

# Commentary on: Chiara Pollaroli's "T(r)opical Patterns in Advertising"

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## 1. CAN A PICTURE BE AN ARGUMENT?

Can an odor or a smell be an argument? I hope you think not. But then a nonverbal picture or visual image cannot be an argument either, for the same reason. The reason for both is that they are nonpropositional, and an argument is a sequence of propositions. (An interesting fact about smells, and tastes for that matter, is that the 'nonverbal' qualification is gratuitous—they are all nonverbal—unlike visual images, sounds, and touches, e.g., of a Braille text.) To say that smells and nonverbal pictures are nonpropositional is not to say that they are not representational. Certainly, they are representational, and this allows them to be used as *evidence* for (verbal) claims. A photograph or videotape of a person firing a gun may be introduced in a trial as evidence that the person used the weapon that, it turns out, caused the injury. Or consider the additive put in natural gas so that smelling it is more or less conclusive evidence for the presence of natural gas. In such a case, one *perceives* the truth of a claim by virtue of seeing the photo or smelling the odor; one does not *infer* the truth of a claim from the photo or smell (diagrams in mathematics may function in the same way). So the sense in which smells and nonverbal pictures can be used as evidence is not the sense of logical support; it is not the sense of giving a reason or supposing a premise for a conclusion. For again, smells and nonverbal pictures are nonpropositional.

Therefore, I think we may get carried away when we say, as Pollaroli does, that "arguments may be conveyed through images and a combination of pictorial and verbal modes" (sec. 1). Given the contrast with the second sentential conjunct, the first sentential conjunct here seems to say that a nonverbal visual image can itself be an argument. Similarly, Ripley says an argument "may be accomplished by non-verbal means of communication," and allows "an ad as an argument...that consists of only a visual image" (2008, pp. 514–515). What appears to be Pollaroli's considered view is more sensible. She says "in any case, images have a role in the text: they either present information relevant to argumentation in an accurate and concise way or have the rhetorical advantage to make the information more persuasive and forceful" (sec. 4). In other words, I think, this describes two possibilities: First, a purely (nonverbal) visual image may function as a component of an argument by being immediate evidence for a claim (as I illustrated above).

Second, a purely visual image may add rhetorical dimensions to an argument. But there is also a third possibility, illustrated by Leo Groarke:

A sign at a “pro-choice” abortion rally displays a macabre photo of a dead woman on a table with a coat hanger... Superimposed over the photo was a red circle with a line through it – the negation symbol a “No Smoking” sign might superimpose over an image of a burning cigarette. One might summarize the message as the claim that abortion should be legal because it is unacceptable to have women, like the woman in the poster, dying from back street abortions. (Groarke, 2005, p. 2)

The third possibility is that a purely (nonverbal) visual image may convey or communicate an argument by *associated* propositional content—here, the “message” Groarke summarizes.

One might get confused by this third possibility. For isn’t the nonverbal pro-choice sign just like the verbal sentence Groarke uses to state the argument in that both convey or communicate the argument? So why is the sign itself not an argument, while many would say the sentence itself is an argument? The most sensible answer seems to be that *neither* the sign nor the sentence is an argument; rather, it is their meaning or associated propositional content that is the argument. Arguments are abstract objects in the sense that they have no spatial properties, though like stories and games, they do have temporal properties (Smith and Moldovan, 2011). They are human intellectual creations with histories—consider John Searle’s Chinese Room Argument, for instance. A stark contrast between the pro-choice sign and the sentence Groarke uses to “summarize the message,” however, is that the sign is far more subject to different interpretations depending on background knowledge and assumptions: the propositional content is only loosely associated with the sign. Indeed, it doesn’t take a great amount of effort to imagine a “pro-life” argument being associated with the same sign Groarke describes.

## 2. ADS AS ARGUMENTS

Where the propositions in an argument are expressed by sentences, they are expressed by declarative sentences or assertions. So we should not agree with Pollaroli that a product advertisement argument may have “as the final conclusion the positive standpoint *Buy product X*” (sec. 2). This is an imperative or a command, not an assertion, so it cannot be the conclusion of an argument.

Pollaroli says that “advertising argumentation takes the form of practical reasoning...: the potential consumer has a goal and buying product X is a means to help fulfil[l] the goal, thus the potential consumer should buy product X” (sec. 2). But this form can’t be right, can it? It would make all advertising argumentation inherently fallacious, and not for the reason you might think, such as that by nature it all to some degree exaggerates, misleads, or deceives. Rather, the form would make all advertising argumentation inherently fallacious because, first, there might be other, equally good or better means to bring about the goal, and second, the goal itself might not be worth pursuing, or might even be an evil goal. Later, Pollaroli recognizes the first of these problems to some extent by adding a *ceteris paribus*

clause “because there might be other means to bring about the same goal” (sec. 5), though she does not say anything about the relative ranking of the different means. That there are other means to bring about the same goal does not matter if those other means are inferior.

Let us consider how a visual image in an ad may “have the rhetorical advantage to make the information more persuasive and forceful,” as Pollaroli puts it. About the Nike Air shoes ad, Pollaroli says it “is an example of visual metaphor...that condenses an argument from analogy” (sec. 5). This seems about right. But the ad does not consist entirely of a purely (nonverbal) visual image. The element of the six firefighters holding the shoe is only part of the ad. There is also the explicit verbal content. It consists of the Nike logo inside the shoe, the Nike Air logo at the top right, and the message at the bottom, which says “*The Air Essential. Something soft between you and the pavement.* INTRODUCING TWO NEW WALKING SHOES FROM NIKE WITH NIKE AIR CUSHIONING IN THE HEEL. THEY’RE VERY SAFE PLACES TO LAND.” (And there is some small print below the little shoe picture at the bottom right that I haven’t been able to decipher.) Pollaroli sees the argument from analogy as involving the maxim or corresponding conditional “if X belongs to the same functional genus of Y[,] and belonging to this genus proves to entail Z for Y, then Z is entailed for X too,” where X is the Nike shoes, the “functional genus” is “elastic surfaces,” Y is a firefighter “jumping sheet,” and Z is “protects people from impacts” (sec. 5). This paraphrases some of the explicit verbal/propositional content of the ad and combines it with some implicit propositional content, that is, propositional content that Pollaroli reasonably speculates would be associated with the ad.

Of course if the “visual metaphor” were removed and the ad was simply a direct statement of the argument from analogy, it is unlikely that it would sell shoes. How does the visual metaphor create a “rhetorical advantage,” making the ad “more persuasive and forceful”? A key to this, I believe yet I don’t see Pollaroli discussing, is that the visual image tells, or begins to tell, a brief fictional story that at least includes the idea that there are six firefighters holding up a Nike shoe. This is not so much what I have been calling ‘associated propositional content’ as it is something that you can *perceive*, simply by looking at the image and knowing what you are looking at, and knowing that firefighters don’t actually do such things.

This appears to mean that such ads can be placed at one end of the continuum of fictional narrative, with novels at the other end, and short stories, films, and plays somewhere more toward the middle. All parts of this continuum have affective force. An interesting feature of the continuum of fictional narrative, it seems, is that somewhere fairly early on—moving in the direction from such ads to novels—*believability* becomes a central criterion of assessment. Is the piece successful “make-believe”? In the case of novels, no doubt their distinctive power and sweep is their unrivaled potentiality for intricate plot and associated character development. But for any given plot/character development complex, we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true about the real world (of human psychology, action, and society) in order for the fictional complex to be believable? Because this is always a reasonable question to ask, and because it can be an unanalyzed datum or given that a novel is indeed believable, it seems a novel

can be an argument—a transcendental argument. Put a little more formally, I think the basic structure of the argument of a novel is this:

- (1) This story (complex) is believable.
- (2) This story is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world.
- (3) Therefore, such and such principles operate in the real world.

Two things to note about this sketch are, first, if indeed a novel can be an argument, the argument would have to be indirectly or implicitly expressed. For otherwise, the work's literary status (in the sense applied to fiction), and hence its status as a novel, would be called into question. The piece might be hard to distinguish, for example, from a work of philosophy built around an elaborate "thought experiment." Second, propositions must be in play before the question of believability can even be considered, because propositions are the objects of belief (what is believed), including "make-belief" (see my 2011 and 2012 for a fuller account of novels as arguments).

Understanding this novels' end of the continuum of fictional narrative allows us to better understand the other end where ads like the one for Nike Air shoes *lie*. Near to these ads on the continuum are short fables and parables. Short fables and parables, and especially the ads, are unrepresentative of the wider class of fictional narratives in that for such cases the question of believability hardly pertains. This is because the sequence of events described is so simple. There is almost no plot or character development. Whether the "story" is believable or unbelievable is not a significant question because the "story" is more like a caricature of a story. Nevertheless—like works of nonlinguistic art forms such as pure music and painting—short fables, parables, and ads may be moving or arresting. But this affective appeal especially allows short fables, parables, and ads also to be seductive and possibly misleading since they have a point or message, unlike a piece of pure music. One can be seduced into accepting the message for no good reason (cf. Govier and Ayers, 2012). Such perniciousness does not apply to longer fictional narratives insofar as believability implicates *truths* of human nature, even though longer fictional narratives have as much or more affective appeal.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the little story told by the Bosch ad for frost-free refrigerators is in fact deceptive. A web search reveals that, in full, the ad says "*If you have icebergs in your fridge, they are missing somewhere else.* The NoFrost-Technology prevents icing in the ice-compartment and saves energy. So icebergs remain in Antarctica." Accompanying this language are pictures of what vaguely appear to be icebergs in the freezer compartment of a refrigerator. In actuality, a manual defrost refrigerator consumes *less* energy than a frost-free one if it the owner regularly defrosts it to avoid the buildup of a significant ice blanket around the cooling coils. Such a blanket makes the system work harder to cool the compartment. A frost-free refrigerator functions by periodically *heating* the coils for a brief time, melting the ice and allowing the water to drain off.

I would like to thank Ms. Pollaroli for a stimulating paper.

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