taken as wholes, are argumentative appears as the claim that they are 'thought experiments' (e.g., Carroll, 2002; Elgin, 2007; Swirski, 2007; Green, 2010; Mikkonen, 2013). But there are inappropriate connotations of this concept that are perhaps best revealed by considering the inverse relationship between parameters of assessment. Factors that make a thought experiment good (e.g., straightforwardness and precision, convincingness) tend to make a story bad (lack of nuance and subtlety, didacticism), and vice versa (cf. Egan, 2016, p. 147). We can, and possibly should, consider suppositional reasoning in connection with fictional literature without dressing it up as thought experiment. In a literary fiction, suppositional reasoning (or any kind of reasoning) generally can be exhibited only *indirectly*, that is, within the context of critical interpretation,[3] for otherwise, the work would be overtly didactic or polemical, which undermines its status as literary fiction and makes it akin to philosophy or science. With this understood, one may take a literary fiction as—supposing P, Q—where P is the work's fictional 'premise', and Q is the set of consequences inferred in the work, which at least constitute conditional (on P) knowledge if the reasoning is good, thereby evidently satisfying both requirements of (viable) literary cognitivism above. For instance, Greene's *The Third Man* can be taken as constructing a supposed counterexample to the generalization that "when loyalty to a friend conflicts with loyalty to a cause, one ought to choose in favor of the friend" (Carroll, 2002, p. 10).

In Plumer, 2017a, I detail another way that literary fictions, taken as wholes, can be argumentative. In encountering an extended literary fiction, we already have a basic intuitive grasp of human nature and the principles that govern it. The work may evoke these principles or generalizations concerning human nature in its storytelling (thereby satisfying the textual constraint), which makes the work believable if it is otherwise coherent. Through the reflective or critical interpretive task of progressing through the believable fiction and perceiving what survives or dominates in the various situations and conflicts, fundamental assumptions held by the reader about human nature can become *internally justified* true beliefs. Hence, there is a transcendental argument indirectly expressed or embodied by the work, since for any extended literary fiction that is believable, we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true of human nature in order for the work to be believable?[4] And believability with respect to fiction is quite a different

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[3] My use of the term 'critical interpretation' more or less conforms to Gibson's (2006, p. 444): "Rather than directed at the recovery of linguistic meaning, critical interpretation marks a process of articulating patterns of salience, value, and significance in the worlds literary works bring to view. That is, critical interpretation marks the moment of our engagement with the world of the work, and it has as its goal the attempt to bring to light what we find of consequence in this world."

[4] Sometimes you see a vague, undeveloped recognition of this transcendental structure, for instance, Nussbaum on Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*. I take her here to be summarizing the argument she discerns in her reflective experience of believability: "The claim that our loves and commitments are so related that infidelity and failure of response are more or less inevitable features even of the best examples of loving is a claim for which a philosophical text would have a hard time mounting direct argument. It is only when, as

thing than it is with respect to nonfiction. If a work of nonfiction is *believable*, it is *worthy of belief*, but the term cannot mean this with respect to fiction. So the fictionality requirement is satisfied.

Both of these ways that literary fiction can be argumentative involve a substantial interpretive load. Another way of taking a literary fiction as globally argumentative, viz., as an argument from analogy (e.g., Hunt, 2009), appears to involve a much greater interpretive load insofar as, for indirectness, the auditor must fill in the second (target) case of the analogy. For example, which of far too many actual totalitarian states do you fill in for Orwell's *Animal Farm*? Thus, construed as an argument from analogy, it is dubious that the novel could satisfy the textual constraint of literary cognitivism. (See Plumer, 2017b for analysis.)

4. TWO PROPOSED EXAMPLES OF ARGUMENTATIVE PAINTING

Let us start with the painting by Picasso that he named *Guernica* (Figure 1), the name of the town in northern Spain that was bombed by the Nazis in 1937. Aside from its title, which gives interpretive orientation, *Guernica* is entirely non-verbal. Its reasonably obvious message or conclusion lies along the lines that indiscriminate bombing (many of the figures face skyward) is evil, and the evidence presented is the consequent destruction, suffering, and death hauntingly depicted. If this evidence and what it evokes

Figure 1: Picasso's Guernica

are sufficient, knowledge of the conclusion and of the consequences of indiscriminate bombing are derivable from the work (cf. the textual constraint), and since it is a Cubist-Surrealist departure from puremimesis(cf. the fictionality requirement), whichallowsthe

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here, we study the loves and attentions of a finely responsive mind such as Maggie's, through all the contingent complexities of a tangled human life, that...we have something like a persuasive argument that these features hold of human life in general" (1990, pp. 139-140).

argument to be constructed, it seems that analogues of both requirements of literary cognitivism are satisfied. Pure mimesis, as in an unmanipulated photograph, would restrict the creativity that is needed to construct an argument and express a point of view. There is a huge theoretical obstacle standing in the way of regarding a nonfictional narration (history, biography, etc.), or a realistic painting, as argumentative: The point of nonfictional narration and realistic painting involves *veracity*—sticking to the facts, telling what happened or how things are—so there is no theoretical room for the creativity that is needed to construct an (indirect) argument by significantly inventing what happens (as in the case of fictional narration) or massaging reality (as in the case of nonrealistic painting).

If this is right, *Guernica* exhibits the pattern of what is called an 'argument from negative consequences' (Walton, Reed, & Macagno, 2008, pp. 101, 332) against a practice, with the form: practice *p* has undesirable consequences c_l—c_n; thus, *p* is bad. This is a normative, defeasible, and simplified style of *modus-tollens* reasoning. An indication that *Guernica*'s argument is real is that it is *contestable*: presumably (e.g.) the authors of the Allied bombing campaign against Germany would dispute its conclusion, as well as the sufficiency of the evidence—including its proscriptive nature.

An issue in the study of visual argument has been whether such an argument can be entirely non-verbal (e.g., Kjeldsen, 2015, p. 124; Groarke, et al., 2016, pp. 218-219). Dove claims that "none of the proponents [of visual argument] seem to take images as sufficient for arguments. Instead, images are components of arguments" (2011, p. 381). But I think Dove's sort of view involves a kind of capitulation and makes the topic less significant. Is there any doubt that images are frequently "components of arguments," at least in their *evidentiary* use in ordinary life ('seeing is believing'), law, and science? Consider, e.g., medical imaging and visual abductive reasoning in archaeology and geology. Moreover, a case might be made that sometimes an image can directly express a *conclusion*. Given that the image of Pinocchio and his nose has basically the "fixed meaning" of *liar*, the Michael Ramirez political cartoon with verbal premises (e.g., "the private sector is doing fine") connected to a long nose on Obama accused him of being a liar (see Groarke, et al., pp. 221-222).

So if it is thought that the Picasso example is somehow cheating because it has a revealing name, look at Figure 2, a case of untitled[5] street art by NemOs painted on the

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[5] Although one website indicates it was named (by whom?) *Before and After* [https://artpeople.net/2017/02/street-art-illustrations-by-nemos/], and another site says *Edifeci* (Italian for 'buildings') [https://www.secondamanoitalia.it/vivere/lartista-dellinquietudine/#]. At any rate, these names offer little or no interpretive information that is not already obvious in the image itself.

Figure 2: street art by NemOs

side of a building. One can again see an argument from negative consequences against a practice. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, the message or conclusion of this surreal scene is that endlessly turning trees into building structures is bad—the structures are defecated by an unattractive and stylized, humanoid tree-eater—and the evidence presented is the nondescript, jumbled, and ever-rising nature of the pile of buildings depicted. Granted, Figure 2 is not as (the painting analogue for) 'literary' as the Picasso—it is not 'high art'— yet the same kinds of considerations indicating that analogues of both requirements of literary cognitivism are satisfied by *Guernica* also apply to Figure 2.

Contrast Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (Figure 3). As compared to our other two paintings, this is realistic art; there is little or no surrealism here. As relatively realistic, the scope for the creativity that is needed to construct an argument is restricted. Correspondingly, it would be difficult to make the case that any analogue of the fictionality requirement of literary cognitivism is satisfied. Thus, I think Blair (1996)

Figure 3: Goya's The Third of May 1808

is basically right about the Goya that it "portrays human cruelty, fear, terror, hopelessness and courage; but it gives no reasons for favoring the loyalists or opposing Napoleon,"
yet wrongly lumps it together with the Picasso: "What conclusion are we to draw? That this was a terrible, cruel, destructive act? But that is what Picasso's painting expresses; there is no argument" (pp. 27-28).

5. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

5.1 *Composition*

Perhaps the biggest issue revolves around the widely accepted idea that arguments are sequences of propositions, and since paintings are not such sequences, how could a painting be an argument? But, just as for a literary fiction, I am not claiming that a painting could *be* an argument, only that it could make, express, or embody an argument indirectly, i.e., through critical interpretation. It seems that a sentence or series of sentences cannot *be* an argument either; rather, their meaning or associated propositional content is the argument. Accordingly, I think the issue reduces to determining how loosely propositional content is associated with a painting such as *Guernica*. Sentences would appear to have a huge advantage in that they are tightly governed by semantic rules, have propositional syntax and argument- indicator

terms, etc. However, it seems that resemblance relationships between aspects of (non-verbal) images and their objects, as well as the conventions governing the cognitive processing of images, can be clear or tight enough (witness Pinocchio's nose, not to mention traditional pictograph writing systems, icons, emojis, etc.) that it is not an interpretive free-for-all, allowing the cognitive import to lie primarily in the content of the image or painting, not in what the auditor brings to it. Certainly, it is unclear that the interpretive load involved in discerning an argument in such paintings as the Picasso or the NemOs is *greater* than that involved in discerning a global argument in a literary fiction, if you put the works on par in terms of their cognitive complexity. On the other hand, the more abstract a painting is, the greater the interpretive load. In the case of Suprematism, for example, such as Malevich's *Black Square*, the load is extreme, and correspondingly, it is dubious that any analogue of the textual constraint of literary cognitivism could be satisfied. Similarly, it is dubious for at least some 'experimental literature' that the textual constraint could be satisfied.

5.2 *Internal structure*

A concern is that such images as Figures 1 and 2 lack "the requisite internal differentiation" that would "reliably" permit distinguishing premises from conclusion; this distinction, which "is at the heart of argument…is thus collapsed" (Fleming, 1996, p. 13). Blair says that "this is the main difficulty in interpreting" *Guernica* "as an argument" (1996, p. 28). Champagne & Pietarinen (2020, p. 232) see the problem as involving a dilemma:

> If the conclusion is present in the image, then the visual argument risks begging the question [because it cannot be distinguished from the premises]; but if the conclusion is absent from the image, then the visual argument risks supporting any conclusion.

An example they give of the dilemma's second horn is a Nazi propaganda postcard from the early 1930s that shows the Sun on the horizon emblazed with a swastika, and a harvested wheat field in the foreground. Groarke (2015, p. 148) says that the image suggests "that a Nazi future will bring food and abundance," leading to an implicit conclusion that "You should vote Nazi." Yet Champagne & Pietarinen object that "there is no evidential basis in the image itself to infer that the sun-like Nazi emblem is rising as opposed to setting" (p. 215).

These are reasonable concerns, but they seem overblown or overgeneralized. Take the NemOs It is just not that hard to "reliably" identify the premise material and distinguish it from the equally identifiable conclusion material. How could the conclusion not be along the lines that endlessly processing tress into buildings is bad, since in the image the buildings are defecated by a repulsive creature? Certainly, not just "any conclusion" is expressed, even though this is a simple normative conclusion. The premise material or evidence presented is, as I mentioned, the nondescript, jumbled, and ever-rising nature of the pile of buildings depicted.

Nevertheless, one might wonder what in the NemOs corresponds to an argument-indicator or illative term ('since', 'therefore', etc.), as in an argument verbally expressed. One kind of response is that of course the NemOs is in some respects enthymematic, as are most purely verbal arguments. For the NemOs, the illative relation is enthymematic, as is, to some degree, the notion that the situation indicated by the evidence is bad. No doubt one

can often appeal to various dimensions of context to help fill in such enthymematic blanks, as (e.g.) Groarke, et al. argue (2016, pp. 220-221). A plausible addition is proposed by Champagne & Pietarinen. Since "argumentation is a *sequential* activity" (2020, p. 229n40), their main idea, inspired by Peirce, is that "illation—the distinctive transition from premise(s) to conclusion…involves a growth of signs" (p. 230). They discuss Alfred Wegener's landmark 1929 map, which he used as evidence in abductively concluding that Africa and South America were once part of a supercontinent but subsequently were subject to 'continental drift'. In the map, the South Atlantic Ocean has been vastly narrowed, and one can see simply by looking at the map that the coastlines easily fit together. According to Champagne & Pietarinen, what is key is that "the components of the map [the coastlines] need to be *moved* in order to establish the relevant conclusion," moved, that is, backwards in time from their current positions (p. 227).

A similar analysis can be applied to the Picasso and the NemOs, although each expresses an argument from negative consequences against an actual practice, not abduction (and not a suppositional, transcendental, or analogical argument as we saw above for literary fiction). The NemOs depicts the process of endlessly turning trees into buildings, and going from premise material or evidence (the nondescript, jumbled, and ever-rising nature of the pile of buildings depicted) to the conclusion (that this process is bad) involves going back in time through the process. *Guernica* is more enthymematic or relies on its name, but here too, going from premise material (the destruction, suffering, and death depicted) to the conclusion (indiscriminate bombing is evil) involves moving back in time through the events. The purely static and (hence) non-argumentative character of such a work as Malevich's *Black Square* stands in sharp contrast and confirms the Peirce-Champagne-Pietarinen theory.

Besides, and by now you probably anticipate this point, there are many who interpret certain literary fictions, taken as wholes, as argumentative, usually as thought experiments. It does not seem any *easier* to identify and distinguish premises, conclusions, and illative relations in literary fictions than it is in paintings. After all, literary fiction cannot *be* suppositional reasoning, or any kind of reasoning, in a straightforward way; if it were, it would be overtly didactic or polemical. It generally can be argumentative only indirectly or implicitly.

5.3 *Too simple?*

Are the arguments made by the Picasso and the NemOs too simple to be of interest? The propositional content associated with these paintings does appear to be simple, but that is not the whole story. If there is anything that everyone agrees on about our topic, it is that images generally are 'thick' representations with greater meaning and force than 'thin' representations such as sentences (although no doubt the force of sentences can add up). As Kjeldsen contends, a thick representation "in an instant, can provide a full sense of an actual situation and an embedded narrative connected to certain lines of reasoning" (2016, pp. 279, 267). Trying to grasp *Guernica*'s meaning by only considering its associated propositional content is something like trying to appreciate a musical piece by only considering its written score, with no sounds imagined. Compare Larvor (2013, p. 247) on the role of diagrams in mathematical proof, e.g., in classical geometry: we could render such a "proof into prose and deliver it as speech, but it would be pretty well impossible to

follow. Anyone who could follow it would do so by creating and manipulating mental images, that is, by re-creating and acting on the diagram in imagination."

Perhaps surprisingly, Stolnitz's (in)famous paper "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art" (1992) says some similar things about Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*: "Once we divest ourselves of the diverse, singular forces at work in its psychological field, as we must, in getting from the fiction to the truth, the latter must seem, and is, distressingly impoverished," namely, "Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart" (pp. 193-194). The points of similarity are, first, that the propositional content associated with a painting such as *Guernica* is simple, perhaps "distressingly" so. Second, the power of *Guernica* lies in its surrealistic expressiveness, like the power of Austen's novel lies in "the diverse, singular forces at work in its psychological field," which belong to its *fictionality*. Of course with this power, there is risk—of being bamboozled—as by the Nazi postcard. The situation is the same with fictional literature; see, e.g., Green's (2016) "Learning To Be Good (or Bad) in (or Through) Literature."

6. FINAL THOUGHT

Even given that the Picasso and the NemOs make arguments, it could be that most paintings do not. Many paintings are too abstract or too realistic for a case taking the approach I have taken (using literary cognitivism as a guide) to get off the ground. If the painting is too abstract, an analogue of the textual constraint is not satisfied. If the painting is too realistic, an analogue of the fictionality requirement is not satisfied. This is not at all to imply that non-argumentative paintings lack cognitive value. Non-argumentative ways that a painting can have cognitive value include knowledge by acquaintance of peculiar colors and shapes, as well as phenomenal knowledge of what objects, states of affairs, and even emotions look like—allowing one to imagine what an experience or emotion feels like, thereby enabling empathy. The Goya above nicely illustrates this.

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