Fig. 49 Nothing is impossible to Change

9. Utopian Practices of Video-Activism

»Nada deve ser impossivel de mudar«[1]

This research started with the description of a video about police violence in Switzerland during Art Basel. Three years earlier, on 17 December 2010, Tarek el-Tayeb Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid. Seventeen days later, Bouazizi died from his injuries. His death is remembered for sparking the Arab Spring – a wave of contestations characterized by the occupation of central urban sites and the global dissemination of audiovisuals via social networks. Videos became a crucial repertoire of contention, spreading scenes of violent oppression of activists around the world. Almost a decade later, on 25 May 2020, George Floyd was pushed to the ground and choked to death by a police officer in the city of Minneapolis. Darnella Frazier filmed this violent scene on her smartphone. Her video evidence ignited largescale protests against police brutality and structural racism in the US and beyond.[2] A list that could be extended infinitely.

1 »Nothing is imposible to change« is a quote of theater producer Bertolt-Brecht, which stands in contrast to Margrit Thatcher's ›There is no Alternative‹ principle, when imposing anti-poor austerity measures.

2 Seventeen-year-old Frazier, who happened to be present when the police officer Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, is reportedly traumatized by witnessing the police brutality. Ramsey Orta, the videographer who filmed the killing of Eric Garner in New York City in 2014, was sentenced to four years in prison after filming the NYPD officer chocking Garner to death. Officially

A local protest in Switzerland, Arab Spring revolts across the MENA region and the Black Lives Matter protests in the USA span over a decade and three continents, but they have one thing in common. Audiovisual recordings shaped not only how we memorize these events, but the course of events itself by creating real-time feedback loops. Especially videos of violence often played a crucial role in sparking explosions of outrage and bringing people to the streets. Therefore it is little surprising that this research about the emerging practices of video activism in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro ended with descriptions of the sometimes deadly violence that the cameras of activists and witnesses capture.

The power that new technologies in the form of smartphones and social media brought to urban movements unfolded in the early 2010s in full force and with complex effects. Today in 2025, we find ourselves on the edge of another new digital era being kickstarted by the rapid advance of A.I. technologies. The final chapter presents first, a reflection on the methodological approach and how it shaped the findings of the study of video activism. Second, a brief comparison between the two sites of research – Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town – draws attention to the required context sensitivity when studying globalized technologies such as smartphones and social media. Third, the conclusion describes how video activist practices constantly oscillate between the streets and the net, between a here and there, and power and vulnerability. The notion of utopian practices of video activism reconnects the empirical investigations with conceptual questions, pointing a way forward in how we can think digitalizing the right to the city through the prism of video activism.

9.1 Studying Bottom-Up Video Activism

In the early 2010s, discourses that described the Arab Spring as being facilitated by the ›new liberation technologies‹ dominated, popularizing techno-utopian visions in which narratives of modernization and technological progress that were replete with colonial stereotypes reverberated. Although these debates inspired my research,[3] I approached such

the charges brought against Orta were not related to his documentation of police brutality. Dennis Flores expresses strong doubts to the claim that the prosecution of Orta was unrelated to his courage to film the killing of Eric Garner. The dangers in which eyewitnesses place themselves when filming acts of police aggression is described in detail in: Nevett, »George Floyd: The Personal Cost of Filming Police Brutality.«

3 Looking back, my visit to this exhibition »Kairo. Neue Bilder einer Andauernden Revolution« (Cairo. New Images of an Ongoing Revolution) left a

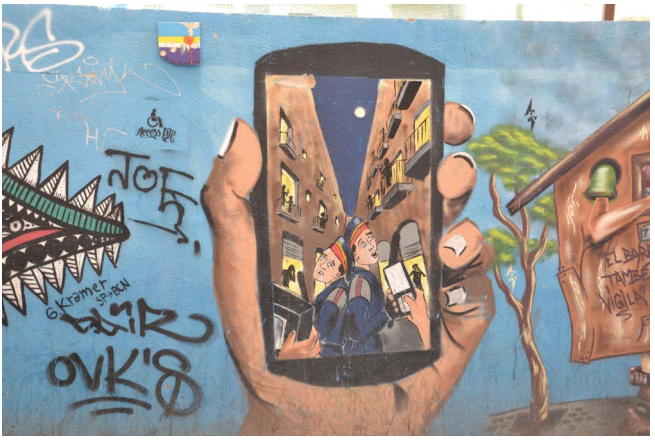

Fig. 50 Street Art

grand narratives with great skepticism, since they wrote the inhabitants and particularities of the places that they described out of the histories they told. Dichotomies that are rooted in techno-determinist modernization theories are incapable of understanding the nuances of bottom-up video production on the ground. Simplified accounts written form a distance by journalists and academics following social media debates alone, run the risk of failing to recognize the simultaneous power and vulnerability of videographers who risk their personal safety to film protests and police violence. Video activism is made by people in particular places, not by technologies in empty spaces.

The multi-sited ethnographic study presented here, attempted to describe the practices of video activists as ›doing video activism‹. Five features from a critical, multi-sited ethnographic approach are relevant to this study: my focus on a perspective ›from within‹; my positionality in relation to my field of research; my emphasis on specific contexts; my approach to video activism as a practice; and my rejection of Cartesian binaries. By adopting such an approach, I contextualized video making – combining traditional media analysis of the videos with investigations of practices happening in the process of their production. By positioning video activism as an urban phenomenon, as a practice of bottom-up city making, the research examined audiovisuals not merely as technology,

> strong impression on me and inspired me down the path that led to the research presented in this book. The exhibition about the 2011 revolution in Egypt was presented at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg in 2013. It presented artists', activists' and citizens' documentations alongside a rich collection of videos. In the confined space of the exhibition hall, these documents evoked an intense and disturbing sense of immediacy.

text, or testimony,[4] but as a process combining a range of practices. However, the methodological decisions carry critical consequences to position the findings, which created an account of positioned knowledge.

First, as producer of ethnographic knowledge, I am writing from a particular position the same way a cameraperson films from a particular angle. The angle chosen is »from within« the video activist movements rather than looking down on them – therefore more often than not, sharing their perspectives. Hence, I have privileged perspectives of (video-)activists over those of other actors such as police officers, politicians, urban planners or business elites. My method of empirical data collection allowed me to take the knowledge of video activists seriously and recognize their expertise in urban politics and bottom-up city making, while more top-down perspectives – for example by police officers or government agencies – are not systematically reflected in my accounts.

Secondly, employing claims to objectivity to create authoritarian and universal statements written from a fictional distance is not what this research attempts to do. Instead of denying subjectivity, I have attempted to make my positionality transparent and reflect on the effects throughout the research and writing. I avoided speculations – which can be a challenging task when faced with opaque organizations such as social media corporations – and clearly based the writing on the accounts of respondents, triangulated with solid evidence wherever possible. Given the highly politicized topic and the strong emotions that audiovisuals can stir up, I aimed at remaining reflexive which required numerous rewritings and extra-time from research to publication. However, certain political decisions – for example the ludicrous claim of some to position fascism as emancipatory or libertarians calling egoism a moral duty – are wholeheartedly rejected.

Every video has a story. Videos of protests and police violence do not simply appear online, they are produced in specific contexts. By examining video activism as practiced in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro I aimed at emphasizing the specificity of localized media production vis-à-vis the worldwide availability of new communication technologies and their capacity to disseminate audiovisuals on a global scale. Since the time of conducting this research, the technological, social, political, and economic landscapes changed significantly. Therefore, it is important not to hastily transpose these findings to different spatial or temporal contexts.

These three positionings should be considered for the findings presented from Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro.

4 Askanius, »Video Activism as Technology, Text, Testimony – or Practices?,« 178.

9.2 Video Activism in Rio and Cape Town

> »There is no way of studying the protest without studying the web. The web and the streets are two sides of the same coin.«[5]

Examining the period from 2010 to 2018 – the time when smartphones and social media accounts became ubiquitous – the work shows how the digital thread became interwoven into the urban fabrics of Cape Town and Rio. The practices of video activism in Cape Town and Rio demonstrate that these technologies were not simply inserted into an empty space,[6] but became embedded in the very specificities that characterize these two divided cities and their various urban movements.

Digital video activism hence reflects urban structures and morphologies as well as media landscapes and evolving digital architectures. Bottom-up video production at times challenges and at other times reproduces the existing fault lines in the streets and on the net, especially when inserted in context of deeply divided cities.

Cape Town is marked by a decades-long history of strict racial segregation during which marginalized urban citizens were banished from the center to the city's peripheries. This socio-geographical compartmentalization reflects in a spatialized belt model of marginalization. Rich and white people being overrepresented in the city center and along the shorelines and economically disadvantaged people of color concentrating in far outstretched Cape Flats and the urban peripheries. A fragmentation reflected in the city's urban movements and how certain urban citizens in practice enjoy more rights than others. Political mobilization at the urban margins – often summed up under the umbrella term ›service delivery protests‹ – struggled to establish broad coalitions without the assistance of external allies and intermediaries. The segregation in urban spaces is mirrored online, where participants in Service Delivery Protests and members of marginalized communities experienced

5 See (Vid.04, Mariano, Desde Junho 1) for a description by Esther Solano, Professor of Media Studies, of the inextricable connections between the ›streets‹ and the ›net‹ during the Jornadas de Junho in Brazil in 2013.

6 A model of time separated from space as a three-dimensional container, as proposed in Cartesian philosophy, enabled colonialists to assert that their occupation of territories constituted the filling of empty spaces, thus allowing them to completely disregard the existence and histories of local populations. A deeper analysis of how corporate social media reiterates such discourses on space deserves careful conceptual consideration. The works of Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias on data colonialism offer promising entry points to this discussion, see: Couldry and Mejias, »Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject«.

diminished control over the audiovisual representations used to portray them. Unlike the RMF student movement, their protests were often ignored or labeled as violent.

The RMF student activist movement had the capacity to establish its own successful Facebook distribution channel, on which it shared self-produced activist videos[7] thereby being able to make more extensive and effective use of audio-visuals.[8] Overall, bottom-up video production in Cape Town played a minor role during the examined period, as a journalist and video activist from Cape Town confirms: »In reality, video is something that requires expertise and time. It is something that probably hasn't featured as effectively as it could have. It is happening in an ad hoc way [in Cape Town].«[9]

The role of journalist videos remained dominant in covering protests, providing more or less sympathetic views about urban movements and their cries and demands. Here the relatively free but somewhat biased media landscape and the massive challenges of internet access played a significant role. Second, witness video production for protests as a form of bottom-up recording is present in Cape Town, but struggles to capture much attention. However, witness videos played a significant role in documenting acts of violence in Cape Town, although exposing videographers to significant threats. Finally, activist video production in Cape Town appears as ›emerging practice‹,[10] driven strongly by few engaged individuals and journalists aligned with certain movements such as the students RMF movement or single political interventions such as the Marikana settlement.

Although Rio de Janeiro is as divided as Cape Town, its socio-spatial divisions differ significantly in that they are reminiscent of a mosaic: favelas dotted all over the hilly terrain bordering on pockets of wealth right across the city.[11] Rio's hosting of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic

7 Furthermore, the student activists could at least partially rely on sympathetic journalists to provide them with a media platform on which to express their views.

8 In general, urban social movements in Cape Town have placed more emphasis on setting agendas via ›#hashtags‹ than through audio-visual production due to the lack of accessible and affordable internet in South Africa.

9 Int. 28, Video Activist, Cape Town, 12 August 2016.

10 In the past years video production has increased significantly and the use of video by the Black Lives Matter movement is likely to further strengthen bottom-up video production. For example, a coalition of NGOs has started a campaign to gather documented police violence against poor and black residents during the Covid-19 lockdown (Harrisberg, »›Critical for Accountability‹: South Africans Go Online to Document Police Brutality«).

11 Socio-economic marginalization is deeply entrenched and sustained for certain population groups in Rio, but marginalization does not equate with living on the geographical peripheries of the city.

Games, both of which were envisaged as catalysts for urban transformation, in reality pushed an agenda of neoliberal urbanization.[12] In resistance to this, the intense grassroots mobilization that constituted the Jornadas de Junho temporarily brought together a diverse multitude of citizens in a series of protest marches in June 2013. With more than a million people taking to the streets in June of 2013, the Jornadas de Junho turned into a collective experience of protest. The cathartic moment offered by the Jornadas de Junho protests – as well as the violent repression and misrepresentation in mass media – fostered the development of a more unified scene of video activist collectives, which now cover most protests in the city center as well as some in marginalized areas such as the Maré favela. To grasp the emerging landscape of bottom-up video production it is worth returning once more the typology of journalist, witness, and activist videos.

Journalist video production and their reporting on protests as well as acts of police violence in Rio de Janeiro can be described overall as strongly biased and sensationalists from a perspective of urban protesters and victims of (lethal) police attacks in city's favelas. This perceived one-sidedness is rooted in the legacies of Brazil's dictatorship, reflects the deep race and class divisions in Brazil, and most of all, triggered a powerful movement to collectively organize video activism.

Witness video making plays a minor role in amplifying voices of protesters – with exceptions such as the crowd sourcing of information to uncover the false allegations by police against Bruno in 2015 – but is crucially important in documenting violence. Coverage of unpredictable acts of (lethal) police violence in the favelas largely depends on the presence of eyewitness videographers. But bottom-up video production should not be constrained to examining only the recording of videos but equally look at responsibility in the act of disseminating such dangerous evidence. The examples of thinking about videographers' safety first, before releasing any material, was powerfully illustrated by the case of the police killing of Eduardo in Morro da Providencia. Why witness video production is important for recording police violence, it does depend to a certain extent on activist networks offering responsible distribution channels.

In Rio de Janeiro, the 2013 Jornadas fostered a unifying moment and cathartic experience, out of which numerous collectively organized video activist groups emerged. These collectives in tendency still overrepresented white and middle-class Cariocas, but over the years aimed to

12 Elites – such as representatives of the city and state governments of Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian government, construction companies, and FIFA and the IOC – aimed to create a world-class image of the city that would attract investors and tourists at the same time as it further marginalized the already marginalized. Relocation programs, the violent ›pacification‹ of favelas by the UPP, and the heavy-handed suppression of emancipatory urban movements were the results of this top-down process of neoliberal urbanization.

diversify themselves and continuously attempted to broaden their coverage beyond protests in the urban center.[13] Those collectives practicing video activism on an unprecedented scale, turning Rio de Janeiro into hub of video activism with global significance.

To transcend these locally specificities describing how witness and activist video making emerged as a form of bottom-up city making, the next section presents three productive tensions before moving to a conceptual proposal to respond to the initial question about how video activism contributed to the digitalization of the right to the city.

9.3 Video Activist Practices In-Between

> »But for now the only existing transparency is that of the users, who become more and more machine readable. Transparency applies to the masses, not to the systems of power, governments included.«[14]

Doing video activism on the ground is often messy and complicated, since video activism cannot operate outside the contradictions that the system of neoliberal capitalism simultaneously imposes on the in-betweens of the ›streets‹ and the ›net‹, between the ›here‹ and ›there‹ and between ›power‹ and ›vulnerability‹. This presents three productive tensions, between which my research continuously oscillated and that reflect the challenges that utopian practices of video activism face in the phase of digitalizing the right to the city. The mutual infiltrations taking place in the evolving digital-urban nexus show how simplified dichotomies of digitalization such as »online/ offline, digital/ analog, old/new«[15] should be given up. Instead, the starting point is to adopt »an analytical approach anchored in practice theory [that] puts us [researchers of video activism] in position to ask holistic questions.«[16]

With the task of ›spatializing‹ bottom-up politics with Henri Lefebvre and the attempt of moving beyond the legacies of Cartesian dualism as expressed by Manuel Castells, the first step of the analysis is to show how urban inequalities on ›the streets‹ are reproduced ›in the net‹ of digital communication.

13 A more detailed analysis of this process is emblematically captured in an interview with video activists from Mídia Independente Coeltiva in: Geuder, »From Expansion to Empowerment«, 2023.

14 Ippolita, 10.

15 Askanius, »Video Activism as Technology, Text, Testimony – or Practices?,« 137.

16 Askanius, »Video Activism as Technology, Text, Testimony – or Practices?,« 137.

Between the Streets & the Net

Oscillating between the streets and the net is part and parcel of the practices of video activism. What I described as the digital-urban nexus in this work, is the fact that the build environments of concrete streets and corners overlap, interact, and mutually infiltrate digitalized spheres that are often conceptualized as placeless. When video activists capture protests and police violence with their cameras and post these testimonies online, they tinker with notions of being place-bound by making evidence globally accessible. However, video activist practices cannot be reduced to either the offline or online realm but are inherently based in both.

Oscillating between the streets and the net signifies a playful connection, where time and space are reconnected through audiovisual representations – literally producing space itself. The counter-hegemonic video production has the capacity to recenter attention to otherwise marginalized areas when for example documenting police violence in Favelas. And beyond the geography it has the potential to store historical moments in audiovisual form, making it accessible to generations of viewers who may not have been born yet at the time of a protest. In this sense video activist practices play a crucial role in transcending time and space without ever leaving their boundedness to place itself. In contrast, video activists as well eyewitnesses often have an intricate knowledge of the places and situations they film. They often carry intricate knowledge of the street corners where they film a protest march, which viewers of their footage not necessarily possess.

In this sense, the oscillation between the streets and the net produces its own dynamics not least in respect to social movement organizing and mobilization. While for some audiences the videos of protest and police violence are only creating »weak ties« to social movements and their causes, for other audiences – often living in the area and potentially being involved with activism already – these videos have the function of reaffirming their activism and fostering ideas of belonging. Seeing that a protest march gathered attention not only on the streets, but online as well, has become a quintessential part of signifying it as relevant. Especially since the beginnings of digital video activism in the 2010s, this mirrored digital audiovisual presence is a core element in making claims heard and seen.

Over and over, it has been shown how single videos can play a major role in sparking outrage, leading to mobilizations that bring people to the streets. The video showing the beating of Rodney King in 1992 in Los Angeles is one of the most famous examples globally. While this footage was distributed via old gatekeepers of TV channels, today's new digital video activism depends on entirely different gatekeepers who reshape the existing topographies of visibility. Viral videos stand at the end of a long tail of

video production and only few of them have a lasting impact, but some do break filter bubbles and enter public discourse here and there.

Between Here & There

The ›here and there‹ of making and distributing videos poses its specific challenges, especially since many of key rules for creation of online attention are tightly controlled and surveilled by opaque actors like privatized social media corporates, while hyper-visibility of violent acts poses its own challenges for victims and their families.

For-profit social media companies, the new gatekeepers of public communication, have taken on an ambivalent role in the process of bottom-up video production. On the one hand, they offer new avenues for urban movements and citizens to disseminate content that amplifies their cries and demands for a right to the city on a global scale. On the other hand, these online platforms enable urban citizens to circumvent the traditional gatekeepers of journalism, as the long struggle between Globo and video activists in Rio illustrates. However, bottom-up video production has also been incorporated into the commercial logic that drives the corporate social media. My interviewees repeatedly expressed their frustration with social media companies for not being politically accountable for their decisions[17] and for failing to offer an economically sustainable model for bottom-up video production.

In contrast to audiovisuals of peaceful protests, which rarely receive significant numbers of views, violence generates attention. My analysis of topographies of visibility showed two types of video typically attracting high levels of attention: witness videos documenting scenes of particularly graphic violence; and videos that are distributed via the established channels of media activist collectives or traditional media outlets. In Cape Town, critical media organizations such as GroundUp fulfil a key role in organizing the dissemination of video materials, whereas in Rio de Janeiro video activist collectives established their own independent distribution channels.

Urban movements in cities in the Global South write themselves into history by appropriating smartphones and social media within their specific spaces. In Cape Town, witness and journalist videos dominate in the display of protests and police violence. The successful appropriation of social media platforms by video activist collectives during the Jornadas and by the student activists of the RMF movement prove that it is possible to

17 A criticism that applies particularly strong to questions of disabling content but touches as well on the opacity of algorithmic decision making for example by using personalization mechanisms.

harness the corporate social media for emancipatory purposes and collectively produce commons. Nevertheless, few repertoires of contention are as dependent on corporate social media platforms as video activism.[18]

To bypass social media corporations and their commodification of digital communication will require resources and organization to provide alternative platforms for video activism. Challenging the resource-rich social media giants and their strategies of commodifying everything for the attention economies they run – which includes profiting of videos documenting violence – requires grassroots organization to stretch beyond their capacities. Especially, when media activist collectives keep low operational budgets to remain independent.

The production of public opinion has unquestionably been fundamentally transformed by corporate social media platforms as well as by the increasingly online consumption of journalism. The potential benefits and dangers brought by the emergence of corporate social media has sparked heated political, scholarly and public debate over the last decade. For its proponents, social media represents a set of ›liberation technologies‹ with the potential to democratize the world. For its opponents, social media creates ›filter bubbles‹ that destroy any sense of common ground, facilitate the proliferation of ›fake news‹, and aid the manipulation of elections. In any case, we can clearly observe a shift from a »here« to a »there« of controlling whose voices can be heard and whose images ought to be seen. As new gatekeepers, corporate social media play a deeply ambivalent role for emancipatory urban movements and their video activists. On the one hand, they allowed to question biased mass media narratives and develop independent media productions by the movement for the movement. On the other hand, corporate social media corporations introduced a new form of algorithmic governance. A control of communication channel that is automatized, invisible, and extremely powerful.

For (video) activists a greater degree of autogestion could only be created by controlling the means of online video distribution itself. It would require to either establish alternative platforms to the corporate giants of Facebook, Google, Twitter and others or to democratize the existing tech giants themselves by forcing them to at least make their algorithms transparent in open access code.[19] Especially the latter option appears as hardly realistic. On the other side the former option to create independent, non-profit websites and repositories by video activists for video activist is

18 The large data requirements for circulating videos online has restricted attempts to build independent networks. The collapse of the global Indymedia movement illustrates how bottom-up initiatives struggle to compete with the convenient services offered by corporate social media platforms.

19 Tech advocacy organizations such as the New York City-based NGOs Witness and Data & Society Institute are attempting to raise awareness of the political impact of decisions made by the Silicon Valley tech industry.

more promising. The goal from a perspective of emancipatory bottom-up video production has to be to have decision making closer to the »here« of democratically run collectives than the distant »there« of profit-driven social media corporates run by a hand full of oligarchs in Silicon Valley.

Between Power and & Vulnerability

Video-activism is a form of bottom-up city making, which means that video activists do not only oscillate between the streets and the net or between a here and there, but equally between power and vulnerability in their practices on the ground. Videographers' audio-visual testimonies transpose evidence of violence beyond the constraints of space and time, but the videographers themselves remain embedded in the situations that they document. Being in a position between power and vulnerability can be existential for videographers. They are the ones behind the cameras, whose fate hardly becomes visible. A danger when exposing violence beyond protest marches.

The heuristic typology of videography helps to add nuance to our understanding of power and vulnerability. Journalist videos are produced by professional outsiders, who tend to be least vulnerable due to protection of the media outlet they work for and the international standards that developed to protect the freedoms of the press. For activist videos created by engaged insiders the situation differs. They can rely on a certain level of mutual protection, especially when filming together. However, when states turn to tactics of repression as seen in Brazil under the Bolsonaro presidency, dissidents can become targets of state-led violence. The most vulnerable group of videographers are eyewitnesses filming scenes of violence in the everyday of marginalized communities. While anyone can become a unpredictable spectator – an amateur eyewitness – the levels of protections depend heavily on the training, resources at the hands of videographers. The example of the eyewitness from Providencîa who had to hide after their video was published or the Cape Town police knocking at the door of eyewitnesses are only some of many possible examples to point to.

The number of videos documenting how marginalized urban citizens are injured or lethally attacked by police officers has exploded in the last decade. The capacity to record such evidence is a powerful tool. Often captured in witness videos by individuals who simply »happened to be there,«[20] this act of recording simultaneously places eyewitnesses in a position of vulnerability, exposing them to the risk of retaliation. Videos have the power to expose violence, but doing so is itself a vulnerable act.

20 Int. 38, Researcher, Rio de Janeiro, 8 September 2016.

9.4 Utopian Practices of Video Activism

Fig. 51 Protest at Candelaria

> »Utopia is on the horizon: I walk two steps, it takes two steps back. I walk ten steps and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking.«[21]

The notion of utopian practices highlights the tensions between the utopian ideal of emancipation and the concrete actions and practices required to work towards the ideal.[22] Derived from the right to the city as »concrete utopia«,[23] utopian practices contain an inherent productive contradiction. My research suggests reimagining the concrete utopia of the right to the city by transposing it from its origins in Paris in 1968 to the experiences of bottom-up video production in two cities in the Global South in times of Web 2.0 digitalization. By reasserting the right to the city as a cry and demand into an urban fabric in which digital threads are increasingly interwoven, video activism proposes an alternative to the techno-utopian visions propagated by Silicon Valley's social media corporations.

21 Galeano in: Shukaitis and Graeber, *Constituent Imagination*, 33.

22 In contrast to thinking in dichotomies such as the ›material‹ and the ›ideal‹, dialectical thinking embraces the tension of oscillating between two – or, in Lefebvre's case, usually three – poles. As Cunningham argues in a comparison of three »proto-typical urban theorists« – Walter Benjamin, Manfred Tafuri and Lefebvre – Lefebvre sees in utopias an experimental framework that can be invoked to practice transduction as a particular form of dialectical thinking (Cunningham, »Triangulating Utopia: Benjamin, Lefebvre, Tafuri«, 270).

23 The notion of concrete utopias is credited to German philosopher Ernst Bloch (Bloch, *Geist der Utopie*, 16).

Grounded in an epistemological critique of Cartesian thinking, which separates the online and offline realms into two distinct spheres of reality, I argued that we need to find ways to conceptualize the mutual infiltrations of the ›streets‹ and the ›net‹. By applying the emancipatory claims of the right to the city to video activist practices, I highlighted the multiple interconnections between the making of videos, the production of visibility, and the exposing of violence without having to fall back on dichotomous Cartesian conceptualizations. This conceptual framing grounded in Henri Lefebvre's work leads me to a conceptual proposal of thinking video activism as part and parcel of a broader process of digitalizing the right to the city as utopian practice.

Following the conceptualization of the right to the city earlier in this work, three core challenges drive the utopian practices of video activism – these are, the quest for urban citizenship for all, de-commodifying digital communication and widening autogestion as guiding principles.

Urban Citizenship

> »Use rather than attendance is crucial, because democracy is not a form of intellectual tourism, but a concrete practice.«[24]

Urban citizenship demands that all inhabitants have a »right to rights«.[25] Urban citizenship guarantees basic rights of personal sovereignty and integrity and provides the unquestioned foundation for any struggle for the right to the city and consequently has to be extended to the sphere of a radically democratized emancipatory communication. Social media corporations, as private enterprises, do not address their users as citizens with inalienable rights but instead as customers with use rights that can be arbitrarily granted and denied by the corporation. For the corporations operating in in the model of »surveillance capitalism«, users are primarily a resource whose personal data can be mined.[26]

Ideally, organizing bottom-up video production is a collective endeavor. Forming groups of activists that collectively establish and build up a

24 Ippolita, *The Facebook Aquarium: The Resistible Rise of Anarcho-Capitalism*, 8.

25 Holston, »*Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil.*«

26 Surveillance of users, the impossibility of questioning platforms' decisions to disable content, and lack of transparency in algorithmic governance are characteristics that illustrate how corporate social media does not approach its users as ›citizens‹ endowed with rights. (Geuder, 2023; Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 2019)

channel on social media or, even better, their own website has proven to be the best path for guaranteeing that videos emerging from the bottom up become widely visible. For David Harvey, the right to the city is a »common rather than individual right since this transformation [towards a right to the city] inevitably depends on the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization.«[27] To challenge communicative capitalism online, Jodi Dean argues, efforts of collective organization are necessary. Collective organizing in solidarity amongst media activist collectives has thus far proven as the most efficient strategy to level inequalities, find a voice to speak out against discrimination and violent repressions and work towards an ›urban citizenship‹ that guarantees everyone rights to rights. While urban citizenship has made major progress in attempts to practically secure basic rights for irregularized migrants in cities, it is going to be key to extend these struggles to digital spheres, where the corporatization of the internet undermined basic rights and produces surveilled subjects more than empowered citizens.

Commodification

> »The recent revival of emphasis upon the supposed loss of urban commonalities reflects the seemingly profound impacts of the recent wave of privatizations, enclosures, spatial controls, policing and the surveillance upon the qualities of urban life in general[.]«[28]

Video activism aims to create digital commons instead of commodification through digitalization. Videos that document protests and police violence are shared with no commercial intent. In its early days, the internet had provided a space for the free sharing of information.[29] However, the distribution networks provided by corporate social media platforms insert video activism into a for-profit context. Video activists' videos are thus commodified even as their practices actively defy this process. Attempts to bypass the corporate social media are difficult due to the asymmetry in resources available to bottom-up organizations, on the one hand, and the global tech giants, on the other. This monopolizing of financial resources by a handful of global actors such as Facebook and Google work to the detriment of not only professional journalism but also independent bottom-up initiatives.

27 Harvey, »The Right to the City,« 2008, 23.
28 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 67.
29 In fact, the digital replicability of information is ideally suited to create commons, since the consumption of digitalized data does reduce it.

What my book has strived to show is that we must not stop at a discussion of what is seen emerging on social media; instead, we must delve deeper to investigate the conditions in which this visibility is produced. Thus far, the commodification of public communication by social media corporations has had mostly negative effects in terms of socio-economic inequality. Corporate social media has consistently increased its share of advertising revenue and thus contributed directly to the increasing financial hardships facing independent high-quality journalism. Furthermore, a few powerful social media corporations have concentrated and privatized financial resources on an unprecedented global scale. A redistribution towards bottom-up video activism that aids the establishment of independent websites, revives initiatives such as the Indymedia network,[30] and creates archives that preserve the work of video activists are desperately needed to enable radically democratized forms of communication.

Autogestion

> »There is a need for separate and dedicated places, where the rules are created by the users themselves.«[31]

At the core of this debate is the question of how the autogestion or self-management of urban movements can best be organized. Video activist collectives tread a fine line between independence and inexistence, as my examples from Rio illustrate. External funding threatens the independence of video activist collectives and can open the door to co-optation and a loss of autogestion. However, a strict emphasis on autonomy can ultimately lead to inexistence, which can occur when video activist collectives with insufficient resources refuse to accept any external funding. Such dilemmas are familiar for grassroots political activists, but they are of particular relevance in the context of video activism when regular content production is required to keep established distribution channels functional. Genuine autogestion means that video activist collectives not only control the making of videos but also their distribution. Above all, the independence-inexistence dilemma raises the question of whether it is possible to sustain independent and critical video activist practices while navigating between the twin existential threats of co-optation, on the one hand, and collapse, on the other.

30 Corporate social media negatively affected the decentralized Independent Media Center network (Giraud, »Has Radical Participatory Online Media Really ›Failed‹? Indymedia and Its Legacies«).

31 Ippolita, *The Facebook Aquarium: The Resistible Rise of Anarcho-Capitalism*, 8.

The algorithmic governance imposed by social media corporations creates a set of opaque, top-down rules – for example the use of personalization algorithms[32] – that are decided upon by the shareholders and management of these conglomerates.

As Henri Lefebvre argued, the production of »abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space ›differential space‹.«[33] The production of differential spaces accessible by all, is what the concrete utopia of the right to the city aims at. This vision is what drives many of the emancipatory practices of digital video activism described and stands in opposition to the abstract space of a privatized digital sphere as corporate social media produces it.

Utopian practices of video activism put people before profit. The utopian practices of video activism are defined by the goal to radically democratize communication from the bottom-up. Using audio-visual repertoires of contention changes »ways of Knowing the City«[34] and thus gives way to the »right to change ourselves by changing the city.«[35]

Bottom-Up learning

The experiences of videographers from Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro contain important lessons when discussing the digitalization of the right to the city in the early 21st century. The Examples from Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro illustrate the importance to take into account the specific urban settings and the histories of their social movements, before assuming generalized impacts of globalized technologies such as smartphones and social media. Second, the practices developed on the ground show a complex web of practices which videographers navigate when recording protests and audio-visually evidencing police violence. The newly available tools of social media and smartphones have shaped and affected urban struggles by providing new ways of amplifying voices on the one side but increased the dangers of surveillance and commodification of resistance on the other side. Tensions which cannot be brushed off easily. Finally, the research shows how video activism as practice

32 Filter bubbles and echo chambers – which serve commodification but not the common good – preclude a politics of encounter, the precondition for coming to terms with and learning from difference. In contrast, personalization algorithms foster a culture built on mutual ignorance and violent confrontation. It is thus particularly at the level of video distribution where autogestion has become essential if the aims of bottom-up video production are to be realized.

33 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 52.

34 Kurgan and Brawley, *Ways of Knowing Cities*.

35 Harvey, »The Right to the City,« 2008, 23.

navigates tensions between the streets and the net, between here and there, between power and vulnerability. The inventiveness and risk-taking of individuals and collectives allow crucial tactical wins for emancipatory struggles for radically democratizing communication. However, the strategic balance is tilted towards the new gatekeepers of corporate social movements and against the autogestion of independent social movements.[36] While single videos and messages may break through the tightly controlled system of algorithmic governance by corporate social media from Silicon Valley, in the long term these corporations possess enormous and mostly unchecked power. Most recent reporting by New York Times suggests for example how Elon Musk appears to effectively use his power as owner of the messenger app X, formerly known as Twitter, to silence critics of him, even when they share the right-wing background.[37] More systemically on a large-scale the rising accusations of silencing any form of critic of Israel's conduct of war in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria emerged in the past months.[38]

With the rapid advance of A.I. technologies, the effects on video activism are hard to predict precisely today. The possibilities for control and censorship are likely to increase, which would further tilt the control of representation towards corporate social media and their owners. A second concern is the now widespread possibilities of A.I. to manipulate all sorts of information, including audio-visuals. When viewers lose the capacity to differentiate between original video recordings and manipulated materials, the trust of audiovisuals as evidence erodes. The erosion of trust is likely to have major impacts on discourses of social movements and their capacity to represent their struggles. These shifts in power deserve attention, but as this work has shown, techno-determinism would be misplaced here.

The creative appropriation of technologies by social movements is what has created the form of digital video activism as a form of bottom-up city making in the early 2010s. Despite technological transformations, context specificity and the uniqueness of each struggle, the »cry and demand« for a right to the city appears to be alive and echoes in the hundreds of videos produced to amplify voices from the urban margins, document protest marches, and evidence police violence.

Utopian practices of video activism have become a key repertoire of contention in struggles for a right to the city, one which is both utopian

36 The difference between tactics and strategies as employed by Michel de Certeau helps to understand how digital architectures shape movements in a similar way that built environments strategically suggest the movements through urban space (DeCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*).

37 Thompson, »They Criticized Musk on X. Then Their Reach Collapsed.«

38 Human Right Watch, »Meta's Broken Promises.«

in its visions and practical in its actions. In the poetic words of Eduardo Galeano, the utopian practices of video activism are steps towards an emancipatory horizon: »Utopia is on the horizon: I walk two steps, it takes two steps back. I walk ten steps and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking.«[39]

39 Galeano in: Shukaitis and Graeber, *Constituent Imagination*, 33.