

Schizocartography as a Methodology: Case-Studies from Gaza

Written by Martin Duffy

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Schizocartography is often described as a symbiosis of philosophy, politics and political geography. It has developed as a methodological approach from the collaborative works of Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari. Essentially it is a technique of mapping which overtly challenges dominant power structures and narratives. It overcomes the censors and draws on potential sustenance from abroad. It is a perfect methodological apparatus to adopt when looking at an isolated, violent society such as Gaza – a territory where the imposition of outside and internal powers is omnipresent, and censorship of various forms operates. This article will show how a brief experiment in locating Palestinian protest-material in Venice sheds light on the potential construction of a cartography of resistance.

Schizocartography seeks to expose the contradictions and power dynamics within urban territories. It does so while simultaneously reclaiming the sentiments of individual subjectivity and fostering alternative modes of creative expression. Despite oppression and genocide, Palestinian artists are proactively resisting their gruesome fate. They thus generate multiple vistas of civic space which are invariably controlled by forces outside the Palestinian community. Such a technique moves away from traditional psychoanalytic notions of subjectivity and instead focuses on how individuals interact persuasively with their environment. These daily synchronicities are what Guattari and Deleuze designate as, “assemblages”. From one inspirational piece of artwork depicting the torture of Palestinians in Gaza, schizocartography can reveal how its message is amplified in posters, graffiti and social media, so that it becomes a crescendo of protest. Thus, Venice has become a hub of Palestinian resistance art. Schizocartography (by mapping these works) shows how a resistance campaign is deftly internationalized.

The Cartography of Palestinian Resistance Art

Palestinian resistance art potentially encompasses creative expressions, from visual arts, music to literature, often reflecting themes of displacement and freedom. Some notable examples include: the New Visions collective (First Intifada); the abstract works of exiled painters like Jumana al-Husseini, Samia Halaby, and Kamal Boullata, and contemporary artists like Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir. We should also mention Ghassan Kanafani who championed “resistance literature,” while artists like Sliman Mansour use their art to document and express the Palestinian experience under occupation.

A number of Palestinian artists, including Mohammed Alhaj, were interviewed as part of this project. Mohammed’s original work, which inspired this article, came from the Displacement Series (2020). This article explores how Palestinian resistance-art may percolate through public spaces (such as museum posters and graffiti) and thus generate significant or even virtual “assemblages”. Thus, schizocartography incorporates elements of psychogeography, studying the effects of geographical environment on behaviour, by exploring the subjective experience of place. Digitally, this methodology captures the austere emotionality, inherent in much of Palestinian protest-artwork. These images are manifest in the entire portfolio of Mohammed Alhaj’s creative work depicting human suffering in Gaza.

In IR and political geography alike, such schizocartographic approaches are valuable in challenging dominant narratives. By revealing contradictions and power dynamics, schizocartography aims to disrupt hegemonic

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chronicles, and their destructive power structures. These unreconstructed power-sources are often narrowly associated with specific locations. The schizocartographical view of the world is potentially revolutionary. This is why it is invaluable in tracking the impact of something as nebulous and ephemeral as “protest-art” or “revolutionary street-graffiti”. It encourages novel forms of creative expression and spatial practice, allowing individuals to reclaim their relationship with space and (thus) challenge the status quo. It eludes censors. This inevitably creates a resistance cartography even in an ostensibly formal, enduring streetscape, like Venice.

The essence of schizocartography is that it offers visionary tools in mapping (as a method) to understand how spaces are constructed, experienced, and controlled. In my short experiment, I found that evidence of Palestinian protest art, such as the works by Mohammed Alhaj, were omnipresent. Perhaps the street is a more insightful purveyor of popular sentiment than state-organisations or municipal repositories? Oftentimes street-thinking expressed in cartooning is a better acid-test of the times than formal gallery-spaces. Adopting a schizocartographical approach we found graffito-scores and protest artistry in the most unlikely of places. This allows us to attribute a greater prominence to examples of mass culture which are not so widely evidenced in formal arts-museums. Indeed, as we will note further on, some of these original artworks have actually been banned from certain museums.

This move is significantly beyond what is depicted in the relative mundanity of traditional maps. It also implicitly calls into question the priority afforded to official Biennales and their exhibitions. Schizocartography is thus a versatile methodological approach showing the real manifestation of protest-art in the public street. It rescues art and resilience from the clinical and sanitised glass-cases of private museums and brings the struggle genuinely unto the mundane pavement. Few people would have considered this so evident in the topographically traditional landscape of a city like Venice, but that is an important lesson for IR students to learn.

The Spatial Experience of Protest in IR

By revealing the complexities of spatial experience, schizocartography empowers individuals to reshape their relationship with environments. For this article, I examined posters near Venice’s main railway station. The result was a collection of ephemeral “artwork-of-resistance”. Violence is manifested in the threat of civilian casualties in insurgent violence perpetrated by freedom-fighters, and also from state-violence. Gaza is perhaps a particularly gruesome case-study. Gazan art is invariably central to activism. My pick as a prime example of “resistance-art” among the topography of contemporary Venice is a flyer from an exhibition on Gaza held some year or so ago in the city. It depicts Palestinian men with naked torsos running away from Israeli torture. Their nakedness is thus a symbol of resistance to the naked oppression they experience in day-to-day Gaza. It is unclear whether any of these men have themselves been involved in actions of terrorism.

In *The Biggest Prison on Earth* by Ilan Pappé, we read about the decades of torture which has been inflicted on the Palestinian people. The artist whose work we have selected for this experiment Mohammed Alhaj champions “art-of-resistance”. He opens the world’s eyes to Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Using only a notebook and pens, the gifted artist documents the different stages of the Gaza genocide, including scenes of ruthless displacement. The faded billboard I found near Stazione Santa Lucia is an unusually graphic example of the artist’s depiction of his people. During the current all-out war, virtually all artistic work has temporarily ceased. As he puts it during an interview:

When there is a military escalation in Gaza, the inhabitants of the Strip stop practising any type of artistic activity to follow the developments of the war. This time is not like the others: we are experiencing an unprecedented event that has led to terrible transformations. The war has been going on for a long time and the conflict seems endless. I chose to release the burden inside me through drawings and diaries that document the various stages of the genocide of the Palestinian people, using the tools I have at my disposal: a notebook, pencils and black ink pens.

Thus begins the dramatic tale of a Palestinian artist living in Gaza who participated in the art collective *Foreigners in Their Homeland*, organised by the Palestine Museum, US at Palazzo Mora in Venice. This is a moving example of how implicitly, schizocartography helps us excavate the trauma of everyday life through fine arts. The exhibition, curated by Faisal Saleh, ran for six months until November 24, 2024. It included the works of a grand total of 26 Palestinian artists, shedding light on the suffering conditions of their people, who are forced to live in an apartheid

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situation. Mohammed Alhaj and his colleague Maisara Barud are currently among a tiny minority of artists from Gaza exhibiting in Venice, while simultaneously trying to survive Israeli bombings.

Recently, Mohammed has been drawing only with simple ink on paper, representing his experiential situation in his artwork. It was through this that the series *Diary of a Palestinian Displaced Person* was created for Venice's Palazzo Mora. These are black-and-white drawings in which Mohammed depicts scenes of daily survival, tent camps and the flow of refugees travelling from north to south in a desperate attempt to escape the bombings in Gaza. Here is an implicit homage to schizocartography. The powerful visual messages in Alhaj's creations, document life under the bombs, such as stark depictions of families huddling beneath their burning tent. These works portray a profound asymmetry in power. To quote Mohammed:

On some occasions, I have created fictional characters that depict the typical Palestinian: shirtless, wearing only a keffiyeh and jeans, symbolising their bare resistance. Other times, I have created abstract and cubist-style drawings with symbolic meanings related to the displacement of refugees in the Al-Mawasi area of the Strip. I managed to create a heritage of work...

Mohammed's latest drawings (2023–24), and a piece that highlights the use of colours, show how the “art-of-resistance” may truly raise the profile of a cause. These pastel-evoking creations seek to convey Palestinians' sense of disorientation caused by brutal forced displacement. The respective collections are titled *The Truth Is with You* and *The Land Is with Them*. One drawing, a mural, describes the alienation felt by Palestinians even within the occupied territories. Mohammed explains.

Our people live in a state of disorientation and helplessness, unsuccessfully seeking paths to safety. Unfortunately, the mural, of which we have exhibited a printed copy in Venice, was burned and destroyed along with the other works that were in my studio in Gaza City, devastated by the bombs. Many artists were killed and their art destroyed. I lost everything, including my tools.

This young artist was born in Tripoli, Libya, in 1982 to a Palestinian family and returned to Palestine at the age of 13. When the war broke out, he was living in Gaza City. Then, with his wife and four children, he was forced to flee to the Nuseirat refugee camp in the centre of the Strip. Subsequently, he moved to the Al-Mawasi area, between the cities of Khan Yunis and Rafah. As Mohammed states:

I stayed there for about three months, then returned to the Nuseirat camp, where I currently reside with my family and my father. My mother died at 82 due to a severe illness...danger is always lurking, which is why I want to leave Gaza. We are waiting for the Rafah crossing to reopen to find a safe haven.

Mohammed's canvases, sculptures, bas-reliefs and murals were all destroyed, burned and reduced to ashes. The only traces of his artistic work are some photos he had previously published on his social media pages, in addition to the pieces preserved at the Palestine Museum, US. This tragedy opens up a debate about how we best memorialise the creativity of those whose works have been destroyed by armed conflict? As he observes:

Every phase of an artist's life is characterised by a unique and special experience reflected in the artworks. I have gone through various phases that encompass drawing, colour painting, sculpture, collage, printmaking and engraving. Each work results from an experience that is different in form and content from the previous one. The war has expanded my intellectual and visual horizons, allowing me to observe its effects in daily life, strengthening my expressive capacity and finding new ways to express the situation in Gaza which, paradoxically, represents fertile ground for creativity.

In 2022 the Venice Biennale Arte collection, titled *From Palestine with Art*, was proposed by the Palestine Museum US. Due to political pressure on the Biennale's organisers, the exhibition (envisaged for) *Foreigners in Their Homeland* was not recently included. Mohammed explains:

The Palestinian project that was presented by the Palestine Museum, US was rejected. A 'double standard'

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emerged: the Israeli project was approved and included in the Biennale's activities...Nevertheless, thanks to the Palestinian Museum, US's alternative exhibition, set up in Venice, (we) were able to represent Palestinian art, internationally.

Schizocartography is invaluable in fleshing out the underbelly of street subcultures, such as how a society's sense of politics is expressed in its streetscape, like as political graffiti. There are diverse forms of public theatre and avenues of potential activism. As Muhammed also argues:

Investing in art is no less important than resistance activity and political action. The Palestinian people's struggle is a just cause that deserves to be supported...I believe that art is a means to narrate the Palestinian story: we don't need someone to translate our art to the world, the common denominator among people is the visual language.

The resistance art of Mohammed Alhaj is an exemplar of how schizocartography offers a method of cartography as an alternative to dominant power structures. In defiance, the work of people like Mohammed Alhaj, attempts to reveal the aesthetic and ideological contradictions that appear in urban space. It does this while simultaneously reclaiming the subjectivity of individuals, by enabling new modes of creative expression. Schizocartography thereby uniquely challenges anti-production. It robustly takes to task the homogenizing character of overriding forms which seek to silence heterogeneous voices. This is shown even in the way in which Mohammed Alhaj's paintings have found themselves distilled into the popular culture of a city like Venice.

Conclusions

Schizocartography contributes to our deeper understanding of the social contours of transition or crisis. By combining the insights of philosophy, politics and political geography, this discipline helps us map the impact of phenomena such as social protest in urban environments. How societies express their emotions in public space is demonstrated not just by riots and organized or even *ad hoc* demonstrations, but also by a wide range of different, more subtle forms of assemblages. In the artwork of Mohammed Alhaj we see how one Gazan artist may have impact beyond the bounds of a single studio. This is all the more manifest when that studio is destroyed by bombs, and on-location news reportage is banned. Even in those worst communal moments of sacrifice, the artistic expression of that society offers both a form of memory and a space to dwell in. This is a lesson of great resonance.

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Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning and holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.