

## Original Research Article

**Thematic Analysis of Mehdi Ghadyanloo's Murals from a Sociological Approach (Reflective and Shaping);****A case study of murals at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Dewey Square in Boston, and the Shoreditch area in London\***Aliakbar Emamisahebi<sup>1</sup>, Mohamadreza Hassani<sup>1\*\*</sup>**1. Department of Painting, Faculty of Art and Architecture, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Zahedan, Iran.**

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**Abstract**

**Problem statement:** The present study was an attempt to investigate Mehdi Ghadyanloo's murals in public spaces such as the World Economic Forum in Davos, Dewey Square in Boston, and the Shoreditch area in London. Ghadyanloo's works deal with contemporary social issues and global concerns, utilizing symbolic elements including children, balloons, and apertures of light. Through a surrealist mode of expression, these elements prompt the viewer to engage in contemplative reflection. The primary research questions are: Which social issues influence the thematic content of Ghadyanloo's murals? What motivates the artist's use of symbolic elements and a surrealist style?

**Research objective:** This study aims to investigate the significance of the artist's connection to society, his responsiveness to social life, and his efforts to effect change with the goal of improving urban life reflected in his works.

**Research method:** The research employs a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing library, survey, and fieldwork resources. Data collection instruments include note-taking and interviews.

**Conclusion:** Mehdi Ghadyanloo's artworks, viewed through the dual lenses of "Reflective" and "Shaping" approaches, simultaneously mirror social crises and vulnerabilities while inspiring hope and transformation. By employing visual symbols such as children, crows, balloons, and the sky, he constructs a multilayered representation of both the real and Idealized world. As a conscious artist, Ghadyanloo leverages mural painting as an artistic medium to foster new perspectives regarding the contemporary condition and future trajectory of society.

**Keywords:** *Mural Painting, Mehdi Ghadyanloo, World Economic Forum in Davos, Dewey Square in Boston, Shoreditch area in London.*

**Introduction**

The present study addresses the murals of Mehdi Ghadyanloo, specifically his works titled "Finding

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Hope" (2019) at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland; "Space of Hope" (2016) at Dewey Square in Boston; and "We Didn't Start the Game" (2015) in Shoreditch, East London. The thematic constructs and elements employed by Ghadyanloo include urban populations, children, blue skies, balloons, apertures of light, spatiality,

depth, and perspective. Each of these elements can serve as a representational vehicle reflecting different facets of contemporary global life. He is an artist who strives to transcend the geographical boundaries of a single region and to depict diverse nationalities within his murals. He draws on a range of visual symbols—from globally recognized to local and regional symbols—to communicate with his audience through a universal language rooted in shared emotions. The themes selected by Ghadyanloo, including climate change, water scarcity, an uncertain future for children, global warming, and prevailing world conditions, are driven by motivations such as reconsideration of living conditions and protection of the planet, underpinned by themes of hope and foresight. His expressive style in mural painting evokes the artworks from the surrealist painting schools.

### Research Questions

Which social issues influence the thematic content of Mr. Ghadyanloo's murals? The artist places particular emphasis on social themes such as the uncertain future of children, global warming, and hope for life in his work. What motivates Ghadyanloo's use of symbolic elements and his distinctive expressive style in murals? In an attempt to express themes in his murals, the artist integrates symbolic elements—such as children, balloons, and apertures of light—with surrealistic modes of expression to prompt viewers to reconsider living conditions and the meaning of life.

### Research Methodology

The present study employs a descriptive-analytical case study methodology with a focus on two sociological approaches: Reflective and Shaping. Data collection instruments include interviews and note-taking. Accordingly, the sociological approaches of “Reflective” and “Shaping” serve as a foundational basis for the data analysis.

### Literature Review

Relevant studies related to this research include: the

master's thesis article by Behnam Zangi et al. titled “The Analysis of Social Position of Post Revolution Wall Painting Art in Iran (based on Pierre Bourdieu Sociology)”. This article investigates mural painting and its diverse functions and social roles in post-revolutionary Iranian society. It also explores the discursive and social potentials of contemporary mural art in relation to society through the lens of Bourdieu's field theory (Zangi et al., 2012). “A Sociological Approach to Contemporary Iranian Mural Painting (Street Art)” is the title of a master's thesis by Davood Khosravi. In this study, he focuses on street art and its cultural and decorative capacities in relation to the urban environment and the inhabitants of the city (Khosravi, 2014). “A Sociological Analysis of Mural Paintings in the City of Tehran” is the title of Maryam Hosseininia's thesis, which investigates mural paintings in Tehran in different post-Islamic Revolution periods. The study aims to recognize the thematic content of murals, track the evolution of their subject matter, and understand the new values represented in the murals (Hosseininia, 2013). “A Reflection on the Functions of Post-Revolution Mural Painting in Tehran from the Sociological Perspective of the Reflective Theory” is the title of Samineh Motlebi's thesis, which analyzes the post-revolutionary contemporary mural paintings with a focus on the symbolic, social, and cultural capital embedded in them. Her study reflects political and social transformations, as well as the practice and power fields within the sphere of painting and state power (Motalebi, 2014). “Investigation and Identification of Approaches to Mural Painting in Tehran Based on Fieldwork Data” is the title of Mehdi Ebrahimi Lame's master's thesis. This study investigates and sheds light on various thematic approaches in mural art and their defining characteristics. The primary objective of this research is to introduce various thematic approaches to mural painting and their defining characteristics based on a dataset of 500 murals found across high-traffic streets and highways in Tehran during 2016 to shed further light on their visual and structural qualities

(Ebrahimi Lame, 2017). “A Structural and Content Analysis of Mural Artworks in Tehran and Their Relationship with Citizens’ Lived Experience: A Case Study of Idealistic Mural Paintings in Tehran during the 2000s” is the title of Seyyedeh Fatemeh Jabarzadeh’s thesis. This study investigates a selection of Idealistic and revolutionary murals in Tehran from the perspective of technical and thematic pathology, as well as their communicative relationship with the audience (Jabarzadeh, 2018). “An Aesthetic and Semantic Study of Mural Painting in Tehran (District 8)” is the title of Fatemeh Hazavian’s thesis. Her research focuses on the meaningfulness of aesthetic principles taken into account in mural artworks in public squares and urban spaces, emphasizing their potential role in enhancing the sense and quality of everyday life (Hazavian, 2021). The reviewed literature doesn’t include any study focusing on three artworks by Mr. Ghadyanloo—namely, “Finding Hope” (2019) at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland; “Space of Hope” (2016) at Dewey Square in Boston; and “We Didn’t Start the Game” (2015) in Shoreditch, East London—using the specific approach adopted in the present study. Therefore, the present study is innovative in terms of both its subject matter and objectives.

### Theoretical Framework

The critique and evaluation of artworks are generally conducted through two primary approaches: intrinsic (formalist) criticism and extrinsic (contextual) criticism. Intrinsic criticism focuses on the aesthetic elements and technical principles of the artwork, while excluding consideration of environmental and social factors (Ravadrād, 2007, 67). This approach is also referred to as Formalist, which disregards the emotional and psychological dimensions of the work and stands in opposition to psychological and content-oriented critiques. Formalist criticism posits that social approaches to art attempt to integrate art with the entirety of society; consequently, formal criticism disregards the content aspects of art, in effect, equate form with content (Lavin, 2007, 41).

Contrary to this perspective, thinkers such as Hegel regard art as a mirror of culture. The term “history and art”, which denote a systematic depiction of artistic developments within the historical context, was first introduced by Winckelmann in his work the History of Art (Adams, 2013, 37). In his book Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, Bourdieu demonstrates that the concept of aesthetics has a class-based foundation. The working class tends to focus on the practical and perceptual aspects of an artwork, which stands in contrast to the notion of pure aesthetics, a concept that negates the extrinsic function of the artwork. In fact, Bourdieu holds that there is no singular understanding of the concept of art; rather, aesthetics and the judgments associated with it have undoubtedly found a chance to emerge within historical and social contexts (Wolff, 2015, 27–28). Extrinsic criticism focuses on the relationship between society and art. One of the central topics in this type of criticism—which encompasses the sociology of art—is the reciprocal relationship between art and society. This impact may be exerted by the artist on society, or conversely, by society on the artist. The former approach is termed the “shaping approach” from the perspective of art sociologists, while the latter is known as the “Reflective approach” (Ravadrād, 2007, 68). These two sociological approaches to art do not assign a systematic privilege to selected artworks in the history of art, but neither do they deny their importance nor the differences in their artistic quality (Heinrich, 2022, 63).

The shaping approach encompasses a broad spectrum of theories that share the core belief that art influences society. Similar to the reflective approach, the shaping approach conceptualizes the relationship between art and society as a direct line; however, it reverses the direction of the causal arrow (i.e., the direction of influence between artworks and society) such that art is considered as the influencing agent on society, rather than the other way around. According to Arnold, the fine arts contribute to the advancement of society due to their “moral, social, and utilitarian nature.” Within the shaping approach, art is regarded

as possessing a status above society, and through its creativity and dynamism, it exerts influence upon society. The artist, through the concepts and forms they create, establishes a communicative relationship with the audience, and as a result of this relationship, the concepts embedded in the artwork become internalized within the audience (Alexander, 2021, 84–85). In the shaping approach, the analytical framework for phenomena is based on the malleability of the audience's society and the influence exerted on behavioral and social structures. It can thus be posited that art, in its broad spectrum, functions effectively for the target society.

Another subject in the sociology of art is known as the Reflective approach. According to the definition of the Reflective approach, art functions as a mirror that reflects society. The artist emerges from within society and is influenced by it. This theory is based on the premise that the existence of an artwork is linked to the characteristics of a specific historical period, social group, and so forth (Duvignaud, 2018, 75). According to another definition, it can be said that the artist explicitly or symbolically reflects, in some way, what they derive from their society, including the social, political, cultural, and economic achievements of that society (Turkashvand, 2009, 26).

The main distinction between the shaping approach and the Reflective approach can be examined across different societies. In some societies, particularly those grounded in mass production and increased consumption, greater emphasis is placed on the shaping approach, because this approach holds that art, in general, can generate additional social needs and, through the individual genius of the artist, shape public tastes and direct various social groups toward predominantly capitalist objectives. The individual creativity of the artist manifests in promoting a culture of consumption of more expensive goods and a desire to access cutting-edge technologies. In contrast, the Reflective approach embodies a form of social commitment that disregards mere propaganda. This approach is grounded in a form of ethical consideration and attentiveness to the explicit and

implicit needs of societies. Consequently, themes such as poverty, gender and racial discrimination, injustice, environmental pollution, global warming, the future of children, and world peace receive attention in this approach.

#### • Introduction to the artist and the murals at the world Economic forum in davos, dewey square in boston, and the shoreditch area in london

Mehdi Ghadyanloo was born in 1981. He completed his undergraduate studies in painting at Tehran University of Art and received his master's degree in animation from the same university (Fig. 1). Ghadyanloo is known for his urban murals characterized by the technique of Trompe-l'œil and elements of surrealism. His mural works draw expressive inspiration from Giorgio de Chirico and René Magritte. Ghadyanloo's murals have been painted on urban walls across Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, Austria, Norway, Switzerland, and Russia. In addition to urban murals, he has created paintings with diverse themes and styles, which have been exhibited in various galleries and exhibitions both domestically and internationally.

He has painted over 100 murals across Tehran. In an article titled The Promise of Bewilderment, published by the Courtauld Institute of Art, Sussan Babaie discusses his earlier works: his depictions of imaginary parks are filled with greenery and fresh air, elements that are scarce in the polluted urban landscape of contemporary Tehran. Viewers engage with the contemporary architectural and



Fig. 1. Photographic portrait of the artist. Source: <https://avammag.com>.

urban contexts of the capital through the lens of his whimsical perspective. For Tehran's residents, these enchanting murals provide accidental opportunities for escapism and elevation, even if only momentarily, allowing them to move beyond the instability of everyday life into semi-ethereal and uplifting public spaces created by Ghadyanloo. The diversity of perspectives within these works contributes to a multiplicity of experiential interpretations; the aesthetic experience of the murals is highly dependent on the observer's spatial positioning, whether they are passing by en route to a store or gazing through a crowded bus window amid traffic congestion. The unrestrained accessibility of this public art firmly establishes it within the tradition of contemporary urban art in Tehran, where murals have held a prominent presence<sup>1</sup>. Ghadyanloo has held numerous exhibitions worldwide, including in the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, Austria, and Norway. Between 2004 and 2011, he employed symbolic elements such as children, staircases, balloons, and ... to convey concepts including hope, anxiety, loss, and neglect through his artwork.

#### • **The mural at the world economic forum in davos: finding hope**

The World Economic Forum (Davos Forum) was established in 1971, with its sessions held in Davos, Switzerland. This forum is a nonprofit organization aiming to foster interaction among political and economic leaders worldwide and to accelerate global development. The Forum has endeavored to associate its name with transformation and future change. Although commonly known as the World Economic Forum, it currently includes missions addressing health, global water resources, and terrorism within its agenda (Revill, 2025).

This mural (Fig. 2) consists of three large panels: a central main panel flanked by two side panels. It is painted on an interior wall of the main hall in the upper section of the World Economic Forum building in Davos, Switzerland, covering an approximate surface area of 200 square meters. The mural incorporates several detailed elements, including a sewing needle

and thread, a red balloon, a young girl dressed in red holding a balloon, and a blue sky. The scene unfolds within an enclosed space that opens only toward the sky via the ceiling. The lighting direction is rendered from left to right. In the central panel, a young girl wearing a red dress with orange shades and her hair braided at the back is depicted. In the girl's hands, a red balloon floats against a blue sky, beyond the interior walls of a building resembling a traditional Iranian building with a central courtyard, characterized by multiple entryways painted in earthy ochre tones. In the upper right section of the sky, a dense cluster of voluminous, swirling clouds encroaches upon the courtyard space. On the left of the central panel, a smaller structure replicating the same courtyard typology of the central panel is depicted. From two opposing entryways of this courtyard, two threads symmetrically extend, gently suspending a needle in mid-air, its point directed downward.

In the right panel, the composition mirrors that of the left panel, with one variation: instead of the needle, a large red balloon larger than the one held by the girl is suspended in space. Like the needle in the left panel, this balloon is tethered by a rope or thread. The needle and the balloon across the left and right panels introduce a meaningful visual contrast within their otherwise symmetrical and roughly identical layouts. The interior of the building in the right panel is illuminated by a greater degree of light compared to its counterpart on the left. Given the direct incidence of light in the architectural space in the panel on the right and the presence of a balloon similar to the one held by the girl, a closer connection can be conceived with the primary subject of the mural—the girl holding the balloon in the central panel. In contrast to the right panel, the left panel is dominated by a relatively dark atmosphere. The menacing form of the needle, rendered at an oversized scale in this panel, creates a marked contrast with the tranquility and hopeful ambiance of both the central and right panels. In conclusion, this mural, thanks to its three-panel composition, illustrates the opposition between hope and threat, as well as between light and darkness in



Fig. 2. Mehdi Ghadyanloo, Finding Hope, World Economic Forum Building in Davos, 2019, Switzerland. Surface area: 10.20 square meters. Source: <https://sinapress.ir/news>.

a metaphorical and artistic manner. The girl with the red balloon in the central panel functions as a symbol of innocence, dream, and liberation, positioned within a confined space that opens towards the sky. The two lateral panels, which replicate similar elements but with meaningful alterations—one featuring the threatening, dark needle and the other the brightly illuminated balloon, which is thematically closer to the central panel—emphasize the binary opposition between hope and despair, safety and danger. Overall, through the deployment of symbolic elements and visual contrasts, the artwork invites viewers to reflect on the balance between vulnerability and hope in the contemporary world. It reflects the psychological and social state of contemporary mankind within restrictive structures, where individuality (symbolized by the girl with the balloon) is caught between external threats (the oversized needle and the gloomy space) and emancipatory hopes (light, sky, and the floating balloon). Through this work, the artist provides a symbolic representation of the challenges faced by the individual in confronting social structures, evoking the Reflective theory in art, wherein the artwork mirrors the social, class, and cultural tensions of its time. Furthermore, this symbolic confrontation between hope and threat can also be analyzed within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's viewpoint of social symbolic spaces and power relations in

cultural structures (Bourdieu, 1990, 127). Bourdieu emphasizes that these symbolic spaces are products of history and social structures, and understanding them requires a thorough analysis of the relationship between objective structures and internalized structures (habitus). Within this framework, symbolic oppositions such as “hope” and “threat” can be addressed as instruments for understanding how power operates within cultural and social spaces (ibid., 128).

- **The dewey square mural in boston, titled space of hope (2019)**

The exterior wall of the Rose Kennedy Building, located in Boston's Rose Kennedy Greenway area, USA, is annually commissioned to an artist for a mural during autumn. Mehdi Ghadyanloo, a young Iranian artist, was commissioned to paint a mural on this wall in 2016. He created a mural approximately 650 square meters in size titled Space of Hope on the wall of this large building (Fig. 3), (Reville, 2025).

The elements employed in this mural include a red balloon, aperture of light, a spiral staircase, an entrance hatch, a wall, the sky, two rectangular spaces resembling doorways symmetrically positioned on the lower part of the painting on both sides, as well as a long queue of people from various social classes and races, including women, men, and children. The mural is composed of four independent spatial sections



Fig. 3. Mehdi Ghadyanloo, Space of Hope, 2019, 10.3 × 63 sq/m. Source: <https://www.eligasht.com/Blog/>.

positioned next to one another. The primary scene of the mural is located on the left side, encompassing a vast area that contains the primary subject of the painting. The upper part of this space features a dome-shaped form. The artist takes full advantage of this form, which belongs to the main structure of the building, conveying the artwork's message by utilizing this shape with a hatch opening towards the sky. Adjacent to this vertical rectangular space, an attached form in the shape of an inverted letter "L" is depicted. A densely packed crowd is ascending and then entering through the hatch embedded in the wall of the main space of the painting. In the adjacent area of the L-shaped space, a section of a white wall is visible, which, through angular perspective lines, separates the sky from the wall. A small portion of blue sky can also be seen. This limited expanse of sky contrasts with the densely packed ascending crowd and the enclosing wall adjacent to them.

Within the dome-shaped form, the artist has created an opening through which light gently permeates into the expansive and relatively dim interior space of the painting. Inside the building's interior beneath the dome, numerous individuals are ascending a

spiral staircase. This crowd has traversed a long path to ascend the stairs and reach the dome, and the aperture of light in the upper section, where they observe a red balloon overhead. In this mural, the enclosed and confined space, combined with the ascending crowd striving toward the aperture of light, symbolizes the social condition of individuals and their relentless efforts to attain better conditions. The artwork, particularly in light of the relationship between the enclosed space and the revealed light, emphasizes that societies, through collective endeavor, may move toward freedom and liberation, albeit along a path fraught with social challenges and obstacles. According to the theory of shaping, art has the capacity to shape and influence social and cultural realities, as well as emerging social attitudes and behaviors. As Alexander asserts, such works shape behaviors, values, and social transformations (Ravadrād, 2007, 69). In this mural, elements such as the red balloon, the aperture of light, and the spiral staircase can actively influence the viewer and their social and cultural perceptions. The depiction of individuals ascending the staircase toward the light emphasizes the belief that individual and collective

efforts can improve social conditions and open new pathways to freedom and opportunity. In this mural, the confined space and enclosing walls serve as visual symbols of social and economic constraints, which are challenged by the light streaming through the aperture in the dome. The light shining into the dark interior from the aperture in the dome symbolizes transformation and emancipation, implicitly promising improvements in social and individual conditions through overcoming constraints.

### The Shoreditch Mural in East London, titled *We Didn't Start the Game* (2015)

The wall in Shoreditch, East London, annually hosts a mural created by artists from around the world. In 2015, Mehdi Ghadianlou's mural, titled "We didn't start the Game Yet", was painted on this wall (Fig. 4). The neighborhood has gained recognition due to the murals adorning its surfaces. Ghadyanloo's mural, which covers an area of approximately 200 square meters, was displayed on this wall for six months. (Pasandideh, 2015) In this artwork, fear and threat are juxtaposed with joy and excitement in a profound and meaningful contrast; similarly, joy is contrasted with death, hope with despair, and stillness with movement.

This piece embodies a realization of dichotomies, while also manifesting the artist's mental space.

At first glance, one can see that the mural is divided into two distinct sections. The central ceiling, with an aperture in the middle, divides the space into two equal horizontal parts. In the upper section, crows, waiting for an opportunity, peer through the aperture, observing the children playing below. In the lower section, beneath the central ceiling, three children are engaged in play. Two girls, positioned opposite each other, hold a skipping rope, while one child is leaping unusually high from the rope, suspended well above the ground, approaching the ceiling and the window where the crows are waiting above her. The juxtaposition of crows and the playing children could be part of a visual motif that conveys a unified message to people of all cultural backgrounds and languages. The use of yellow and red colors directs attention to the expressive power of color as a means of warning. This mural, within the framework of reflective theory, serves as a symbolic representation of the social and psychological conditions of children in contemporary society. The contrast between the playful space and the innocence of the children below, and the threatening presence of the crows above, reflects the presence of



Fig. 4. Mehdi Ghadyanloo, 2015, *We didn't started the game*, 10 × 20 sq/m. source: <https://londoncallingblog.net/>.

underlying and persistent danger or social anomalies in the backdrop of everyday life. The central ceiling and the aperture within it, functioning as a boundary between safety and threat, visually depict how the freedom and joy of children are constantly under the heavy and threatening gaze of external forces. In this framework, the artwork not only reflects social realities but also, through its intelligent composition, artistically and critically represents the inequalities and vulnerabilities of childhood.

### Sociological Elements in the Murals of Mehdi Ghadyanloo (Based on the Reflective and Shaping Approaches)

Pamela Karimi, in her article *Experiencing the Sublime in Tehran: The pains and pleasures of the overwhelming in the paintings of Mehdi Ghadyanloo* writes: “Threatening objects that remain suspended and are kept at a safe distance; a group of men trapped at the threshold of a grand and luminous portal; a tower resembling a Lego piece with glowing windows at night; industrial structures amidst dark and melancholic landscapes; crowds of people stuck at the bottom of a geometric pit in an apparently barren land; spiraling staircases that lead nowhere; and a massive, dark cloud suspended over a group

of people floating on a vast expanse of water are some of the scenes from the recently exhibited murals of Mehdi Ghadyanloo. This collection, titled “Spaces of Hope”, has the capacity to rapidly transform the viewer’s sense of awe and admiration into fear (Karimi, 2017). By identifying the elements within Ghadyanloo’s works, one can analyze and interpret these elements within the framework of two main approaches in art studies: the reflective and the shaping approaches (Table 1). The elements used in the artist’s works—such as light apertures, balloons, children, blue skies, crows, and packed crowds moving towards light—each carry specific social connotations that mostly align with one of these two approaches. In the reflective approach, the artwork functions like a mirror, representing social, psychological, or class conditions as they truly are. In this context, elements such as crows, dark spaces, vulnerable children, and enclosed ceilings belong to this approach, as they reflect hazardous conditions, social threats, and contemporary anomalies in some way. In contrast, within the shaping approach, the artwork plays an active role in shifting perceptions, inspiring social actions, and creating new horizons for the viewer. Elements such as light apertures, open skies, collective ascent, and red balloons fall into the

Table 1. Contrastive Analysis of Mehdi Ghadyanloo’s Murals from the Perspectives of the Reflective and Shaping Approaches. Source: Authors.

Additional explanations	Shaping approach	Reflective approach	artwork
The artwork intensely focuses on representing social and individual issues, with the element of hope contrasting with threat.	Less prominent Focus on representation rather than direct change in attitude or social action.	Highly prominent Reflection of the psychological condition of the contemporary human in the face of enclosed and threatening structures.	Finding Hope (World Economic Forum in Davos)
A clear narrative of liberation and social ascent, a forward-thinking and constructive perspective with the power to inspire transformation.	Highly prominent Encouragement of hope, progress, and movement towards light as a social shift.	Moderately prominent Reflection of the collective effort to break free from social constraints.	Space of Hope (Dewey Square, Boston)
The contrast between safety and threat to joy in a childish atmosphere is depicted in a critical and cautionary manner	Low in prominence More cautionary and reflective than constructive.	Highly prominent Reflection of the vulnerability and underlying threats within society.	We didn’t Start the Game (Shoreditch, London)

Overall Summary:

The Davos and Shoreditch works are primarily framed within the reflective theory and serve a critical role. The Boston work is a blend of both approaches, but the shaping approach is more prominent, as it encourages the viewer to take action, have hope, and strive for change. The only work where the shaping approach is less prominent is the Shoreditch piece, as it focuses more on warning and reflecting the vulnerable state rather than creating a new future.

category of elements used in this approach, as they evoke feelings of hope, freedom, and liberation, encouraging the viewer to reflect or take positive social action. In fact, the choice of these elements and their mode of representation in the murals allows us to figure out which works acquire meaning through which approach. Taking into account the aforementioned elements and the definitions provided for each approach, one can figure out whether Ghadyanloo’s works, from a sociological perspective, are focused on reflecting social reality or shaping it (Table 2).

**Conclusion**

In the artworks of Mehdi Ghadyanloo, various visual elements carry sociological concepts that acquire meaning within the frameworks of “Reflective” and “Shaping.” In the Reflective approach, elements such as the child, crow, and enclosed spaces symbolize vulnerability, threat, and social pressures. These elements reflect the constraints and anomalies within society. Conversely, the Shaping approach, through elements like the moving crowd, red balloon, and blue sky, envisions a better and hopeful future.

The light apertures transition between these two approaches; at times symbolizing minimal hope, and at other times indicating a passage or salvation. By integrating these two approaches, it offers a multi-layered narrative of the contemporary human, navigating between social realism and visual idealism. The present study, focusing on Mehdi Ghadyanloo’s mural artworks, demonstrated that these pieces can be analyzed sociologically within the frameworks of both “Reflective” and “Shaping” approaches. In the Reflective approach, the artist, as a sensitive observer affected by social conditions, depicts social anomalies, threats, and crises through elements such as vulnerable children, crows, enclosed spaces, and restricted ceilings. These images clearly emphasize dissatisfaction, vulnerability, the threat of the future, and the structural obstructions within society, positioning the artist as a receptor of social realities. In contrast, the Shaping approach presents Ghadyanloo as a creative and interventionist actor who, through elements like the red balloon, open sky, light apertures, and collective movement toward light, highlights concepts such as hope, liberation, change, and forward-thinking in his

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Mehdi Ghadyanloo’s Murals from the Perspectives of the Reflective and Shaping Approaches. Source: Authors.

Sociological Element	Reflective approach	Shaping approach	Associated artwork
Children	Depiction of vulnerability, underlying threats, helplessness, and a dangerous social atmosphere	-	We didn’t Start the Game (Shoreditch, London)
Crow	Symbol of threat, darkness, the presence of anomalies, and social disorders	-	Finding Hope (World Economic Forum in Davos)
Enclosed Spaces / Ceilings	Symbol of obstruction, restriction, isolation, and structural pressures	-	Finding Hope (World Economic Forum in Davos)
Crowd Moving Towards Light	-	Symbol of progress, social unity, and the struggle to break free from the status quo	Space of Hope (Dewey Square, Boston)
Red Balloon	-	Symbol of the desire for freedom, innocence, positive energy, and the possibility of ascent	We didn’t Start the Game (Shoreditch, London)
Apertures of light	Reflects the tension between hope and despair, sometimes merely a minimal presence of hope amidst threat	Symbol of hope, passage from darkness to light, invitation to forward-thinking	Finding Hope World Economic Forum in Davos
Open / Blue Sky	Sometimes symbolizes contrast with enclosed space (inaccessible)	Symbol of freedom, open horizon, space	Space of Hope (Dewey Square, Boston)

works. In this approach, the artist is not merely a mirror of society, but a generator of attitudes and a guide in steering the audience's mindset toward positive change. The element of childhood plays a central role, serving a dual function: both reflecting the status quo and symbolizing hope for a better future. Since mural painting is a public medium, in full view of the public, Ghadyanloo effectively utilizes this platform to convey his social messages to a broad audience. His art is not confined to mere representation or idealization; rather, it establishes a dynamic connection between these two states, a connection that places the artist in a position where he is both influenced by society and guides it at the same time. Ghadyanloo's works can be considered a prime example of art that, through active interaction with society, fosters inquiry, awareness, and even transformation in the audience's mindset. Overall, the reciprocal relationship between the artist and society—both in terms of influence and receptivity—is clearly evident in Mehdi Ghadyanloo's works. By utilizing visual language, he creates a cultural and social narrative that not only reflects societal realities but also guides the audience toward change and a fresh perspective on society and the future. This characteristic positions Ghadyanloo in the stance of a committed, conscious, and socially active artist who uses art not merely for aesthetic purposes but as a tool for dialogue, warning, and building the future

## Endnotes

1. To access the original text of this article, please refer to the link opposite. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LrQxMzQ5hYAGB4tO1G6fDBn9Rocfu7bE/view>

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