Review of:
Paula Olmos, ed. *Narration as Argument*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Paula Olmos' edited volume brings together the major international scholars who work on narration, within and close to the field of Argumentation Theory. It offers a state-of-the-art overview of the approaches to narration, underlining both commonalities and differences. The book is divided in two parts: Part I is devoted to the philosophical issue of the justificatory power of narratives and their potential argumentativeness; Part II to «particular functions that unquestionably argumentatively-oriented narratives may play or particular practices that may benefit from the use of special kinds of narratives» (p. 2).

While I was reading the volume, Tony Blair's review of the same work appeared in *Argumentation* (Blair, 2019). Therefore, I refer to Blair's text for a detailed commentary of the chapters. Here I only sketch the content of the book and then look at it as a whole, as a contribution to understanding narration as an argumentative practice.

2. CONTENTS

After the introductory overview by the editor, Christopher Tindale (Chapter 2) argues that, to accommodate the notion of *narrative* argument, a dynamic understanding of *argument* is necessary. If an argument is a movement from premises to conclusions and from arguer to audience, then narratives can help the audience in this cognitive effort. Floris Bex and Trevor Bench-Capon (Chapter 3) instead take for granted that «stories can be powerful argumentative vehicles» (p. 31), and look at how they are deployed in analogical reasoning. They consider how stories function in the legal context, where they are powerful resources for presenting evidence. Chapter 4 by Michael Green and Chapter 5 by Gilbert Plumer both focus on the role of fictional narratives in persuasion, within the framework of literary cognitivism, a theory according to which literature can be a source of knowledge because it activates reflections in the reader that go beyond the fictive dimension. Plumer proposes three structures narratives can embody when used as arguments: analogies, suppositional or transcendental arguments. He further observes that arguments can also be a source of knowledge (p. 65). Eduardo de Bustos (Chapter 6) is interested in parables, i.e. conventional, semantically rigid stories with the purpose of conveying a moral, and in their cognitive similarity with metaphors. He considers parables extended metaphors, because they are not used to narrate something per se, but as "vessels of knowledge" (p. 84). Parables feature a storyline and a narrative structure, but «the actions are driven by an underlying metaphor and a projection between two domains» (p. 86). Thanks to the principle of invariance (Lakoff, 1990), parables can be used in argumentation: per analogy, their moral can be

transferred to the situation compared to them. De Bustos includes parables within the framework of pragma-dialectics as «supportive elements of an argument», which «seldom carry the burden of proof» (p. 94) and whose interpretation is strongly context-dependent. The justificatory power of narratives and their interplay with pragmatic arguments are the object of Paul van den Hoven's Chapter 7. Narration is a primary communication form, found in all societies from remote times onwards, whereas argumentation belongs to a more modern, scientific and structured world. The two modes can nonetheless be fruitfully combined to reach a broader audience and to communicate more effectively. Van den Hoven demonstrates their structural compatibility (p. 109) and shows how both modes can serve to justify actions. He presents as a case study a documentary on the Chinese-Japanese war in the 1930's.

Narratives about historical events and societal issues are central also to most of the following chapters, both as the core objects of investigation and as examples to which scholars apply their theoretical models. In these contributions, the importance of narration for public communication becomes evident. Leona Toker (Chapter 8) considers how historical testimony about gulags was transfigured in literature and became an argument in justification of political action in USSR. The linguists Adrien Frenay and Marion Carel (Chapter 9) use Semantic Blocks Theory (Carel, 2011) to demonstrate that argumentativeness and narrativeness are embedded in language and tightly intertwined. They analyze the article "L'Aigle survole le Rossignol" by Maurice Barrès (25.08.1914), showing how «narrative traits arise from the argumentative features» (p. 142). James Phelan (Chapter 10), taking a rhetorical approach, shows how narrative can be «a mode of argument in itself» (p. 177) or serve in support of arguments. His case study comes from an autobiographical publication by a doctor who advocates narrative medicine. The editor, Paula Olmos, moves to a narrative practice typical of the realm of natural science and philosophy: the thought experiment (Chapter 11). Thought experiments are necessary when one needs to discuss phenomena that cannot be materially implemented or reproduced, when results are expected to mismatch with predictions or when they would be so obvious that implementation would be superfluous. Despite the lack of implementation, thought experiments serve as arguments in scientific disputes, i.e. on subjects that are still controversial and thus cannot become object of scientific explanation. The book closes with a study of war narratives by Kvernbekk & Bøe-Hansen (Chapter 12). War narratives are composed by political actors to justify planned military action and convince a nation to support it. As such, they are rhetorical devices arising from a Bitzerian rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). As they have an exhortative function,

they are prospective before the war begins, i.e., they «project […] a future end-state» (Kvernbekk & Bøe-Hansen, this volume: 227). This structural peculiarity is nonetheless reversed during the war itself, because they become retrospective while adapting to the developing events over time. This puts narratives at risk of erosion: as events can contradict the predictions, the credibility of the narrator is weakened. During a war, the narrative moves from being evaluated on the basis of audience acceptance to undergoing scrutiny according to epistemic criteria.

3. FINDINGS

Paula Olmos' edited volume constitutes a milestone for the field, because it contributes to understanding narration as a communicative mode intertwined with argumentation. In many instances, it shows how argumentative categories and analytical tools can be applied to narratives, which proves an underlying structural similarity of the two modes. Furthermore, narratives are often instrumental to argumentation because they are more easily comprehensible to a broader public.

Of the several thought-provoking impulses and analysis proposed by the scholars contributing to this volume, two seem particularly useful for a broader reflection on the role of narratives in argumentation.

The first is understanding narration as action – «somebody trying to accomplish something by telling a story» (Phelan, this volume: 179), an action that can be performed by resorting to parables (Chapter 6), real stories (Chapter 10), imagined experiments (Chapter 11) or propaganda (Chapter 9). Therefore, narratives can be fruitfully deployed in pragmatic argumentation, as Tindale and van den Hoven (Chapters 2 and 7) underline. This is true especially for prospective narratives. We can see this in the case of war narratives (Chapter 9 and 12) and in scientific thought experiments (Chapter 11), which are predictive of a scientific phenomenon and used to convince the scientific community to act in a certain way.

The second aspect is the assumption of a structural correspondence between narration and pragmatic argumentation. Narratives could indeed be tested with the critical questions for pragmatic argumentation proposed in Chapter 7 (p. 108). For example, let us apply them to the article "L'Aigle survole le Rossignol", where the standpoint is that war is a fertile and fruitful means of regeneration for a corrupted society. Regeneration is a desired situation (answers critical question 1), war leads to regeneration (2) and it is realistically possible to carry out war (3). The risks and side

effects of undertaking war (4) do not seem to be taken seriously, though, and there must be a better way to achieve regeneration than declaring war (5), which might also not go against other fundamental values of a culture (6), but it is definitely not so in the eyes of the author.

All in all, if narratives are such a strong resource in pragmatic argumentation (even in domains as dangerous as military propaganda!), then it is crucial to investigate them in collaboration with other disciplines that deal with storytelling, besides literature. For instance, journalism and media studies, media linguistics, political and organizational communication scrutinize storytelling practices in real contexts of application, while also providing the basis for training future communication professionals. These disciplines could much profit from a more thorough analysis of the argumentative dimension in storytelling, while providing argumentation scholars with insightful data that could further the understanding of how people argue by narrating in real life.

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