

# EPISTEMIC MODALITY IN THE VISUAL 'ART OF DISSENT': THE EXPRESSION OF 'REALISM' IN IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL SARDINIAN *MURALES*

ANTONIO PIGA  
UNIVERSITY OF CAGLIARI

**Abstract** – This study, part of an ongoing research project based on identity and authenticity in building the image of Sardinia in international tourist discourse, will focus on the active roles played by the 'language' (both visual and verbal) to "narrate the story of the many Sardinian identities and myths: rebellion against authority, ethnic uniqueness and strenuous protection of local values" (Fodde, in print).

The study tries to investigate the rationale that lies behind, and the rhetorical and pragmatic content of the social and political wall murals created between the late 60s and early 70s in Sardinia, as well as the representational function they have played not only as an instrument to describe class conflicts, but also the active role they have served in efforts to catalyze cultural support for the organization of political goals. Initially introduced in the late 60s to reproduce scenes of everyday life, wall murals quickly became the striking medium used by political activists to express themes beyond local events: criticism of the capitalist society, denunciation and social conquest, accompanied by a sensibility and by a feeling of disillusion concerning the Italian government's centralization policy. Therefore, a political, social and historical analysis of the main events that have led to this mural production is necessary to understand the wider context in which the factors and the dynamics of this form of "artification" (Cozzolino: 2014: 167) has acted. The methodology refers to modality as one of the key dimensions of "social semiotics" (van Leeuwen 2005: 91) and aims at analyzing the ways in which the symbolic contents of Sardinian murals create a communal self-identification, legitimizing this form of narrative to further ideological and political goals. In more specific terms, attention is called to the concept of epistemic modality of mural images, with the scope of providing a systematic and comprehensive account of the grammar of their visual design. By analyzing the formal elements and the structures of the murals' design, that is colour, perspective, framing, composition, and the texturing of their texts, this contribution aims to examine the ways in which mural images communicate meaning and create the truth or reality values of their representations.

**Keywords:** epistemic modality, social semiotics, murals, symbolism, ideology.

*Murs blancs, Peuple muet (anonymous)*

*Le mur appartient aux "demeurés", aux "inadaptés",  
aux révoltés, aux "simples", à tous ceux qui ont le cœur gros.*

*Il est le tableau noir de l'école buissonnière.  
Le mur refuge des interdits, donne la parole à ce aux qui sans lui,  
seraient condamnés au silence (Brassaï 2002: 152).*

## 1. Introduction

Sardinian's political and ideological *murales*, most adorning the walls of contested urban and countryside areas in the centre of the island, were, and still are, a striking medium employed by political activists of dissent to express their ideological messages and further their political goals. In spite of their commanding visual presence and the significant

volume of research which has been carried out to explain the “artification<sup>1</sup> process” of murals in Sardinia (Cozzolino 2014: 167; Barnoux 2011; Heinich 1998; Goodman 1977; etc.), few scholars have analyzed the deeper significance of the region’s murals or investigated the political part they have played in social class struggles (Rubanu and Fistrale 1998). Much of the literature on the murals, led by Buscaroli and Grossi (1977), De Bure (1981), etc. has focused on the murals’ role in expressing various social themes and sociological debates prevalent at a regional, but also at a global level. Caria (2001), Fancello *et al.* (1989), Olita and Pes (2006) have emphasized the murals’ role in representing social themes, and the way they are employed as an artistic expression, while some other scholars (e.g. Viola 2001, etc.) argue that they are a means of expressing identity, political and ethnic-regional and national-identity.

Against this background, the current work attempts to investigate the role that the production of Sardinian’s political and ideological murals played in not only expressing political, ethno-regional beliefs, and in actually constructing communal identities and ideological messages, but intends to do so from a social semiotic linguistic perspective (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; van Leeuwen 2005). Indeed, as will be explained in more detail below in 6., attention is called to the deep ‘reading’ of mural images, with the scope of providing a systematic and comprehensive account of the grammar of their visual design. By analyzing the formal elements and the structures of the murals’ design, that is colour, perspective, framing, composition, and the texturing of their texts – visual and verbal -, this contribution tries to examine the ways in which mural images communicate meaning, highlighting in particular the synergy of their grammar of language with that of visual communication.

Although at first Sardinia’s *murales* reproduced scenes of everyday life, rather quickly the themes presented have become largely political and economic: criticism of the capitalist society was accompanied by a third worldist sensibility and by a feeling of disillusionment towards the Italian government’s centralization policy. The episode which played a crucial role in introducing the mural idea centered on the question of Sardinia’s political and ideological status began in 1969 with the ‘struggle of Pratobello’.

The expression ‘Struggle of Pratobello’ or ‘Battle of Pratobello’ refers to the conflict that brought the residents of Orgosolo, a small village on the west coast of Sardinia, to the occupation and liberation from military control of Pratobello’s territorial pastures, an area sighted for the creation of a military base, following an agreement between the American and the Italian governments in 1969 for the creation of NATO range. Cfr: *Sa lotta de Pratobello, Circolo Giovanile di Orgosolo*, libro prodotto in serigrafia, Orgosolo (Nuoro), 1969. This struggle between competing political ideologies, the Italian and the American governments on the one hand, and the local inhabitants on the other hand, caused a tremendous amount of instability in the region politically, as the legitimacy of both the governments’ act was called into question. The conflict resulted in the proliferation of civil groups or organizations (the most important of which was *Il Circolo Giovanile d’Orgosolo*), often acting politically, although their competing sides have most often been identified and defined using cultural, rather than political criteria. These organizations claimed to represent and protect the interests of the local communities from which they drew their members, and sought to provide the security and safety of the pasture lands that the local community felt the Italian government was unable to supply because of too much servility and obsequiousness to the American government. The

<sup>1</sup> As far as the process of “artification” within the domain of sociology of art is concerned, cfr. Shapiro (2012).

political instability in the region was soon matched, however, by cultural instability within the local community itself, as people from the region struggled to create and characterize their own collective identities and ideological aims.

The creation of political and ideological murals in the village of Orgosolo, a practice which reached its peak at the end of the 60s and early 70s, was a highly visible part of this effort. Struggling with the crisis of the illegitimate and controversial occupation from military control of Pratobello's lands, organizations and groups turned to 'war' through murals in an effort to construct a narrative that would legitimize their ideological claims and help catalyze popular support for their political causes. In this respect, vibrant, vivid and conspicuous murals served as a means by which radical organizations and groups could gain support amongst the more neutral citizens. The decision to create political murals and the symbolic contents chosen by these organizations and groups reveal not only the political instability that was so evident in the area of Orgosolo, but also a deeper tension within the local communities themselves, as radical local organizations attempted to mobilize communities on a larger scale all over Sardinia, defining the problem primarily in cultural and educational terms, although their aims were of course to accomplish what were explicitly political aims. The narrative created and expressed through the mural tradition in Orgosolo accomplished this ambition, explicitly connecting the cultural with the political and thus furthering the ideological purposes of these organizations by openly reproducing but at the same time challenging the contested and opposed political order of the Italian and American governments.

This work will proceed with a discussion of the ways that the thematic content helped stimulate and sustain group formation, which will then be followed by the historical context within which the Sardinian murals tradition formed. A subsequent section will explore what such political and cultural expression meant for Sardinian society. The presentation of the theoretical and methodological framework will then follow, before turning to the linguistic analysis of the visual grammars of the murals.

## 2. Sociological theories of "Group-making"

As stated above in the Introduction, the contested issues of the 'struggle of Pratobello' were fundamentally political, but the competing side has most often been identified and defined using cultural rather than political tools and criteria. The emphasis on the making of a group which contrasted the decision of the Italian government and to neatly classify the "struggle of Pratobello" can cause significant problems for the study of Orgosolo's (and Sardinia's) political and cultural conflict. In his work on symbolic power and social space, Bourdieu (1989) illustrates many of the difficulties which are inherent in considering such groups as authentic and concrete entities (cfr. also Goalwin 2013). Bourdieu (1989) explains that academic and folk sociologies in general tend to take groups as a given, interpreting them as closely and unitary social actors with defined objectives and rational plan of actions.

In his analysis of class distinctions, Bourdieu (1989) maintains that these groups are socially constructed and internally dissimilar, in the sense that they are maintained through a dialectical relationship between the subjectivity of self representation and the objectivity of the social structural forms. As propounded by Bourdieu (1989), Brubaker (2004), Goalwin (2013), Brubaker (2004) applied this concept to the study of ethnic group and ethnic conflict. According to Brubaker (2004), studies of ethnic conflict almost automatically take vaguely defined ethnic groups and relate to them as reified organisms

engaged in effective struggles (cfr. also Goalwin 2013). Brubaker (2004) attempts to move forward the scholarly analysis of ethnicity and to go past the concept of reification, and claims that group-making is in reality a cultural, social and a political project. In other words, he states that: “ethnicity, race, and nation are ways of perceiving, interpreting, and reinterpreting the social world. They are not things *in* the world they are perspectives *on* the world” (Brubaker 2004: 17). Brubaker (2004) points out that the actors of ethnic and social struggle are not groups as such but various kinds of organizations, which draw their support from, and often claim to speak in the name of, larger ethnic communities, and that they are not coterminous with them.

Brubaker’s analysis of organizations and groups involved in political struggles and conflicts could be usefully applied to the study of Sardinia’s murals<sup>2</sup>, where a wide variety of political organizations and groups actively involved in the struggle claimed to stand for and speak on behalf of larger cultural groups, organization and communities which were less politically oriented and far more various and heterogeneous. This tension between civil organizations and groups on the one hand, and the Italian government with its law enforcement and institutions on the other, induced the social actors of the different civil organizations to engage in the type of group-making Brubaker (2004) delineates. In order to contrast the Italian government’s decision, local civil organizations engaged in significant propaganda endeavours, which were conceived to vehicle the local organizations’ messages and ideologies to the entire Sardinian population in ways that prompt group formation and mobilized popular support for the organizations’ political goals all over the island. Pragmatically, as a consequence, the more radical principles of the local political movements and organizations tried to gather larger consensus involving other, more neutral, communities to their causes. Otherwise stated, the “Battle of Pratobello”, although dangerous as it could well have brought about physical violence, was in fact fought as much through rhetoric and propaganda in what in Slukas’ words could be called a “war of words and symbols” (Sluka 1996: 8).

Art, generally speaking, has always been a very powerful instrument by which any kind of social movement expresses its own purposes and ideologies. In line with this perspective, for instance, many social movements have drawn upon a wide variety of artistic media (Goalwin 2013): this is the case, among many others, of the United States civil rights movement which emphasized music; the women’s movement employed poetry, and organizations such as Black Panthers used theatrical drama in their political movement (Goalwin 2013; Reed 2005). At the same time, murals themselves were pervasively employed in the 1960s by Chicano movements in the United States, and, in addition, they have also emerged spurring liberalism and radical political change in post-Apartheid in South Africa (Marchall 2007). The most striking features in all these is that such fruitful utilization of art combined constructive political mobilization with cultural issues (Goalwin 2013). According to Goalwin (2013), Sluka (1996), Reed (2005), artwork therefore is a medium which enables social movement activists to build an image of the world as they see it from their perspective, creating a narrative that can improve, characterize and define the movement itself. Art conveys political propaganda and expresses ‘our’ political view of the worlds, ‘our’ values and aspirations and criticizing those of the opponents. These types of efforts, with their explicit emphasis of culture “reveal the importance of culture and culture politics in social movement mobilization” (Goalwin 2013: 7). In accordance with this view, it can be said that artistic imagery has

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Goalwin (2013) who applied Brubaker’s analysis of group-making to the study of the conflict in Northern Ireland, where a great variety of paramilitary forces were actively involved in the battle.

the enormous privilege to provide and disseminate powerful cultural symbols around every mobilized movement and at the same time, every social movement organization, through the power of cultural symbols, which could use symbols to create larger cultural groups in support of their cause (cfr. Goalwin 2013).

The symbolic content associated with the murals thus played a central role in fostering and strengthening the sense of dissent and protest in the village of Orgosolo and throughout the island of Sardinia: political murals were a major form of symbolic representation, serving the crucial role of reactionary medium of the dominant and hegemonic Italian culture (read American culture) and imperialism. They were and still are today a powerful symbolic form of public expression representing the most obvious political art form against the other “clashing symbols” (Sluka 1996: 381) of the domination of Italian and particularly American culture – flags, anthems badges, bunting, etc. The principal issue underlying the use of these symbols is that they serve as “both offensive and defensive function, mark territory, educate, elicit support, and keep the struggle in both the public and individual’s mind’s eye” (Sluka 1996: 381). They represented a powerful visual medium for expressing resistance and dissent on the one hand, and the political dynamics of domination and imperialism on the other, and, by expressing ‘our’ political views, values and aspirations and criticizing those of the opponents, they conveyed political propaganda and built opposing narratives that supported their sides’ own ideologies.

### 3. History of the walls

The term “*murale*”, which is an adjective and a masculine noun in the Italian language, is hardly ever used in its plural form: in place of it Italian speakers often employ the Spanish word. A linguistic preference that is maintained not only by Sardinian speakers themselves, but, as it is possible to see by simply flipping through books and research articles dedicated to such paintings<sup>3</sup>, the Spanish term “*murales*” is widely used to refer to nearly all mural paintings created after the birth of the mural painting movement in Mexico and which is commonly known as “Mexican muralism”. For the purpose of this work, it has been decided to employ the term *murales* – or, alternatively, *murals* as defined in English-speaking countries<sup>4</sup> – as it seems to be much more appropriate to speak of *murales* (or *murals*) and not of *wall paintings* nor of *frescoes*, since these two terms do not refer to an object but to a technique and these are hardly used in the case of the Sardinian *murals* (Cozzolino 2014).

The question to pose is what exactly are the murals of Sardinia. They are paintings which are hand-made on an external wall of a building. As noted by Cozzolino (2014), this external placement of such paintings is a crucial point that differentiates them from other manifestations of mural paintings - such as for instance the Mexican paintings in which

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. for example Cozzolino (2014), Buscaroli and Grossi (1977), Rubanu and Fistrale (1998), Olita and Pes (2006).

<sup>4</sup>The author of this contribution is not dissociating the term murals from the term *murales* since this is a question of translating a word that refers to the same phenomenon. However, in line with Cozzolino (2014), in this contribution the word *murales* would be preferred - as these are called in Sardinia - when the reference is made specifically to the phenomenon in Sardinia, and the word *murals* when the author generally talks about the mural painting produced by this phenomenon. The choice is motivated by the fact that it wants to underline the linguistic preferences of the Sardinian people “to call the murals painting *murales* in order to affiliate them to a genre, and to a specific case: Mexical muralism” (Cozzolino 2014: 184).

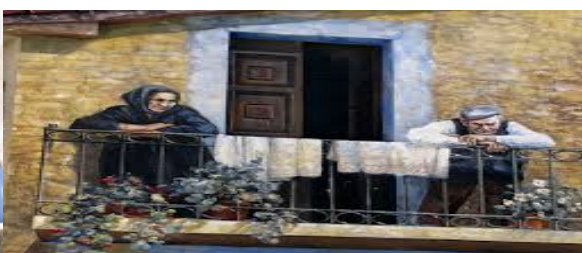
the murals are generally painted inside public buildings or semi-outside walls -, and thus this renders their presentation inherently public. As far as the walls themselves in which Sardinian murals are depicted, muralists are primarily dealing with walls on private properties, into which paint is applicable without any type of surface preparation. The Sardinian muralists' project was therefore mostly focused on the realization of an outdoor museum which put into images (and words) the state of mind of the locals and the cultural and political changes they were experiencing, thus trying to involve all people of the community with an echo beyond it. Based on the purpose and message that the muralist artist wants to divulge and reveal, the selection of the wall itself was the first step for a muralist. On some occasions, imperfections and defects of the wall, along with the presence of windows and balconies, stimulated new ideas for the artist, which were then integrated into the overall theme of the murals.

In order to better comprehend the extent and the proportions of the mural phenomenon being analysed in this contribution, it is noteworthy to review and consider some figures regarding the occurrence of *murales* in Sardinia; throughout the entire island mural paintings are found in more than seventy villages, achieving a total of about one thousand murals within the island's boundaries (cfr. Cozzolino 2014).

The origins of murals of great cultural and historical importance in Sardinia date back to the end of the 60s in the village of San Sperate, in the province of Cagliari, thanks to the pioneering work of a famous painter-sculptor, Pinuccio Sciola, who is considered to be the pioneer for introducing the influence of the Mexican muralism movement to Sardinia (Concu 2012; Olita and Pes 2006). Sciola, together with other artists, began to paint the old *làdiri* (mud-brick) walls of the historical centre, and his purpose was to create murals in the public space so that they would become a means of expression for the citizens and common people as well as a strategy for freeing art and bringing it outside the museum (Cozzolino 2014; Olita and Pes 2006). The subjects of the *murales* in San Sperate 'speak' about ordinary life of the common people as the images were mostly based on daily life or social and environmental motifs, as the example provided in Pictures 1, 2, 3 and 4 shown:



Picture 1. "ancient wisdom: sewing by hands"



Picture 2. An elderly couple standing on the balcony





Picture 3. A peasant with yoke oxen



Picture 4. Shepherds shearing sheep

However, it was not until the middle of the following decade that the tradition of murals found a prolific and a fertile ground for its own outstanding expansion in the area of Orgosolo, a small village situated at the very centre of the island, in the region of Barbagia. As noted in the Introduction, this is where the *murales* became: “the heirs and representatives of a strong activism of dissent that electrified the country between 1968 and 1970”, a period in which the effective activism of the local residents gave rise to the association commonly known as “Orgosolo’s Youth Club”, namely *Circolo Giovanile d’Orgosolo*. It was during the meetings of this association that militants forged the manifestos of opposition and affirmation that would adorn the walls of the region for several years in the form of *murales*. As already stated above, the thematic representation of Orgosolo’s murals differ considerably if compared with those which appeared in San Sperate, as they no longer represented scenes of everyday life, but showed essentially political or ideological scenes. This new wave, which could be defined as ‘activism-art’ or ‘political-and ideological-art’ and which will be the primary concern in this contribution, although principally focused on themes relevant to Sardinians, went subsequently beyond local events, depicting, as already pointed out above in the Introduction, images linked to criticisms of the capitalist society in general, imperialism and centralization policy, etc., as can be seen in Pictures 5 and 6 provided below:



Picture 5. In place of tractor to land to plough, we have tanks and cannon fodder now



Picture 6. Fertilizer not firearms

Today the area hosts nearly three hundred murals, most of which were influenced and inspired by social and political events and have become more and more significant attractions for national and international tourism (Cozzolino 2014; Satta 2001; Denti 2013; Fodde *in print*).

In the wake of the experience of Orgosolo, the art of muralism has proliferated in the various areas and villages of Sardinia, artistic festivals, congresses and conventions, fostering the creation of new murals took place at various locations throughout the island

(Denti 2013; Fodde *in print*). Today, the village of Orgosolo and its *murales* represent a unique open air museum where the many highly visible murals offer inhabitants and visitors from all over the world the opportunity to appreciate not only their beauty but also their deep messages in the context of the whole village (Denti 2013; Fodde *in print*).

#### 4. Corpus description and selection

The Corpus selected is represented by almost 90 *murales* chosen among the villages of Orgosolo, in the Province of Nuoro, and San Sperate, in the Province of Cagliari. Because many of the selected murals are untitled, and for the sake of understanding, in this contribution a title has been assigned to many of them. These walls ‘speak’ about local as well as global topics, and when images are not enough for appropriate visual communication they are filled by verbal texts and captions, thus becoming authentic multimodal constructions. There are three main different periods that could be identified in Sardinian muralism:

- I. the murals belonging to the early years, which are dated 1960s-1970s, and which deal with the local and global history narrative, for instance reproducing scenes of everyday life, but also showing political and social struggles;
- II. those belonging to the ‘80s-‘90s, in which the local history narrative is prevalent, for instance, stories of ordinary lives;
- III. ‘90s onwards, in which the main topics are again political and social struggle, and in which local history becomes again global history.

For the purpose of this study, only the murals of the early periods have been selected: in particular the murals of San Sperate, since they represent the birth of the muralist movement in Sardinia and those of Orgosolo, as they represent the first murals in Sardinia which portray political, social and ideological scenes relevant to Sardinians (for instance those related to the “Battle of Pratobello”), but which also dealt with national and international themes (feminist movement, American imperialism, governments’ centralization policy, etc.). The epistemic modality adopted in the representations is conformed to the genre of the message they are meant to convey.

### 5. Theoretical framework, methodology and aims

#### 5.1. Dimensions of semiotic analysis

The theoretical framework adopted in this study<sup>5</sup> is social semiotics. In more specific terms, this contribution refers to the concept of epistemic modality, which is the key to

<sup>5</sup> This contribution is part of an ongoing research project based on an identity and authenticity building process of the image of Sardinia in international tourist discourse. The aim of the overall project, called ‘The image of Sardinia in the International Tourist discourse: Authenticity, Communication and Marketing’, is that of analyzing the rhetorical and communicative strategies employed by tourist companies in the promotion of Sardinia from a social semiotic perspective.



studying how people use: “semiotic resources to create the truth or reality values of their representations, to communicate, for instance, whether they are to be taken as facts or fictions, proven truth or conjectures etc.” (van Leeuwen 2005: 91). According to van Leeuwen (2005), Hodge and Kress (1988), Kress and van Leeuwen (1999), there are four different dimensions of semiotic analysis: “discourse”, which is “the key to studying how semiotic resources are used to construct representation of what is going on in the world”; “genre”, which is “the key to studying how semiotic resources are used to enact communicative interactions – interactions that involve representations – whether face to face, as for instance in conversations [...] or at a remove of time and/place, as for instance through the means of books and other media”; “style” which is “the key to studying how people use semiotic resources to ‘perform’ genres, and to express their identities and values in doing so”; (van Leeuwen 2005: 91) and, as mentioned above, modality, which is the main concern in this paper. Although these four dimensions of social semiotics will be applied to Sardinian *murales* and will be discussed one by one in subsequent contributions, they never occur in isolation, unless, of course, for analytical reasons, and they are all always simultaneously all part of every single communicative event and every semiotic artifact. Only by looking at them simultaneously will it be possible to give an exhaustive and complete multi-dimensional image (van Leeuwen 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen 1999).

## 5.2 Modality

As it has been already featured and specified above in 5.1, this study refers to the dimension of social semiotics which deals with the question of truth or credibility of the representation, or representations. More specifically, the traditional subcategory of the semantic domain of modality which is typically defined in terms of the speaker’s or writer’s judgment on the truth and reliability of the message – any kind of message conveyed in different semiotic modes, e.g. visual, verbal, acoustic, etc. – is described as epistemic modality<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, one of the essential issues in communication is the question related to the reliability of the messages. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1999), a social semiotic theory of truth cannot assert to establish the supreme truth or untruth of a representation. Its function is limited to only show whether a given “proposition’ (visual verbal or otherwise) is represented as true or not” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 159). Accordingly, linguists and semioticians do not ask “How true is this?” but ‘*As how true is it represented?*’ (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 159). Otherwise stated, they are concerned not with the absolute truth of the real world but with the truth that as speakers, writers, painters, and every kind of sign producers see and conceive it and with the semiotic resources they employ to express it (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; Hodge and Kress

<sup>6</sup> The notion of modality comes from linguistics and has been employed in different ways in scientific literature (Palmer 2001; Frawley 2006; Egan and Weatherson 2011). Modality comprises three basic semantic dimensions: dynamic, deontic and epistemic. Dynamic modality is traditionally characterized as an ascription of a capacity to the subject-participant of the clause, in the sense that the subject-participant is able to perform the action expressed by the main verb (*that kid can sing*); deontic modality is traditionally defined in terms of permission and obligation (*We should be thankful for what she has done for us, so we must find a way to show our gratitude to her*); and epistemic modality, whose core definition concerns an indication of an estimation of the chances that the state of affairs expressed in the clause applies in the real world (*someone is knocking at the door. That will be John*) (Palmer 2001; Frawley 2006; Egan and Weatherson 2011).

1988; van Leeuwen 2005). Thus, from the viewpoint of social semiotics, truth is a construct of semiosis and nothing more; it concerns the reliability of the message, and as such is the truth of a particular social group or organization, arising from the values, beliefs and principles of that group or organization (cfr. Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; Hodge and Kress 1988; van Leeuwen 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen 2017). Kress and van Leeuwen (1999) point out that if the message produces a pertinent representation of the values and beliefs of that group, then communication proceeds in an “unremarkable, ‘felicitous’ fashion” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 159).

Whether based on a sort of imposition by an authority or alternatively by an authoritative text or on an agreement achieved in dialogue between a group of people, modality always entails two parties, which could be the speaker, writer or painter, on the one hand, and the hearer, reader or viewer on the other, who, voluntarily or reluctantly, falls in line with the agreed and accepted version (van Leeuwen 2005). Competing parties pursue to impose their own vision and definition of what counts as ‘true’ and ‘real’ in their struggle for social control (Hodge and Kress 1988: 147):

Social control rests on control over the representation of reality which is accepted as the basis for judgment and action [...] Whoever controls modality can control which version of reality will be selected out as the valid version in that semiotic process. All other versions can exist briefly but are deprived of force in the longer term unless a group refuses to let that force be negated. The sanction of modality ultimately has to its source in the agreement of a group of people.

The semiotic resources of modality hence have a significant role to play in the ruling of society. They enable people to build and share the truth they need in order to be able to constitute groups and organizations which believe the same things and can thus act and operate cohesively and adequately “in and on the world” (van Leeuwen 2005: 192). Moreover, they also enable people to downgrade the truths of other groups, with all the potential consequences that this aspect may have, i.e. isolating people out of a group, ideological wars, etc. (van Leeuwen 2005). By constructing or contesting knowledge systems of ‘truth’ or ‘falsehood’, epistemic modality creates shared truths (or falsehoods) aligning readers or listeners with some statements of knowledge and distancing them from others. In all this: “it [modality] serves to create an imaginary ‘we’. It says, as it were, these are the things ‘we’ consider true, and these are the things ‘we’ distance ourselves from [...]” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 160). Modality is consequently one of the crucial issues and one of the critical indicators of political and ideological struggle. It is the principal means employed to express contestation, and the *locus* of the working out, whether by imposition or negotiation, of every form of ideological system (Hodge and Kress 1988). It provides a central component of the intricate process related to the establishment of hegemonic systems: a pro hegemonic system “as through *sheer imposition* of meaning by the more powerful on the less powerful participants” (Hodge and Kress 1988: 123) [italics added]; or, as this work tries to demonstrate, a contra-hegemonic system through the active and effective participation of the less powerful social agents – ordinary people and common citizens of the village of Orgosolo and people of Sardinia in general – on the more powerful participant – the Italian and the American governments and institutions.

### 5.2.1. Visual modality markers

The study of epistemic modality started with the philosophy of language, as a concern with the absolute truth, and the context-independent truth of assertions (Eco 1976;

Bourdieu 1989). But it was within the field of linguistics that the interests in modality has traditionally centred systematically on a specific grammatical system, which is that of the modal auxiliaries, - *may*, *will*, and *must*, which neatly express three different degrees of modality: low, medium and high (Halliday 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). The linguistic resources for expressing modality clearly go well beyond the grammatical system of modal auxiliaries: these three degrees of modality, for instance, can also be expressed by means of other parts of speech, for example, by related nouns, *certainty*, *probability*, *possibility* – adjectives – for example, *certain*, *likely*, *possible* – and adverbs – for example, *certainly*, *probably*, *maybe*. It is however beyond the scope of this work to furnish a complete overview of modality in verbal language, the most significant points that have been illustrated will suffice for the purpose of this contribution.

As pointed out by Hodge and Kress (1988), the study of modality in verbal language on its own has therefore provided a socially oriented semiotics with a very precise and schematic model which in one respect could also be confusing and misleading for the study of the system of modality in general. Verbal language has a highly articulated system of specialized modality markers (cfr. Palmer 2001; Frawley 2006; Egan and Weatherson 2011), as well as context-specific regulations for their use, whilst other semiotic codes employ a range of modality markers which are less clearly articulated, and thus less specific (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress and van Leeuwen 1999). In addition, while on the one hand it is not the case that the reader/hearer's reassembling of modality markers perfectly correspond and are equal to that of the speaker/writer's, since, as pointed out by Hodge and Kress (1988), semiotic systems are characterized by their heterogeneity, not by their homogeneity, nonetheless: "both the level of agreement over the meaning of verbal markers of modality in a given context, and the possibility on deciding on that meaning by means of verbal language, are greater in the semiotic system of verbal language than in any other semiotic system" (Hodge and Kress 1988: 128).

However, the main points that have been illustrated above about modality systems as regards the verbal code hold true in all semiotic modes (visual, acoustic, etc.). Indeed, according to social semioticians (van Leeuwen 2005; Kress and van Leeuwen 1999; Kress 2010), modality is not restricted to language, but it is a multimodal concept, in the sense that all means of expression possess modality resources. In other words, the question of truth emerges in all of them "even if the kinds of truth they allow and the ways in which they express degrees of truth will be different" (van Leeuwen 1999: 165). In this respect, the concept of modality is equally significant in accounting for visual communication. Visuals texts exactly in the same way as verbal text can represent people, places and things as though they are authentic and real, as though they exist in this way in reality, or conversely as though they do not, for example as though they are fantasies, caricatures, imaginings, and the like. Moreover, even in this case, modality values and judgments are again not uprooted from society, but are social, dependent on what is believed as real in the social group for which the visual representation is primarily intended.

In keeping with this perspective, therefore, as with the structure of verbal modality, visual modality is realized by a complex interplay of the following visual cues (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 165):

- *Colour saturation*, a scale running from full colour saturation to the absence of colour, that is black and white;
- *Colour differentiation*, a scale running from a maximally diversified range of colours to monochrome;
- *Colour modulation*, a scale running from fully modulated colour, for example, with the use of many different shades of red, to plain, unmodulated colour;

Colour is thus a crucial component in surveying modality in visual communication. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 1999), for each one of the previous scales there is a continuum which runs from full colour saturation to the absence of colour, black and white, in which only the bright aspects of colours, “lightness or darkness” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 164) persists. The same holds true for “colour differentiation”, whose continuum runs from full colour differentiation to a “reduced palette” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 164) and in the end monochrome. Similarly, colour may also be idealised to a greater or lesser degree as for colour modulation, there is a set of things on a scale running from the choice of a different value of a colour for the representation of light and shade, which is typical, for example of naturalistic photography, to simply plain, flat and unmodulated colour. Therefore, while at one end of these sequences the peculiar dimension of colour decreases to the maximum, at the other end it is completely articulated and its potential is expressed through the maximum. Each point of the scale has a certain modality value in terms of the naturalistic coding orientation, which will be discussed in more detail below in 5.2.2.. Nevertheless, the position conveying the highest modality value does not correspond to either extremes of the scale: modality value in the naturalistic coding orientation grows as articulation increases, but at a certain point of the scale it reaches its maximum value and thereafter it decreases again (cfr. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; 1999).

There are other key markers of visual modality which are of particular relevance to this work and therefore need to be discussed:

- *Contextualization*, a scale running from the less to the most fully articulated and detailed background;

Within the naturalistic coding orientation the absence of any setting decreases modality. Indeed, by being “decontextualized” represented participants become generic, as if it were “a typical example”, rather than a specific, and linked to a particular location in a specific moment in time (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 54). At the same time, again, within the naturalistic coding orientation the most fully articulated contextualization lowers modality.

- *Representation*, a scale running from maximum abstraction to maximum representation of pictorial detail;

An image may present every detail of the represented participants, i.e. the pores in the skin, the strands of hair, etc., or it may be abstract from the detail to a greater or lesser extent. The same is true for representation, there is a specific point beyond which a further raise of detail means hyper realism and hence lower modality from the point of view of photographic depiction, or, as commonly known in social semiotic, naturalistic coding orientation.

- *Depth*, a scale running from the absence of depth *to maximally deep perspective*;

By considering the criteria of standard naturalism, the highest perspective is reached through central perspective, whereas depth created by overlapping only decreases modality value in visuals. Again, perspective can become “more than real”, as when strong convergence of vertical lines is shown, or a ‘fish eye’ perspective is used” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 166).

- *Illumination*, a scale running from the fullest representation of the play of light and shade of absence;

Naturalistic coding orientation shows represented participants as they are mantled by a

particular source of illumination. Non-naturalistic depictions, on the other hand, are abstracted from illumination and represent shadows only in so far as they are requested to model the volume and they have no explanation at all in terms of logic of illumination and lights. "They have 'shading' rather shadow" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 167). At the extreme end of the continuum, light can be abstracted from altogether and lines rather than shading are employed to signify receding contours.

- *Brightness*, a scale running from a maximum number of different degrees of brightness to just two: black and white, or dark grey and lighter grey, or two brightness values of the same colour;

Brightness is another epistemic modality value that can also contrast to a greater or lesser degree: in a depiction the difference between the darkest and the lightest area may be very prominent, for example, deep blacks, bright whites, in another one, on the other hand, it may be very slight, so that an indistinct and blurred effect is originated. Again, a contrast range of brightness values which exceeds from a naturalistic viewpoint may be experienced by the viewer of the image as more than real and thus as being of lower modality value.

As already highlighted above, it follows from this discussion that epistemic modality is realized by a very complex interplay of visual cues: the same depiction may be 'naturalistic' in one of several markers and 'abstract' in others.

Bearing all these notions in mind, the purpose of this contribution is to present a systematic account of epistemic modality of the murales of Orgosolo, focusing specifically on those murals depicting themes regarding ideological imagery, and political and social struggles. Located principally in the village of Orgosolo, the epicenter of the "battle of Pratobello", the dramatic visibility and physical presence of the murals conveying these thematic themes made them a natural medium for organizations and groups attempting to express their ideological messages to a wide audience as possible, not only as concerns regional local thematic content, but also considering political and social issues which went beyond local events. In creating political and ideological murals the painters reveal that they were political activists who paint, rather than painters who take on political themes. This point is a key factor in strengthening their beliefs and ideas, as well as in fortifying their organization and group-making, since this gave rise to the choice of powerful images which helped to craft and reinforce their version of reality, with all the potential consequences that this aspect might have in terms of the degree of 'truth' and 'credibility' of their messages, and hence in the value of epistemic modality of their representations.

As a first step of this survey the epistemic modality value of the *murales* of the "battle of Pratobello" will be analysed, then the analysis proceeds in surveying thematic of political and social struggle which were of global interests, i.e. feminist movement, war, imperialism, etc. Finally, a contrastive analysis between the murals expressing political and ideological dissent and those depicting images of ordinary lives, and social and environmental motifs will also be carried out. The aim in this specific case is to try to understand whether the expression of epistemic modality in Sardinian *murales* can also be related to genre.

However, before proceeding with the semiotic analysis of the corpus under investigation, a brief introduction to the concept of "coding orientation" (Bernstein 1981: 327), which was mentioned above, is worth considering for the purpose of this study.

### 5.2.2. Reality principle of “coding orientation”

‘What is considered and perceived as real’ in images, described so far in 5.2 above, refers to the value of modality markers in term of “naturalistic coding orientation” (Bernstein 1981: 327). As pointed out by Kress and van Leeuwen (1999), and van Leeuwen (2005), the capacity of modern colour photography to provide brightness, detail, colour, etc. “constitutes for our culture today a kind of standard for visual modality” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 168). As stated above in 5.2.1., when these yardsticks are exceeded, an image becomes ‘hyper-real’, which is the predominant modality in surrealism. It is as if people adopted ‘a point of view’ and saw things in perspective: “The world ‘as we see it’ [...] has become the measure for what is ‘real’ and ‘true’” (*ibid.*).

Visual modality, therefore, lies in culturally and historically regulated principles, which determine what ‘counts as real’ and what ‘does not’, and not on the objective coincidence of the visual image to a reality designated in some way independently of it. In this respect, Bernstein (1981: 327) defines coding orientation criterion as a “Set of different abstract principles which inform the way in which texts are coded by specific social groups, or within institutional context”. He distinguishes four coding orientations:

*A. Naturalistic coding orientation:* what we actually see from ‘the real world’.

*B. Sensory coding orientation:* is used in the context in which the pleasure principle is the dominant, certain kinds of art, fashion, advertising, cooking, and so on. In this, colour is a source of pleasure and affective meanings, and consequently it conveys high modality (vibrant reds, and so on). A whole psychology of colours has evolved to do this. Outward appearance.

*C. Abstract coding orientation:* is the code of ‘high art’. In such context modality is higher the more an image reduces the “individual to the general” and “the concrete to its essential qualities” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 170).

*D. Technological coding orientation:* which has as its dominant principle “the ‘effectiveness’ of the visual representation as a blueprint” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1999: 170). Whenever colour, for instance, is useless for scientific purpose of an image, it has lower modality.

The principles of “technological coding orientation” and “sensory coding orientation” do not apply to the murals under scrutiny, therefore they will not be taken into account as they mainly rely on identifying other kinds of messages in other visual genres.

## 6. Epistemic modality in Sardinian murals: analysis

The issue of epistemic modality becomes particularly complex in its application to Sardinian *murales*, since, to a large extent, it has been the task of many Sardinian muralists to redefine reality as they see it, and, to do so, most of the times in contradiction to naturalistic coding orientation. In this section, the intent is to attempt to discuss some of



the issues starting from Picture 7 below<sup>7</sup>, which was one of the first mural paintings which was depicted in the village of Orgosolo during the “struggle of Pratobello”.



Picture 7. A demonstration of citizens

The mural in Picture 7 depicts a political demonstration of quite a large crowd of people holding some posters of protest in their hands (the translation is provided in the footnote 7, below). From the point of view of the role of colour in a naturalistic coding orientation, the mural painting does clearly have low epistemic modality: colour saturation is greatly reduced to a dark shade of brown-red on the one hand, and white on the other hand, which generically can be simply classified as ‘black and white’, in which only the brightness of the colours, their ‘darkness’ or ‘lightness’ remains. Similarly, colour differentiation is seriously lessened to a ‘palette’ of a dark colour and a bright one, there is no diversification range of colours distinguishing objects, clothes, people, etc. At the same time, colour modulation is completely absent, colours are plain and flat, without the different shades of ‘black’ or ‘white’ and thus without intermediate tones, which is a typical feature of naturalistic photography.

The same role of colours conveying low modality features in naturalistic coding orientation seem to hold true for the mural painting presented below in Picture 8. Again, this *murale* appeared as an instrument of ideological ‘art of dissent’ during the “battle of Pratobello” and shows people holding a flag demonstrating against the creation of a new military base in Sardinia. From the point of view of colour differentiation, there is a general tendency to a reduced palette consisting almost exclusively of a monochrome of white, with some desaturated green for the foreground and blue for the distance. Colour saturation is restricted to the minimum with a prevalence of an unnatural white in the depiction of people, lowering therefore the modality and hence the ‘credibility’ from a photographic naturalism viewpoint. Modulation of colour seems to show a contrast between the plain and levelled unmodulated colour in the representation of people and some different shades of blue and green in the modulation of landscape and the sky. In other words, it can be said that colour modulation shows some low/medium modality from a naturalistic point of view when depicting the landscape, but it definitely expresses low modality when referring to the people – the agents and the core of the protest – who are again idealized.

In conclusion, to sum up, as far as the role of colours in both *murales* is concerned, it can be said that from the point of view of naturalism, epistemic modality is decreased in both mural paintings. The continuum from one extreme of the scale to the other extreme is at the same time a continuum from high to low modality. And in both cases the rule

<sup>7</sup> The verbal captions say: “Fascisti carogne, tornate nelle gogne”. “Uniti nella lotta”. “La Sardegna vuole rinascita non basi militari”. ‘Fascists swine. Go back to pillary’ ‘United in the struggle’. ‘Sardinia needs rebirth, not military bases’ [my translation].

applies: the greater the abstraction, which means away from saturation, differentiation and modulation, the lower the modality.



Picture 8. A demonstration of citizens

Now, the other key markers in visual epistemic modality will be discussed. As pointed out above in 5.2.1, another crucial component in the study of visual epistemic modality is “contextualization”. It was said that within the naturalistic coding orientation the absence of a setting lowers modality, conversely, within other coding orientations the opposite is the case. In Picture 7, the represented participants are shown without any setting, becoming a ‘typical example’, rather than a particular contingency, connected with a particular location and a specific moment in time. In abstract coding orientation such a type of decontextualization is valued as high epistemic modality as its function is “conceptual rather than presentational” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 55). In the *murale* presented in Picture 8, as can be observed, there is not a complete absence of a setting. However, epistemic modality is again low from a naturalistic perspective: indeed, as pointed out by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 55; cfr also Kress and van Leeuwen 1999), decontextualization in these specific cases is achieved through “ellipsis” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 55), in the sense that “a few ‘props’ suffice to suggest a setting” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 55); in Picture 8 the small and irregular shaped patch of green and the desaturated red under the figures of the represented participants, or the field of modulated colour depicting the sky in the background lowers epistemic modality from a naturalistic code, increasing it again from an abstract coding orientation.

Moving on to the concept of representation, which refers to the fact that an image may show every detail of the represented participants (the individual strands of hair, the pores in the skin, the creases in the clothes, the single leaves of the tree and so on), or it may be abstract from detail to a lesser or greater extent. In Picture 7 the texture of the image of the represented participants is stylized in some way, is rendered by lines which trace the folds of the clothes, and few and course curved and asymmetrical lines depicting faces and hats of the represented participants, as in quick or ready styles of drawings, displaying in so doing low modality from a naturalistic perspective. Picture 8 takes abstraction even further, and reduces the shape of things and people to a paradigm of highly abstract forms. Indeed, texture is almost omitted altogether: the represented participants are depicted merely by the lines that trace their contour. Moreover, the contours are simplified to different degrees: the heads become simply circles, the eyes two dots, and the mouth a simple straight line.

As regards illumination, naturalistic coding orientation represents participants as they are concerned and affected by a particular source of illumination. On the other hand, if images are less naturalistic, they may be abstract from illumination. In line with this

consideration, in Picture 7 shadow does not seem to have an explanation in terms of logic of illumination, in the sense that if the white part is to be considered the 'lit' part, and the black part is to be interpreted as the shadow part, they lack the sense of being correct and reasonable, as sometimes one stands on the left of the represented participants, sometimes on the right. Picture 8 shows some shadow only insofar as they are required to model the round forms of the represented participants. They show "shading" rather 'shadow" (Cfr. Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 56). Epistemic modality decreases therefore in both images from the point of view of photographic naturalism, enhancing again its level of abstractionism from the principles of abstract coding.

Closely related to the scale of illumination is the parameter of brightness value. The brightness value represents a scale running from a maximum number of diverse degrees of brightness to just two degrees, black and white, dark grey or lighter grey, and the like. In Picture 7 nuances of different degrees of brightness lack in the depiction as there are only two degrees: 'black' and 'white'. In Picture 8, the contrasts between 'dark' and 'bright' seems to be completely absent. This aspect once again increases epistemic modality from the abstract coding orientation and conversely lowers it from the natural coding orientation. It is important to note, however, that, as pointed out by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 1999), the ability of photography to render black as black and white as white is limited, as is its capacity to differentiate brightness value.

The last epistemic modality cue that will be discussed is depth. Depth is the scale going from complete absence to a maximally deep perspective. In both Pictures, 7 and 8, depth is the only visual cue which seems to be high by the criteria of standard naturalism. Indeed, in both pictures the presence of a central depth conveys highest modality from a naturalistic code.

It follows from this discussion that in certain cases, an image may be 'abstract' in one or several dimensions and 'naturalistic' in one or others, as in this last case as concerns the visual cue of depth. However, by virtue of almost all visual cues examined, it is beyond doubt that the *murales* under scrutiny have been depicted as forms of abstraction. The potential viewer sees, not so much 'people demonstrating' specifically during the "battle of Pratobello" in a photographic sense, but as 'people demonstrating'; their essential qualities, namely 'demonstration', 'protest', 'dissent' in general, against imperialism, abuse of power, colonialism, etc. Thus the *murales* represent an abstract truth about 'protest' and 'dissent'. As such both *murales*, although they show low credibility from a naturalistic perspective, within the abstract coding orientation they have high epistemic modality, high credibility: they probe behind appearances, bring out the essential and the general. In order to recognize this aspect, it is not necessary to view these representations of 'people protesting during the "Battle of Pratobello" as credible and true. It acknowledges that the representations are presented as true in a much noble 'high art', that is the abstract coding orientation. This aspect has important implications from the point of view of the 'truth' and 'credibility' of the message conveyed, as will be discussed in more detail below.

The next examples that will be analyzed are Picture 5 and Picture 6, which for the sake of convenience will be repeated here as Picture 9 and Picture 10. Both appeared again during the "Battle of Pratobello". As it is possible to see, the *murale* contains a verbal caption in the Sardinian language, which describes very well the conflict that brought the residents of Orgosolo to the occupation and liberation from military control of Pratobello's territorial pastures, an area, as discussed above in the Introduction, sighted for a military

base, after which an agreement between the American and the Italian governments was signed<sup>8</sup>.



Picture 9. Occupation by military control of Pratobello's territorial pastures

Again, to the modern eye the mural in Picture 9 has a reduced 'credibility' from a naturalistic code. Colour saturation tends to be reduced to simply black and white, with a 'palette' of desaturated 'yellow' to depict part of the setting, including the military car and the woman in front. Colour differentiation is also lessened in degree with some unnatural differences which leans the to the abstract code. In addition, there does not seem to be shades of black and white or 'yellow', but plain, flat and unmodulated nuances which once more decrease modality in natural code and increases abstraction from reality. In Picture 10, which depicts a single protester holding a notice which states "Concimi non proiettili" ('Fertilizer not firearms') [my translation], colour differentiation is reduced to a monochrome, with unmodulation of nuances of a shade of 'blue' to a greater or lesser extent. Colour saturation seems to be full, in so doing this feature may pertain to the naturalistic coding orientation, but once again is an abnormal saturation covering unnaturally all parts of the picture, including the face of some of the represented participants. Therefore, from the point of view of colours in a photographic naturalism both *murales* can be labelled as 'unrealistic' depictions.

Moving on to the setting, the contextualization represented in Picture 9 is meant to be again a 'lack of realism'. Some of the elements to convey that sense are a simplified background, a compression of details and some minor distortions. Decontextualization is reached once more through "ellipsis" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:55): an irregular and distorted patch of an unmodulated colour under the feet of the represented participants, while the rest of the depiction above is left blank. In Picture 10 the represented participant is shown in a void and thus by being completely decontextualized, the image conveys low epistemic modality in a naturalistic mode. Therefore, for 'viewers at large', since both

<sup>8</sup> The verbal caption says in the Sardinian language: "Imbezze de trattores pro arare arriban carrarmados e cannones e truppas de masellu d'addestrare". 'In place of tractors to land to plough, we have tanks, slaughtering troops to train and cannon fodder now' [my translation].





Picture 10. A protester holding a notice

murals do not have a relation of affinity with the mimetic sets of values of a 'real' setting and context, they lack realism, and thus signal, at least from a contextualization viewpoint, the images' fictionality, and the fact that these are not appropriate contexts in a naturalistic coding orientation. The general point to be made is that in a common-sense view, 'realism' in a visual semiotics corresponds to 'truth' in verbal semiotics, a realistic visual representation is also likely to be seen as true (Hodge and Kress 1988), and this is not the case as far as the contextualization in both *murales* under scrutiny is concerned.

Of the representation of figures, in Picture 9 the represented participants, the 'bad boys' (the soldiers) are rendered more realistically than for instance the 'good boys' (the citizens protesting) in Pictures 7 and 8 examined above, with less distortions: their eyes, ears, limbs, are drawn in realistic convention from a photographic naturalism. It seems as if, in a certain sense and in certain cases, the naughtier a character is, the more realistic the depiction is, that is, the higher the modality of affinity of the drawing style in a naturalistic code. This high modality representational feature in Picture 9 may serve to signal the affinity of the depiction with the mimetic values of proximity and contingency of the real – in the true sense of the word – in which a threatening anti-world is really present factually and materially. The motives, actions, force and operation of this group of 'bad boys' are therefore drawn more realistically and seem to be very credible from a naturalistic perspective, along with the terror they bring for the locals. However, at the same time, and in contrast with the representation in Pictures 7 and 8, in Picture 10, even the 'good boy' (the protester) shows every detail and tends to be drawn more realistically to signify an acquired dignity as human, in contrast with the massified puppets of protesters shown in Picture 8<sup>9</sup>. In spite of this, the modality of both Pictures 9 and 10 is meant to be abstract. Although the articulation of details is photographic, the pictures have a strongly reduced colour, and a background with a vivid monochromatism in Picture 10.

The Illumination value in Picture 9 seems to confer to the mural low naturalistic modality. There are some shadings to indicate receding areas and some highlights to indicate protruding areas in terms which have no explanation of the logic of illumination. The mural in Picture 10 again with its modulated darkening of some areas and some brightness for the 'lit' areas seems show no real logic of illumination, hence conferring low epistemic modality.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to point out that the *murale* in Picture 10 is subsequent to the *murales* 7 and 8. Indeed, it appears some time later; the first one to be drawn showing people protesting was the *murale* represented in Picture 8. As can be noted, from the representation of heads as simple circle, eyes two dots, and mouth horizontal line, the people demonstrating tend to be conferred more and more human features and dignity.

As concerns the scale of brightness value, Picture 9 seems to have just two degrees of brightness values, black and white, and thus low modality; while Picture 10 seems to possess two brightness values of the same colour, which once more means low modality from the point of view of naturalistic coding orientation.

Finally, depth. By the criteria of standard naturalism, Picture 9 does not seem to have high modality: it has central perspective, but at the same time there is almost a complete absence of background. Picture 10 has no depth, so low modality.

As was noted above, the same image may be ‘abstract’ in one or several epistemic modality markers, and ‘naturalistic’ in others. And this seemed to be the case of the murals under scrutiny. The marker of “representation”, for instance, was high in naturalistic code in both Pictures 9 and 10; even “depth” conferred, at least in Picture 9, medium-high modality in photographic naturalism. However, ‘viewers at large’ are likely to judge the *murales* 9 and 10 as ‘abstract’ and ‘less than real’, since the majority set of epistemic modality markers involved in these drawings style signify ‘lack of realism’. In other words, for people as viewers, the epistemic modality markers serve to signal their affinity with the mimetic value realized by an image with the real world (Hodge and Kress 1988), and thus to establish relations of realism and naturalism from the absent but strongly implied word presented in the images.

The following are other examples of *murales* of Orgosolo which, although not strictly related to the “Battle of Pratobello”, present essentially political and ideological scenes of social struggles relevant not only to Sardinians, but go beyond local and regional level. Picture 11, for instance, depicts women demonstrating *pro* their rights to equality at work and in the family<sup>10</sup>, Picture 12 is again devoted to a theme which is in some way related to the “Battle of Pratobello”, namely a strong criticism against the war in Vietnam and a serious disapproval and condemnation *versus* American imperialism in general<sup>11</sup>.



Picture 11. Demonstration *pro* emancipation of women    Picture 12. A criticism of American imperialism

For plausible reasons of space, epistemic modality values in Pictures 11 and 12 will not be analysed in depth, however, for ‘readers of images at large’ the entire set of modality features entailed in the portrayal style of the latter two *murales* are likely to be judged in a way that is not ‘like real life’. Both of them lack the mimetic contents and values which mirror the ‘authentic world’ and the reality to which it ostensibly refers.

<sup>10</sup> There are two verbal captions written in Italian. The first one states: “Donne unite per l’emancipazione e la liberazione e una parità reale nella famiglia e nel mondo del lavoro” (‘women united for their emancipation, liberation deliverance and true equality in the home and at work’); the second one says “Donne e uomini uniti nella lotta” (Men and women united in the struggle).

<sup>11</sup> The verbal caption states in Italian: “via i fascisti ameri-cani da Vietnam”. It is interesting to note the division into two syllables of the word “america-cani” to emphasize the word ‘cani’ (dogs) in Italian. A possible translation could be ‘out out out! Fascist dogs of Ameri-cur from Vietnam’.



To conclude this section, a brief contrastive epistemic modality analysis between the *murales* presented below in Pictures from 13 to 16 – including those presented above from 1 to 4 – and those presented in Pictures from 5 to 12 will be discussed.



Picture 13. An elderly man playing *launeddas*



Picture 14. A hunter



Picture 15. Peasants harvesting fruits



Picture 16. A peasant coming home from the countryside

As can be noted, the realization of epistemic modality in the *murales* depicting images of everyday life is accomplished through the “naturalistic coding orientation”, while, on the other hand, in the *murales* representing ideological images, and social and political struggles, epistemic modality is achieved, through a greater or lesser extent, by means of “abstract coding orientation”. In other words, the *murales* having detailed naturalistic representation are indexical, as they resemble reality, thus increasing, factuality, proximity, documentary information (contemporary); on the other hand, the *murales* displaying monochrome drawings, same colour continuum, absence of colour modulation convey ‘essentiality’, ‘universality’, ‘timelessness’, and hence symbolism, thus communicating ‘the spirit of the political activists’, ‘the essence of dissent’, ‘the emblem of social and political criticism’ as universal messages against abuse of power, imperialism, and a strong disapproval of the capitalist society. Naturalistic coding in murals represent the world only superficially, “in terms of outward appearances rather than its inner reality” (Williams 1976: 260). Abstract coding, on the other hand, can encompass or highlight hidden or underlying impulses or/and compulsion or movements, which simply “naturalistic coding orientation” could not pick up and which is the purpose of ‘abstract coding’ to discover and express (cfr. Williams 1976).

Therefore, this symbolic function of murals of criticism played a crucial role in perpetuating and strengthening opposing narrative against the Italian and American centralization governments; muralists crafted dissent by employing cultural weapons and symbols in a way that supported their own side ideologies. The images that muralists chose serve as semiotic signifiers and reflected the creators’ efforts to feed, shape and solidify cohesive group identity and mobilize organization support for political efforts not only at a local but also at an international level. This ‘art of dissent’ symbolizes the

citizens' social cohesions, and inculcate and promote the citizens' beliefs and value system, defending their political and ideological goals, as well as helping to frame their movements, ideas and actions, in an effort to appeal to audiences in Sardinia, Italy and abroad.

Political and ideological criticism during the “Battle of Pratobello” were conveyed in Sardinia through a variety of media including literature, language and, of course, political actions, but the creation of *murales* was one of the most striking and effective means of political expression, a significant medium which has become emblematic of the sensibility and feeling of disillusionment of Sardinians towards the Italian government and the American imperialism and abuse of power. Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power (1989) argues that symbolic struggles over the perception of society can take two different forms: objectively and subjectively. As far as the former is concerned, actors can use symbolic power “to exhibit a group, its size, its strength, its cohesiveness, to make it exist visibly”; as concerns the latter, actors can try to “transform categories of perception and appreciation of the social world, the cognitive and evaluative structures through which it is constructed” (Bourdieu 1989: 19). Ideological and political *murales* in Sardinia performed in both ways and targeted two separate audiences at once, serving as both internal and external purposes. Subjectively, murals were (and still are) a crucial component of symbolic messages: they conveyed and expressed ideologies, represented communities, and served as a means of characterizing self-identity for the mainstream of political movements of the organizations and groups of dissent. In this perspective, mural creation provided a vital medium in the social, cultural and political project of group making (Goalwin 2013; Brubaker 2004), as they worked to establish social cohesion and legitimize beliefs, policies, and institutions. Objectively, *murales* also address an external audience, in the sense that they attempt to make visible the movements' symbolic messages, becoming a key factor in the expression of their ideas and crucial weapons in the “art of words and symbols” and in their building an “act of war on the walls” (Sluka 1996: 387; cfr. also Goalwin 2013).

## 7. Concluding remarks

The expression of epistemic modality in Orgosolo's political and ideological murals, which appeared first in Sardinia during “the battle of Pratobello”, is a complex interplay of different visual cues. From a naturalist coding orientation these mural depictions seem to have comparatively low modality, in the sense that they express ‘credibility and truth’ that are ‘less than real’: colour differentiation, modulation and saturation are greatly reduced; in addition, setting, illumination, brightness are shown in a plain, unmodulated background, along with the irregular and illogical patterns of light and shade, and the use of few ‘props’ to suggest a setting. On the other hand, if analysed from the point of view of abstract coding orientation, epistemic modality increases in such images, which thus show high credibility of the representations they contain.

The comparison between the first murals of Sardinia, which appeared in San Sperate and which are mostly based on daily life or social and environmental motifs, and the murals of the village of Orgosolo, which display essentially political and ideological scenes, show a striking contrast in terms of epistemic modality value. In the murals of San Sperate, ‘credibility’ is achieved through naturalist modality, which is more or less as follows: the more an image of something resembles the way in which viewers would see it in reality, from a specific point of view and under specific conditions of illumination, the higher the modality (cfr. Van Leeuwen 2005). In the murals of Orgosolo, on the other

hand, 'credibility' is achieved through abstract modality, which is the representation of the 'essence' of what is depicted. In other words, the murals of San Sperate are an indexical representation of reality, in which the sign is caused by its referent; their detailed naturalistic representation provides high modality in naturalistic code, making these images similar to a photographic naturalism, thus increasing, factuality, proximity, documentary information and contingency. The murals of Orgosolo, on the other hand, are 'symbolic' representations of reality, they convey 'essentiality', 'universality' and 'timelessness' to their representations, hence communicating 'the spirit of something', 'the essence of it looks like', as universal messages.

These vibrant and visible wall murals that proliferated in Orgosolo during the "battle of Pratobello" were one means by which organizations could powerfully express the 'essence' of their political messages universally and claim for the necessity of continued support for their cause, not only throughout Sardinia, but also in the rest of Italy as well as abroad. Such organizations and groups relied upon visual imagery exactly for this reason, namely, as a means of connecting cultural support to political organizations and aims, building and supporting narratives that could craft their identities for larger communities from which they sought support. In this respect, murals functioned both objectively and subjectively, in the sense that they were intended to address both external and internal audiences, as they sought "to construct new identities in which political organizations and cultural identities were inextricably linked" (Goalwin 2013: 49).

## References

- Barnoux Y. 2001, *Murales de la Sardaigne*, Ettore Gasperini Editore, Cagliari.
- Bernstein B. 1981, *Codes, modalities, and the process, of cultural, reproduction: a model*, in "Language and Society" 10 pp. 327-363.
- Bourdieu P. 1989, *Social Space and Symbolic Power*, in *Sociological Theory*, 7 [1], pp. 14-25.
- Braissai 2002, *Graffiti*, Flammarion, London.
- Brubaker R. 2004, *Ethnicity Without Group*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Buscaroli Fabbri S., Grossi C. 1977, *Murales*, Grafis, Bologna.
- Caria M. 2001, *Il colore della comunicazione, Arte e società nei murales di Sardegna*, in Fadda A., Università di Sassari.
- Concu G. 2012, *L'Arte del muralismo in Sardegna*. Imago Multimedia, Nuoro.
- Cozzolino F. 2014, *Observing the Artification Process: The case of Murales in Sardinia*, in Sarmiento C. and Campos R. (eds.), *Popular and Visual Culture. Design, Circulation and Consumption*, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, Cambridge pp. 167-187.
- Denti O. 2013, *Cross-cultural Representations in Tourism Discourse*, Aipsa Edizioni, Cagliari.
- De Bure G. 1981, *Murales, cultura delle strade*, Silvana Editoriale, Milano.
- Eco U. 1976, *The Role of the Reader*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Egan A., Weatherson B. 2011 (eds.), *Epistemic Modality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Fancello A, Fiori M., Greco S., Nobile S., Secci A. 1989, *I murales di Orgosolo*, in Baldelli B., Università di Firenze.
- Fodde L. *Accessibility through the staging of authenticity in tourist discourse* (forthcoming).
- Frawley W. 2006 (ed.), *The Expression of Modality*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Goalwin G. 2013, *The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland's Political Murals, 1979-1998*, in "International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society" 26 [3] pp. 1-53.
- Goodman N. 1977, "When is art?", in Perkins D. e Leonard B (eds.), *The Arts and Cognition*, John Opkins UP, Baltimore, pp. 11-19.
- Halliday M.A.K. 1994, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Arnold, London.
- Halliday M.A.K., Matthiessen C.M.I.M 2004, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Arnold, London.
- Heinich N. 1998, *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain*, éd Minuit, Paris.
- Hodge R., Kress G. 1988, *Social Semiotics*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Kress G. 2010, *Multimodality. A social semiotic approach to communication*, Routledge, New York.
- Kress G., van Leeuwen T. 1996, *Reading Images*. Victoria, Deaking University Press.
- Kress G., van Leeuwen T. 1999, *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*, Routledge, New York.
- Kress G., van Leeuwen T. 2017, *Multimodal Discourse. The mode and media of contemporary communication*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London.
- Marschall S. 2007, *a Postcolonial Reading of Mural Art in South Africa*, in "Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies 14 [2], pp. 96-121.
- Olita O., Pes N. 2006, *San Sperate, all'origine dei murales*, AM&D eds., Cagliari.
- Palmer F.R. 2001, *Mood and Modality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Reed T.V. 2005, *the Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Street of Seattle*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Rubanu P., Fistrale G. 1998, *I murales politici della Sardegna*, Massari Editore, Bolsena.
- Satta G. 2001, *Turisti ad Orgosolo*, Liguori, Napoli.
- Shapiro R. 2012, "Avant-Propos", in Shapiro R., and Heinich N. (eds.), *De l'artification. Enquêtes sur le passage à l'art*, EHESS, Paris.
- Sluka J. 1996, *The Writing's on the Wall. Peace Process Images, symbols and Murals in Northern Ireland*, in "Critique of Anthropology", 16 [4], 381-394.
- Van Leeuwen T. 2005, *Introducing Social Semiotics*, Routledge, New York.
- Viola M. 2001, *Il muralismo sardo fra arte, politica e turismo*, in Romitelli V., Università di Bologna.
- Williams R. 1976, *Keywords*, Fontana, London.

**Bionote:** Antonio Piga holds a PhD in Linguistics obtained at the University of Naples Federico II. He is a lecturer in general Linguistics and English Language at the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics of the University of Cagliari, where he also teaches Translation studies. His primary research interests lie in contrastive Linguistics (Italian and English Linguistics), institutional and interinstitutional language of the European Union, interlanguages, code-switching, Italian language, dialects, social semiotics, English for Special Purpose (institutional discourse, legal discourse, and discourse of tourism).

**Author's address:** [antoniopiga@unica.it](mailto:antoniopiga@unica.it)