

Gabriella Rava- Doctoral Thesis

Beyond Sectarianism: the Dynamics of Memory in Northern Irish Muralism

Abstract: The present research aims to analyze the famous political murals of Northern Ireland within a renewed frame that moves beyond the theoretical dimension that has dominated the study of mural painting in the province. Proposing the concept of ‘muralism’, which allows for the adoption of a systematic and unitary perspective on this well-rooted practice, this work investigates its contemporary development through the analysis of some functions/trends underlying it. These are identified as: commodification and heritagization, transnationalism, commemoration, archival impulse and the related digitization and archiving of images of murals. These functions/trends, which encompass muralism both within the realm of material culture and digital practices, fall within a theoretical model that describes muralism as a dynamic system through which the communities of Northern Ireland have embodied and transmitted their own collective memories, especially those of the conflict. It is within this model, which highlights the dynamic nature and (auto)poietic character of muralism as a system of memory, that the aforementioned functions/trends are examined, moving on multiple levels of manifestation. These include the level of the material practice of mural painting with all its significance and rhythm of change, the level of the dynamics of memory conveyed by muralism, but also that of the widely neglected online circulation and digital life of images of murals collected in (digital) archives. This wider perspective, grounded in the recent developments of the semiotics of memory, sociosemiotics and memory studies, allows for understanding the growing complexity of muralism in a society that is profoundly changing, while still struggling with the legacy of the conflict and its ‘ghostly’ or actual remnants. Aiming at ‘moving beyond’ sectarianism as the dominant frame within which the murals of Northern Ireland have been researched, this work attempts to fill some of the gaps in the study of these artefacts and their contemporary perception. Indeed, as an expression of the collective imaginary of the communities, muralism mirrors a much more fragmented reality that (re)images itself between the return of the past and a confident projection into the future.