

# Mural Art as a Media for Social Criticism: Perspective Structuralist-Constructivism

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# Mural Art as a Media for Social Criticism: Perspective Structuralist-Constructivism

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of delivering messages through mural art occurs in the social life of the Indonesian people, and is used as a medium for social criticism in the public sphere. The purpose of this study is to find the meaning of social criticism that is carried out through the media of mural art and to find the shift in values that occurs in mural art. Based on the research objectives, this research is a qualitative research with a structuralist-constructivism approach from Pierre Bourdieu. Data were collected through observation and in-depth interviews with mural artists community. The theories used to understand, criticize, find meaning and find shifts in the value of mural art are the Habitus Theory and the Cultural Production Theory. This study found that social criticism conveyed through the media of mural art has an economic meaning, a meaning of community popularity, and a meaning of freedom. While the shift that occurred, this study found that mural art, which was originally an artist's expression as a monumental work, shifted to a commodified and contemporary work.

**Keywords:** *Mural Art, Social Criticism, Meaning, Structuralist, Constructivism*

## INTRODUCTION

The development of public knowledge has encouraged efforts to obtain information quickly and accurately at various scales. The information needed is not only in the form of numbers, but information can also be obtained from visual media. Information in the form of visual media becomes a special attraction for the public as image connoisseurs, relating to various events and interesting information to see. Information can be used to create a better life, because with information the various problems to be conveyed can be presented in a clear, directed and measurable manner by linking the text and its context. Visual media, which are often used to communicate problems and follow global changes, are packaged by artists in an attractive manner with delivery techniques that can captivate ordinary people. Changes in the media in the delivery of problems, is a social change that hit society. According to Ritzer (2003) social change is a change in behavior, social relations, institutions, and social structures at a certain time.

Society as part of the state cannot be avoided from the problems faced by the state where the community lives. To express their aspirations or opinions on the problems faced by the state, the public can use their aesthetic abilities through visual media. Visual media that contain aesthetic value are often used by the public to convey their aspirations or opinions in the form of murals. Mural art is the art of drawing using wall media. Besides having an aesthetic value that can beautify an area, murals are also one of the effective media to convey messages. In addition, murals are considered capable of disseminating aspirations to enter the public sphere. Murals cannot stand alone, but murals are accompanied by the presence of various types of meaning. For the makers, murals are presented in a visual form that is full of symbols, signs, codes, and meanings. The visually depicted messages are conveyed in a unique and creative way through scribbles on pictures and writings using social, political, quote-related themes, to those that were trending when the mural was made. According to

Sutrisno and Verhaak (1993: 81) to assess beauty (aesthetics) there are two approaches that can be used, namely directly assessing the beauty in objects and objects or beautiful nature, as well as works of art; and highlighting the situation of contemplation of the beautiful feeling that is being experienced by the subject (the experience of beauty in the person).

Mural comes from the word '*murus*', which is Latin which means wall. In a contemporary perspective, a mural is a large size painting, designed on a wall (interior or exterior), ceiling, or other flat area. The murals are thought to have appeared 30,000 years BC. A number of prehistoric drawings on the cave walls of Altamira in Spain and Lascaux in France, depicting acts of hunting, gathering and religious activity, are often considered a form of first-generation murals. Murals can be found on city walls, office buildings, school walls, cafe decorations to restaurants, they can be in the form of cartoons, humans or animals. Mural is also an alternative mass media which is classified as hot media. In the book *Understanding Media*, McLuhan mentions that hot media is a medium with a low level of public participation. The low level of community participation is related to the fulfillment of lost and lost information. Hot media has the character of a long or repeated observation time. This provides an opportunity for the public to pay close attention to the message compared to television as a cool medium with a short and non-repetitive observation time.

Furthermore, according to Susanto (2002) murals are large paintings produced to support architectural spaces, so that murals cannot be separated from the elements that make up space, the media to beautify the room. Murals are different from paintings. The difference lies in the special requirements that must be met by murals, namely in relation to architecture/building, both in terms of design (fulfilling aesthetic elements), as well as age and care and comfort in the room. Referring to the activity of drawing on the wall media, it has actually existed in Indonesia since prehistoric human times in the Mesolithic era (Barry, 2008). The humans of the Mesolithic era wrote or drew on the walls of the caves where they lived with the aim of conveying the message that they had lived and carried on life in the caves they inhabited. Murals in Indonesia can also be traced to their existence when there was a war against the invaders in order to achieve independence. Indonesian society at that time used murals as a medium to convey messages of encouragement against the invaders, such as the mural "*Merdeka or Mati*". In this case, murals have meanings and messages in each of their existences that image the social and cultural conditions around them, and of course also aesthetic images. In the current era of technological development, murals can still be found. At a time when humans, with all their needs, require technological intervention, including the need to produce works of art or designs, the existence of murals still exists. Unlike other works of art or designs (such as graphic print, painting, or even animation) which currently require the presence of technology to facilitate the production process, murals still use the conventional method, namely manual drawing in the production process. In this context, murals are not affected by technological developments.

Murals as art, apart from being able to provide information, also contain public discourses and agendas related to certain phenomena in society. Furthermore, a mural as a text will be closely related to the context in which the mural art was created and placed in a certain location. Thus, mural art will contain discourse, text, and context that will be appreciated by certain community groups. According to the Cultural Production Theory, this appreciation is one result of the domain of symbolic power.

In the development of mural art apart from being a social critique, by certain people it is also considered as a promotional medium. If studied more deeply, social criticism and promotion are two different activities. Social criticism is aimed at meeting the interests of the wider community, while promotion is aimed at imagery or business development carried out for the interests of certain groups. The murals as social criticism and murals as promotional media should run separately, but in terms of mural art, social criticism and promotion can go hand in hand. This phenomenon indicates that there has been a shift from the mural function.

Based on the description above, the problems that will be studied in this research are what are the meanings contained in the social criticism presented in mural art, and the extent to which the shift in values occurs in mural art. Meanwhile, the purpose of this research is to find the meaning of social criticism that is carried out through the media of mural art and to find the shift in value that occurs in mural art.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Bourdieu is a scientist who adheres to structuralist constructivism or constructivist structuralism. In the structuralist context, humans (agents) act based on consciousness (consciousness) and will (will). Individual awareness and will is able to direct and force humans to act and communicate (Bourdieu, 1989:14). In a structuralist context, Bourdieu argues that humans are the product of the structure of the social world. If it is associated with the two positions of social view (structuralist constructivism), Bourdieu argues that humans are shaped by the structure of the past social world, but he also constructs the structure of the social world through the habitus obtained from the previous structure and the arena in which he participates in structuring the structure of the social world (Bourdieu, 1984:63). Based on this thought, Bourdieu developed the concept of habitus and arena.

Habitus (practical awareness) is a disposition that is not formed suddenly, but through a long process of self-involvement in the experiences experienced by individuals in relation to the social world. Habitus is formed in the educational process, which Bourdieu divides into three categories, namely family education, social education, and institutional education. Agents do not work in a vacuum, but in concrete social situations governed by an objective set of social relations. Any social formation is structured through a series of hierarchically organized arenas (economic arena, educational arena, political arena, cultural arena). Arena (English: field, French: champ) is a structured space with its own rules of functioning, with its own power relations, independent of political and economic rules, except in the case of the economic arena and the political arena itself (Bourdieu, 2010: xvii). Its structure is determined by the relations among the positions occupied by agents in the arena.

Cultural Production Theory covers the social conditions of production, circulation, and consumption of symbolic goods. The proposition developed by Bourdieu in his Theory of Cultural Production is a social critique of works of art that begins with an absolute habitus (pure expression as rebellion, which is a form of anxiety about the social world) which in the end, through the dialectic of the production process in the cultural arena, will lead to an economic arena that is triggered by strategic considerations.

Bourdieu places the agent as an individual who, through his habitus and arena, has the potential to become a ruler in the arena he is involved in. Habitus is a disposition that is in the agent's self space, which encourages him to enter and wrestle in the chosen arena. Through their habitus, individuals will have a tendency to special forms of taste and appreciation of cultural objects, cultural and social behavior, and others (Turner, 1998:17).

Absolute habitus is a disposition that is formed from a person's life experience, which purely voices his anxiety about the social world. In this case, it can be seen the relationship between individual self-experience, habitus, and the social world. Habitus in humans is not formed by itself, but is the result of a dialectical struggle between the world of self (internal world) and the social world (external world). Habitus is the driving force for the formation of awareness, belief, and decision to enter an art arena.

Absolute habitus will produce expressive actions that are autonomous, actions that are independent of political and economic values. Absolute habitus directs agents to have idealistic values to reveal and seek the truth in accordance with their habitus. Artists and writers are examples of agents driven by absolute habitus. His work is a reflection of the dialectic of the world of the self and the social world that is free from economic and political



interests. The arena he is involved in is an autonomous art arena. Arena is a space where agents who have the same habitus are located.

Bourdieu develops the concept of symbolic power based on forms of capital that cannot be reduced to mere economic capital. Symbolic power is a non-economic and political power, which is related to respect, appreciation, recognition, and coronation. The development of the concept includes thinking about capital that is outside the economy. There are two forms of capital that are important in the arena of cultural production, namely symbolic capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984:xix).

Another important concept that Bourdieu puts forward in the Theory of Cultural Production is rational action. Bourdieu argues that rational action is not entirely carried out by actors in a conscious state. The researcher tries to understand this concept carefully because although rational action can be translated as an action that results from the actor's thinking, but the action can not fully be called an act of consciousness.

The emergence of murals in urban spaces has created different perspectives between mural creators and urban communities who are unfamiliar with mural art. Ideally, people need to understand the tendency of artists, but on the other hand, artists also need to respect urban communities as owners of urban space. On the other hand, the city community can evaluate whether the mural can be classified as a work of art or not, depending on certain parameters. According to Feldman (1967) there are several parameters in assessing mural art, namely as follows.

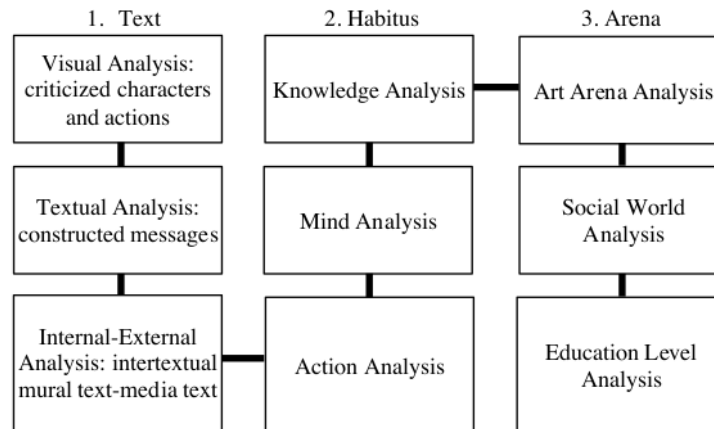
1. Description, namely the outline of a work. At this stage there is an inventory of information to describe something that is presented to the public. The description reveals the size, color, shape, plane, text and texture at a glance, and then interprets the mural work.
2. Formal analysis, which describes further what has been recorded from the description process. At this stage, the process of creating a dark and light impression is analyzed, the relationship between the forms in it. In addition, it also analyzes the relationship between shape, color, line and texture as well as elements of analysis on the shape-forming of the painting.
3. Interpretation, which is a process of searching for the meaning of the work of art through understanding the expressions (line, color, shape, texture and volume) in the mural. Interpreting is the process of finding meaning in a mural objectively and regardless of the intentions of the artist or other people.
4. Judgment, namely making decisions regarding the aesthetic value of a work of art. The debate over the results of the assessment of mural art depends on the criteria used to measure the mural art.

Mural as a public art gets an assessment based on its effectiveness in communicating the purpose of mural creation. Because not all urban people have artistic backgrounds, understanding the communication conveyed by artists is a burden that must be faced when the tastes of artists and people's tastes are met in the public art space. However, on the other hand, artists can also provide an introduction to art for the city community. Based on the Hedonistic Theory of Art, the creation of art can only achieve one goal, namely to provide enjoyment to the observer community. But no less important, according to Soedarso (2006) art must be fun and give pleasure.

## **METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical social perspective. Critical social studies emphasize the search for texts produced by actors and shaped by the social world. Data was collected through text studies and field observations, and the research was divided into three stages, namely text studies, habitus analysis, and arena analysis. In conducting the text study, information was obtained by observing the mural texts in Denpasar City, Gianyar Regency, and Badung Regency. The information was analyzed using Pierre Bourdieu's internal-external text analysis method. In the study of habitus and arena, information was obtained by conducting interviews, field observations, and observations of media texts. Interviews were conducted with the mural artist community in Denpasar City, Badung Regency, and Gianyar Regency.

To understand rational action in their work, researchers conducted field observations of the mural artist community. In the observations made, the researcher places himself as a peripheral member and tries to understand through an insider's perspective (Denzin, 2009:526). Observations like this are very important to do because researchers can observe and interact directly with the mural artist community without the need to participate in the main activities of the group. Other data sources used are photographs. The flow of analysis of the mural text under study is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Mural Text Analysis Flow**  
(Source: processed from research results, 2022)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *The Meaning of Mural Art*

From the results of the study of the observed internal-external text on the observed murals, there has been the use of popular phenomena to construct the main statement. These popular phenomena were chosen to show the public that there has been a density of information in the mass media, so that information that develops in the community needs to be conveyed through the media of mural art. The information conveyed through the mural art media was selected to construct a message to the public. In this phenomenon, gatekeeping practices have occurred at the level of two-step communication carried out by actors on messages conveyed to other parties. The occurrence of gatekeeping practices at the level of two-step communication carried out by actors has resulted in a misalignment between the main statement and the use of phenomena as arguments used to construct meaning. Regarding the prerequisite that social criticism must be made for the benefit of the community, based on the results of observations on the mural art media, there has been a prominent inclusion of actors' identities, large sizes, and placed in very strategic locations. According to Bourdieu, this phenomenon has led to a symbolic power.

Regarding habitus, based on the analysis of the appearance of mural art media, cultural production deviations occur as a result of manipulative communication, namely communication actions that are not based on the values of honesty and sincerity. Honesty is the harmony between thoughts, words, and actions (in Balinese local wisdom it is called *Tri Kaya Parisuda*), while sincerity is an attitude in taking actions that are not carried out for

personal gain. According to Bourdieu, honesty and sincerity are values that fortify artists to remain in an autonomous position. Honesty and sincerity are philosophical values that become benchmarks, whether an action is right or wrong. Theoretically, Bourdieu does not mention the term manipulative communication explicitly, but states that dishonest and dishonest cultural production practices are deviations.

### **1. Economic Meaning**

Based on the research, it was found that the economic significance of the phenomenon under study was the commodification of the content of mural art. In practice, social criticism which is used as the main theme (even later used as group identity) is presented in the form of works of art that are in the public domain. Social criticism which should have a use value as an enlightener of people's lives is transformed by actors into a means to popularize themselves. The actor understands that the public and the media are always attracted to resistance as a result of injustice and the actor knows that social criticism presented by mural art media has a selling point. Furthermore, according to Utami *at.al* (2019) to interpret an art cannot be separated from the socio-cultural conditions of the supporting community.

### **2. Meaning of Popularity**

Based on the observations, it was found that the murals made by the art community are more commercial than social. Orders for mural artist services come from schools, retail traders, cigarette manufacturers, telecommunications providers, and from other parties who are interested in criticizing mural art media. In addition, the use of language style also does not follow the correct Indonesian rules. The language used is everyday language, with the aim of being easily understood by the public.

With the growing popularity of a mural art group or community, the result is that mural art themes are more determined by order. There are still some groups or communities of mural art that are idealistic, these groups are more voicing the demands of the group, such as freedom. As a result, the ideology adopted by each mural art community is inconsistent, and more to build the popularity of the community. Sometimes, political issues are also raised as the theme of mural art. Politics is power, and in the art arena, things related to power are popularity, appreciation, respect, respect, or what Bourdieu calls symbolic power. Symbolic power then turns into symbolic capital, meaning that actors who get symbolic power have symbolic capital in the form of status as recognized actors. On the basis of this recognition, they then received an order to make murals.

From the results of a study of mural texts at the research locations in Denpasar City, Gianyar Regency, and Badung Regency, it was found that the mural art presented was more a form of seeking popularity. This can be seen from the inclusion of a large and strategically positioned self-identity in the composition of the mural, and the use of the theme of social criticism as a commodity. When the public is interested and agrees with the message conveyed, the next question that arises is who made it. Based on this analysis, it was found that the social criticisms made in the three research locations presented criticism in a non-true sense, but was a catcher for public attention in an effort to popularize the actor. In addition, there is a practice of limited cultural production that is different from what was proposed by Bourdieu, namely rational action in limited cultural production, while also carrying out mass cultural production. Actors act as artists (message producers) as well as promoters. These rational actions deviate from the normative values contained in the art arena, where actors are supposed to function as artists and apart from the practice of economic publications. The artist's action is completed when the artwork is finished. Popularity will be obtained when the audience and art critics accept and give a positive appreciation for the artwork. Even if there is an economic event in the field of art, the economic action is not carried out by the artist but by the party called the promoter.

Bourdieu divides the arena of cultural production in micro and macro levels. Bourdieu calls cultural production at the micro level an arena of limited cultural production. This sorting is intended to place artists in a position that remains 'clean' and is not contaminated by economic or political interests. According to Jonna (2018) practices that are outside of these normative values are positioned as deviant cultural productions.

Based on habitus analysis, it was found that the actor's actions were not carried out fully consciously, and the mural art community actor did not have sufficient knowledge about criticism and Marx. The resulting work aims to express anxiety, as well as trying to become popular. This action was taken because of the knowledge of the contemporary art arena gained from institutionalized education, and driven by the mind to gain popularity through strategic means. On the other hand, the mural art community believes that art should generate profit, although it is somewhat different from a pure business. These profits are managed so as to maintain the sustainability of the community. The group members did not feel there was anything wrong with the working mechanism of the community management system because it was all in the entrepreneurship lessons they learned.

### ***3. The Meaning of Freedom***

Referring to the results of the analysis related to the criteria for social criticism, the next problem is how the actors act when viewed from the aspect of freedom of expression. On the one hand, a mural is a work of art that contains freedom for expression from the artist, on the other hand a mural is not a work of art that is in a private space, but a public space. According to Bolette and Nina (2020) information conveyed in the public sphere has social power as an impact because it contains influence so that it touches the political realm.

The meaning of freedom that is understood by the Indonesian people in general has undergone a shift from the true meaning of freedom. The freedom that is ignited is an absolute freedom, even though there is no absolute freedom. Furthermore, according to Munaf *et.al* (2016) art is a medium for various socio-political interests of groups or institutions.

#### ***Shifting the Value of Mural Art***

The results of the text analysis show that the mural text made by the mural art community contains information that is not based on truth values and is not made for the benefit of the wider community, but for the benefit of the mural art community. If you look at the relationship between the two things above, the understanding you get is that the community supports promotional materials, whereas in the public's mind murals are works of art that contain messages of social criticism. Based on the Indonesian communication system, according to Arifin (2011:40) public communication is defined as the order of human interaction through open information to the public which includes freedom and social responsibility. Based on these limitations, according to Mollerup and Gaber (2015) the actor's actions are actions that are not in accordance with the meaning of responsible freedom and are detrimental to society.

In addition, this study also found that mural art, which was originally an artist's expression as a monumental work, shifted to a commodified and contemporary work (Sarah, 2017). The occurrence of commodification to the contemporary realm can be seen from the industrialization of art and art education that is not ready and weak so that it is unable to prevent the occurrence of deviant contemporary art practices. As a result, the value of art is lost because artists are more concerned with popularity and the economy; and there has been abuse of freedom as a result of not understanding the meaning of freedom itself and not understanding what is meant by criticism. The deviation made by the mural art community occurred because the condition of the art arena had also deviated. The intervention of art traders, freedom to voice opinions, and freedom to be creative have an influence



on the knowledge, thoughts, and actions of the mural art community. In addition, there have been mistakes made by actors in perceiving postmodernism.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis, several conclusions can be presented as follows. Social criticism conveyed through murals by the mural art community in Denpasar City, Gianyar Regency, and Badung Regency does not meet the truth value requirements. Murals as a communication medium for social criticism created by the mural art community are not made based on the principle of public interest, but for the sake of pursuing community popularity. The rational actions of actors are not fully conscious because community members do not have sufficient knowledge to criticize. There has been an abuse of freedom as a result of not understanding the meaning of mural art. The mural art actor has shifted the value of mural art, from a work that is monumental to a work that is more commodified and contemporary.

Based on the research findings, the practical implications that arise from constructing social criticism texts that are applied through mural art are the emergence of phenomena as arguments in support of phenomena that have been or are being discussed by the public. The goal is that murals can attract public attention, and lead to the commercial side of art, namely the formation of popularity. While the theoretical implication of this research is not to criticize Bourdieu's thinking, but the results of this study strengthen the theories and methods proposed by Bourdieu. This study also believes that through a structuralist-constructivism approach, the essence of the problems raised in mural art can be found. The essence of the problem is the formation of knowledge and thoughts that underlie actions by the social world through the educational process. So the main problem of the occurrence of cultural production deviations in the phenomenon of mural art is the process of social and institutionalized education.

The internal-external text analysis method proposed by Bourdieu can assist researchers in uncovering the secrets of mural art. The researcher's assumption about the discrepancy in the mural can be revealed by looking at the harmony between the symbolized character, the headline as the main statement, and the bodycopy as the argument. By using this method, researchers can uncover manipulative communication practices behind the jargon of social criticism.

Through habitus analysis, researchers can understand the message production process in mural art, starting from the idea search stage, symbol selection, and implementation. This analysis is continued in the study of the thoughts and knowledge that underlies the rational actions of actors. In this analysis, the researcher conducts a study on the dimensions of the unconscious, which then raises the question, what influences it so that they carry out manipulative communication.

Through arena analysis, researchers can understand art practices that affect the knowledge and thoughts of actors. Currently there is an economic intervention carried out by art traders. The entry of capitalism led to the industrialization of art. In the art arena, there is a practice of trading in artistic goods that is not in accordance with the theory of cultural production. This practice is what Bourdieu calls vulgar cultural production. The results of the arena study also show the influence of the political, economic, social, cultural fields on the emergence of the actor's mind. The influence of the social world is coupled with the emergence of technology that allows actors to search for information quickly, but can also be undirected.

The formation of actor knowledge is also influenced by the education he gets from institutionalized education). Based on the results of the arena analysis, it is known that actors do not get proper guidance and are often treated

as a group of 'rebels'. Some group members who like philosophy have a critical perspective, while other members who like management as an art have an economic perspective. The two perspectives blend into one in an atmosphere of community that is full of tolerance as long as togetherness and friendship can be maintained. That's why an art community was formed that manages social criticism as an economic commodity.

The results of this study strengthen Bourdieu's view of the structuralist-constructivism approach, that the structuralist-constructivism approach is different from other critical approaches. This approach emphasizes more on practical criticism rather than ideological criticism carried out by followers of Critical Theory. What is meant by practical criticism is criticism of actions that deviate from philosophical values. The values used in this study to criticize the actions of actors are sincerity and honesty. Honesty and sincerity are values that underlie Cultural Production Theory, especially on the concept of limited cultural production. Art is an arena that is autonomous and free from economic and political interests, and art is seen as a cultural milestone which is a pillar of civilization. Therefore, deviations in the cultural production process can cause potential problems in the process of civilizing the nation.

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