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Beyond Sectarianism: the Dynamics of Memory in Northern Irish Muralism (by Gabriella Rava)

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This is a very thought-provoking PhD dissertation dealing in an original manner with a still under (fully) explored topic. It offers a suitable disentangling of both the plurality of functions/meanings of murals in contemporary Northern Ireland and an exhaustive conceptual account of muralism *per se*. The time frame is suitably selected. The main aim is clearly formulated, and the dissertation successfully disentangles the nuances and ends muralism is put to. The research and its findings go beyond the customary visual recording of these pieces of visual, mnemonic culture and engages thoroughly with the semantic intricacies and the various ends the murals are put to. Muralism is conceptualized through five functions/trends: commodification/heritagization, transnationalism, commemoration, archival impulse, and digitization. In this respect the approach is original, and it also goes beyond the state of the art by embarking into a more systematic engagement with the muralism as a unique form of political art with its own particularities. By overcoming the customary approaches of muralism - as various expressions of community-based arts and their treatment as another form of commemoration in a landscape marked by temporary or permanent memorials - the dissertation offers a nuanced approach to this subject matter, conceptualizing muralism as a highly fragmented system of representation that pertains both to their material formats and their digital afterlife. The argument of the dissertation is generally convincing and the conceptual and empirical approaches are in line with the main stated goals. The compelling argument about the multiples dynamisms of memory is fully unpacked and convincing by unveiling the plethora of the dynamics of memory, which transcends the single function of commemoration partially overlapping with the level of the different functions of muralism. Bringing to the fore front various level of dynamism in collective memory making and unmaking in the Northern Ireland mnemonic landscape illuminates the claim that, in their collective dimension, memories are not



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frozen and stable renderings about the past but rather mobile and dependant on a variety of factors. Collective memories are customarily defined as “shared representations” about the past and it is not fully clear how muralism can enhance this shareability in the future apart from the online medium of memory making.

The theoretical insights from memory studies and semiotics are nevertheless appropriate in framing the analysis of muralism(s) in Northern Ireland, yet I consider that the literature on memory studies is not engaged with to a sufficient extent. The dissertation mentions that memory studies can provide the tools to analyze muralism in a fresh and nuanced light but then it does not clearly elaborate on the concrete methods employed and on how exactly these methods will be applied to the units of analysis. The main weakness of this dissertation is a less convincing and detailed engagement with the methodology of memory studies and semiotics. The methods used should have been better reflected on in the analysis of the data. It now reads mainly as descriptions of events; objects and situations and it is hard to pinpoint how the methodological tools used have structured the case studies also because the sub-chapter on Work Methodology (from the Introduction) fails to elaborate convincingly on the concrete methods to be employed and how.

From a formal point of view, The PhD dissertation has a clear progression of ideas, and it makes some good use of topic sentences, transitions and keyword ‘signposts’ to move the points of writing forward. The writing is coherent, and structure allows for the smooth flow of the text. The interpretation of secondary literature is sophisticated and well integrated. Conceptually wise, the dissertation does not elaborate fully convincingly on what differentiates “mere political propaganda” from “political art” as there are enough examples of exquisite artistic productions created as propaganda tools. The dissertation states that “muralism has never been regarded as a (proper) form of art, but rather as mere (uncritical) propaganda” (p.10) “Uncritically” does not always make a piece of cultural production less art. A useful distinction would have been between political art that is propaganda from political art that is not propaganda. To illuminate this distinction more accurately the thesis



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would have benefited from a thorough engagement with the theories of political propaganda because the manipulation of symbols and representations may be classified upon different criteria and these criteria do matter. Political art is art that critically intervene in relations of power and it does not merely reflect on them. In its narrow, critical sense, political art is not merely a container of political messages (as propaganda is) but it is politically polyvalent. While the dissertation touches upon the political polyvalence of the murals it is less detailed and precise when it comes to the criteria based on which political propaganda unfolds.

The overall assessment of this PhD thesis is a positive one as the strengths are significant and the approach innovative. Considering this assessment, I recommend the PhD thesis for defense.

Doc. Maria-Alina Asavei, Associate Professor

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Maria-Alina Asavei'.

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