

# Art in Times of the Student Intifada, or How on Earth am I Supposed to Study Right Now?

Nena M. Ackert

The white fathers told us,  
I think therefore I am;  
and the black mothers in each of us – the poet –  
whispers in our dreams,  
I feel therefore I can be free.  
— Audre Lorde, 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury'



*Image 1.* Painting *A Free Gaza* by unknown artist, displayed at Shireen Abu Akleh Square on Woudestein Campus, Erasmus University Rotterdam. Photo by Samir Abdullayev for Erasmus Magazine on May 31, 2024

The most recent genocidal war on Gaza has led to a renewed global uprising of students fighting the complicity of institutions and governments in the ongoing genocide, occupation and apartheid regime. As I was first writing this essay in June 2024, we were counting 174 solidarity encampments for Palestine around the world. What makes such an encampment? Besides the obvious necessities (a location, protestors and tents), another common feature is art such as drawings, posters, banners, movie screenings, music and poetry. At first glance one might think that art is used to embellish the camps, or that it is supposed to make it more fun or interesting to take part in them. While this is not necessarily untrue, there is more to the role of art at the solidarity encampments.

Much has been said about the importance of art for political movements, from its use as a tool for propaganda, to its ability to arouse emotions or its function as a community-building practice. Rather than a conceptual contribution to this debate, this essay is a reflective engagement with a concrete work of art. It was written for a course on aesthetics that took place simultaneously with the protest camp for Palestinian liberation at the Erasmus University. As the declared 'global student intifada' had reached our

campus, I was thinking: *how on earth am I supposed to study right now?* My course work seemed purposeless in light of anything that could be done to contribute to the camp. The mere ability to study seemed shameful, particularly in light of the scholasticide in Gaza.<sup>1</sup> The only place where I felt justified to study was the camp. But studying at the camp did not mean simply doing my usual course work. It was a different kind of studying altogether – studying on campus but against the university.

At the camp I encountered the poem ‘If I must die,’ written by the martyred Palestinian writer, poet and activist Refaat Alareer. He opens the poem, written for his daughter, with the words “If I must die, you must live” and proceeds to provide instructions for what to do should he be killed. He asks for his story to be told, his things to be sold, and that a kite be made out of cloth and string that should rise above Gaza, giving the children a sign of love and hope.

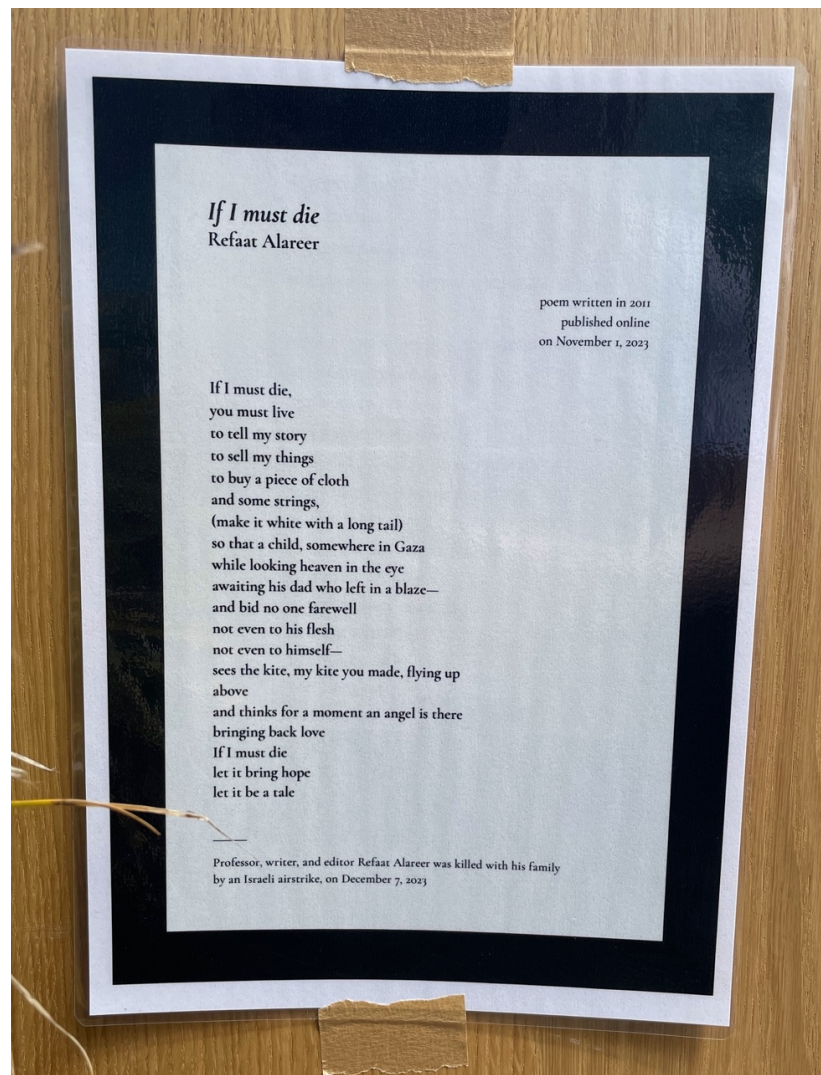


Image 2. Poem ‘If I must die’ displayed at the Jenin Community Library of the encampment at Shireen Abu Akleh Square on Woudestein Campus, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

In this essay I aim to illustrate the potential role of poetry in protest movements through the example of ‘If I must die.’ I will bring Alareer’s poem into conversation with the work of important authors from the history of aesthetics. I will begin with G.W.F. Hegel’s *Lectures on Fine Art* that includes his analysis of poetry as the most advanced form of art due to its expression of inner truth and freedom. Then, I will

<sup>1</sup> The term ‘scholasticide’ is often used to denote the systematic eradication of educational infrastructure. When I started writing this essay, all university buildings in Gaza had been destroyed and most schools had been destroyed or damaged. Students and teachers had been killed, wounded or displaced and survivors were struggling to follow their education. As one Palestinian student is quoted in an article for the Middle East Eye: “I watch my lectures while the Israeli army is bombing the area where I am taking shelter” (See: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-gaza-war-education-students-fight-keep-learning>).

turn to Audre Lorde's essay 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury' to problematize Hegel's theory and to show how my reading of her theory of poetry as a means for liberation bears on the analysis of Refaat Alareer's poem. Lastly, with Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,' I consider the dissemination of the poem through digital technologies and the importance of the encampment as a form of collective action. I argue that the reading of 'If I must die' at the Palestine solidarity encampments offers an example of how art can be politically potent under capitalism. Next to a philosophical engagement with Alareer's poem, this essay was from its beginning an attempt at grappling with being a philosophy student at a university in the imperial core at the time of the genocide in Gaza.

### From Expressions of Freedom to Means for Liberation

In his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel (2011, 45) approaches artistic beauty as an object of scientific study. He situates art in his greater philosophical system by explaining its role in the unfolding of *Spirit* (48). Before turning to Hegel's theory of art and poetry, it is important to understand some fundamental aspects of his system. One way to interpret what Hegel means with Spirit, is to understand it as an all-encompassing, self-conscious and self-determining kind of reason, that produces everything that is external and material. There is a productive tension between the finite external material world and the infinite internal Spirit. The external material world is simultaneously subsumed under the force of Spirit (its producer), and integrated in it as a step towards the realization of Spirit (Da Silva 2007, 70-71). Consequently, Hegel is a holistic thinker for whom truth lies in the whole and everything finite is determined by the whole (1807, *Vorrede*).

Hegel argues that through its content, art approximates the idea of beauty contained in Spirit, "while its form is the configuration of sensuous material." (2011, 47) He classifies art in three categories based on the relationship between meaning (content) and shape (form) that constitutes an art-form. While symbolic art such as architecture is predominantly determined by its form, in classical art, such as Ancient Greek sculpture, content and form are in harmony (50-51). Lastly, in romantic art the manifestation of the idea (content) transcends the materiality of art (form), since the idea is developed to a degree that cannot be represented externally (52-53). Hegel classifies poetry as romantic art. He states that

Poetry is the universal art of the spirit which has become free in itself and which is not tied down for its realization to external sensuous material; instead, it launches out exclusively in the inner space and the inner time of ideas and feelings. (57)

He argues that poetry does not only transcend the materiality of art but "in poetry the external material is altogether degraded as worthless" (57). By overcoming the external material world, for Hegel, poetry approaches the realm of freedom (57). And in doing so, it fulfills the purpose he assigns to art which is "the creation of beautiful objects in which the true character of freedom is given sensuous expression" (Houlgate 2024). Thus, what makes art beautiful for Hegel is the expression of freedom which allows us "to become aware of who we truly are" (Houlgate 2024).

Prior to the application of Hegel's theory, it is important to note his racism. He states that the ideas of 'non-Europeans' are "indeterminate" or "determined badly" (Hegel 2011, 49). He believed that while great craftsmanship can be found outside of Europe, beautiful art can only be created by the enlightened European subject (49). We can assume that Hegel would not have considered poetry by a Palestinian writer the kind of art in which an expression of truth and freedom can be found. Thus, I am intentionally misusing Hegel's philosophy of art through the momentary suspension of his racism for my analysis.

Following Hegel, we can understand the poem 'If I must die' as an expression of freedom and truth. We can read Alareer as pointing towards the existence of freedom, even under extreme oppression. The



poem describes the constant threat of death in Gaza, but it also signifies the possibility of hope and love under these circumstances. It reminds us that there is always something that escapes oppression. The poem signifies that the deaths of Palestinian martyrs are not mere tragedies. It opposes the dehumanization and victimization of the Palestinians in Gaza by showing that they are not helpless victims and that their cruel circumstances have not robbed them of their humanity and agency. Therefore, the reading of the poem at the solidarity encampments has been a way to fight this discourse in the imperial core.

As we have seen, through Hegel we can understand 'If I must die' as an expression of freedom and truth. However, there are more fundamental problems with Hegel's philosophy than his overtly racist world view. He has for example been criticized for categorically devaluing the external material (Da Silva 2007, 70-71). By turning to Audre Lorde, I want to critique Hegel's theory of poetry and show how her account allows us to recognize the potential of poetry to not only express freedom and truth, but to yield concrete action.

In her essay 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury,' Audre Lorde (2017) critiques the predominant understanding of poetry in the white androcentric canon and she offers her alternative understanding of women's poetry as a means for liberation. Lorde argues that throughout the white androcentric tradition, ideas have been understood as the catalysts of freedom. Consequently, experiences and feelings have been subordinated to thought, devalued, and their power to produce knowledge and liberatory action has been denied (8). We can identify this in Hegel's system, where feelings and experiences are regarded as mere moments in the unfolding of Spirit, while ideas supposedly exist independently from the material world as they are part of the force of Spirit. He makes this clear when he argues that in poetry the external material world is overcome and made "worthless" (Hegel 2011, 57). For Lorde (2017, 7), however, ideas are not transcendent units; they already exist in our feelings and experiences. In her essay, she shows how women's poetry invalidates and overcomes the supposed dichotomies of experiences and ideas, the external and the internal, the material and the transcendent. She writes:

I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. (8)

Contrary to Hegel's understanding of poetry as the overcoming of the external material through the approximate expression of the idea of freedom, Lorde argues that poetry has the potential to *distil ideas from experience*. She writes that in revolutionary poetry "hopes and dreams" are articulated and turned into "the most radical and daring ideas," which inform action (8-9). For Lorde, ideas are not the catalysts of freedom, feelings are (9-10). In her account, poetry has a strong pedagogical function because it enables us to make sense of our lived experience and to figure out how to relate and respond to it. We can also identify a pedagogical function of poetry in Hegel, as he believes that it teaches us about inner truths (Houlgate 2024). However, there is an important difference. For Hegel, poetry is an expression of abstract truth, while for Lorde it is a process of learning from concrete existence. For Hegel poetry is *expressive*. For Lorde it is *creative, transformative* and *activating*.

The evolution from poetry as a mere expression of freedom in Hegel, to poetry as a means for liberation in Lorde, has strong implications for the analysis of Refaat Alareer's poem.<sup>2</sup> Lorde's text points

---

<sup>2</sup> Even though Lorde's essay was originally written about women's poetry, I believe that her arguments can be expanded to the poetry of all people experiencing oppression regardless of gender.

to the heart of 'If I must die,' which should not only be considered as an expression of truth and freedom but as a call to liberatory action. The poem arises from the morbid reality of life in Gaza. But the focus is not on death, it is on hope and survival. The horror of another person dead is turned into what Lorde calls "tangible action." (2017, 8) The liberating act Alareer's poem inspires is that of not giving up, holding on to a revolutionary hope. Neither the content of the poem nor its role or effects in the solidarity movement can be understood without its connection to the external material world. 'If I must die' is a poem that springs from the experiences of its author. At its core is the desire to spread love and hope despite oppression and death, through equally material ways symbolized by a kite in the sky above Gaza. It is not a sole expression of transcendent ideas, as Hegel suggests, but better understood through Lorde's understanding of poetry as embodying radical ideas, distilled from experience, that inspire concrete action.

### From Action to Collective Action

So far, I have shown how we can move from an understanding of poetry as an expression of freedom in Hegel to poetry as a means for liberation in Lorde. Lorde (2017, 8) describes the kind of action that poetry can bring about as tangible, lasting, liberating and transformative. Regarding the role of the poem 'If I must die' in the solidarity movement, I find it important to highlight the *collective* action the poem supports. I will do so by turning to Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.'

Benjamin aims to formulate concepts and ideas on art that are useless for fascism but fruitful for a "revolutionary politics of art" (Lindner 2011, 97, my translation). At the core of the text is Benjamin's analysis of how techno-capitalist transformation affects the sociopolitical status and function of art (116). Even though he wrote this essay almost a century ago, and technological innovation has progressed immensely since then, it is no less relevant today in light of modern digital technology. Benjamin invites us to turn towards the effects of the "delocalization of art" and to ask the question whether and how art can acquire revolutionary potency (115, my translation). What does it mean for the struggle for Palestinian liberation that the poem 'If I must die' can travel across the globe through one click of a button, to be read in spaces such as the solidarity encampments?

Benjamin argues that the 'technological reproducibility' of art has changed its social function, it has become fundamentally political (Benjamin 2006, 256-7).<sup>3</sup> Its singular and local existence has been replaced by its mass existence (Benjamin 2011, 15). Consequently, art has become increasingly commodified (22), but its potential to mobilize the masses has also expanded (51). On November 1, 2023, Refaat Alareer posted his poem on Twitter. Around eight months later it had over 33 million views, demonstrating the potential of digital technologies to spread art through the masses, even from a territory under military siege.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin emphasizes that the mere dissemination of art through the masses itself does not make it revolutionary by contrasting the relation of art to fascism with the relation of art to communism. He argues that fascism *aestheticizes* politics by creating sensations that move people while not affecting any material changes in property relations (53-5). This phenomenon is at its peak during war, when extermination becomes "aesthetic pleasure" (Benjamin 2006, 270). We can observe this in the social media feeds of soldiers of the Israeli Defense Forces who display their enjoyment of murder and destruction

<sup>3</sup> My reading of Benjamin's essay is based on the German original of the third edition published by Reclam in 2011. For the direct quotes I refer to the translation in *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940* published by Harvard University Press in 2006.

<sup>4</sup> To avoid presenting (digital) technology in an overly optimistic light, I find it important to acknowledge how technological innovation has had horrific consequences for the Palestinian people because of its crucial role in war and genocide. Most significantly, in the form of military and policing technologies. For an example of the role of digital technologies, see this article: <https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/>.

(Toler et al. 2024).<sup>5</sup> Communism, in contrast *politicizes* art, since it mobilizes it to effect changes in property relations (55).<sup>6</sup> He argues that art cannot be revolutionary as long as it is regulated by capital (34-35).

This interpretation of Benjamin allows me to consider the encampment itself as an important factor for the political power of Alareer's poem. Reading it at the encampment means reading it in a small counterspace within and against imperialist capitalism. The communal life in the camp is in many ways an inversion of the life outside the camp. Usually, its inhabitants take care of each other and resources collectively. Because 'If I must die' is not only made available for the masses, but is displayed and read at the camps, the poem connects those fighting the complicity of their institutions with the broader Palestine liberation movement. And, most importantly, it contributes to the transformation of property relations, even if 'only' in the limited sense of supporting the fight for Palestinian liberation through the financial and political divestment of universities.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is at the encampment where the revolutionary force of Alareer's poem is amplified through its support of collective action.

### Learn, Unite, Fight!

Audre Lorde writes that poetry "lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before." (2017, 9) She argues that it can promote radical change which explains the appeal of poetry for revolutionary political movements. But how does poetry do that? Following the thinkers used for this essay, through its pedagogical ability and the potential to support collective action.

Under the ongoing military siege, many of the most fundamental freedoms of Palestinians in Gaza are restricted. However, we saw how poetry, through its expressive capacity, can teach us that some freedom remains despite extreme oppression and violence. In doing so, the reading of the poem can serve to counteract the dehumanization and victimization of Palestinians. However, learning from poetry is not a process of enlightenment by transcendent ideas but one that is entangled with the very material existence of the author. This is painfully clear in Refaat Alareer's poem. 'If I must die' is about nurturing hope and love in the face of the morbid reality of life in Gaza, especially during moments of intensified Israeli violence. It demonstrates the revolutionary capacity that Lorde ascribes to poetry: to turn experiences and feelings into radical ideas that inspire concrete action. Alareer's poem is not merely an expression of freedom that can teach us something, but a means for liberation.

While learning about the history and the current situation of Palestine is essential, ultimately, collective action is necessary for radical change. Reading Alareer's poem has the potential to inspire and support such collective action. We can turn its teachings into action right here at the university. As philosophers, we think of ourselves as critical thinkers who can elucidate contemporary problems by asking different questions, offering alternative viewpoints and conducting thorough analyses. But sometimes the deepest lesson of our theory is to get up and join a fight.

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, a video coordinating the mix of a war song on DJ decks with the bombing of houses in the background.

<sup>6</sup> The abolition of private property and the collectivisation of the means of production are at the core of communism. Hence Benjamin's emphasis on property relations.

<sup>7</sup> For an explanation of how the collaboration with Israeli institutions makes the Erasmus University complicit in Israel's ongoing genocide and apartheid regime, see the open letter of staff members from May 30, 2024: <https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/2024/06/07/open-letter-from-staff-at-erasmus-cut-all-ties-with-israeli-academic-institutions/>

## References

- Abdullayev, Samir. 2024. "Protesters camp overnight, plan on staying 'until university acknowledges demands.'" *Erasmus Magazine*, May 31. <https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/en/2024/05/31/protesters-camp-overnight-plan-on-staying-until-university-acknowledges-demands/>.
- Alareer, Refaat. 2023. "If I must die." <https://ifimustdie.net/>.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2006. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version." In *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2011. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Philipp Reclam jun. Verlag GmbH.
- Da Silva, Denise Ferreira. 2007. *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1807. *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/hegel/phaenom/phavorr2.html>.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2011. "Extracts from Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art." In *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, edited by Clive Cazeaux. Second edition. Routledge.
- Houlgate, Stephen. 2024. "Hegel's Aesthetics." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/hegel-aesthetics/>.
- Lindner, Burkhardt. 2011. "Nachwort." In Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Philipp Reclam jun. Verlag GmbH.
- Lorde, Audre. 2017. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." In *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. Silver Press.
- Toler, Aric, Sarah Kerr, Adam Sella, Arjeta Lajka, and Chevaz Clarke. 2024. "What Israeli Soldiers' Videos Reveal: Cheering Destruction and Mocking Gazans." *New York Times*, February 6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/world/middleeast/israel-idf-soldiers-war-social-media-video.html>.