Fig. 1 Favela Aktion Basel

1. Video Activism as Bottom-Up City Making

Videos of Protests and Police Violence

The images are blurry and unfocused, since the scene the videographer was about to record came as a surprise.[1] When the visuals come back into focus the video shows a phalanx of police officers, who storm to the DJ's hut to unplug the turntables, punch the DJ to the ground, pepper-spray a woman in her face, and fire rubber bullets at the dissipating crowd. On Friday afternoon of 14 June 2013, a group of activists and artists had constructed an ›illegal‹ twin to the art installation of Kawamata's Favela Café.[2] They criticized the »comfortable poverty porn of ›Favela Café‹,«[3] where visitors to the world's biggest art fair were served cappuccino and champagne at Swiss prices, while appropriating ›Favela culture‹ in a displaced simulation. The video recording – with its blurry images at the start – captured the police aggression against the peaceful party, and it went viral. In Basel, Switzerland, the creative protest questioning the Art Basel's Favela Café appeared as inacceptable to authorities and was violently repressed by police. When I saw my friends knocked to the ground and pepperspayed for no reason I first had an emotional reaction and then started to reflect on the power of audio-visual recordings. The story of my research began with the phalanx of police officers storming into the crowd of peaceful protesters.

1 Vid. 01, Bajour, *Polizei räumt Favelabesetzung auf dem Messeplatz*, 0:25-0:33.
2 The artist Tadashi Kawamata had installed his »Favela Café« for the *Art Basel* fair, which was used to sell cappuccino and champagne at Swiss prices.
3 Jordana, »The Indicator. Favela Café and the End of Irony.«

Eventually, it brought me to investigate video activism in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro. The scenes of protests and police violence captured in videos from Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro are often stark and present another level of police violence. Graphic images of police beating down elderly protesters, firing teargas into crowds, pepperspraying people into their faces. Protesters who lost one eye due to rubber bullets fired at them. A 14-year old spitting blood into white sand after a police assault. Tanks rolling into favela neighborhoods. Police officers shooting with lethal ammunition at unarmed civilians. A man stopped on the street, forced to strip naked in public and then humiliated by heavy police boots hit into his genitals. Five teenagers killed with 111 bullets. These are only some of the many stories this research follows. To see the tragedies captured in the videos is challenging and readers need to be warned of the graphic content they will inevitably encounter when reading this book.

The question driving this research was to understand how video activism as practice can unfold its emancipatory power as a form of bottom-up city making. More precisely, it asks: How do grassroots practices of video activism contribute to visualizing and shaping urban struggles – and what emancipatory potential do they hold as forms of bottom-up city making? This overarching interest can further be broken down in a conceptual question, which asks how video activism contributes to digitalizing the right to the city. A question that should not remain abstract but instead follows the action. To examine practices of video activism meant to look what is happening behind the cameras. This led to my empirical questions in trying to understand the concrete practices of ›doing video activism‹ between the streets and the screens. Who are the people recording protests and police violence? What motivates them, and why do they believe in video as a tool of communication? And most of all, how do they organize, record, edit, and disseminate their audiovisuals?

Movements and their Media

Today, smartphones and single-lens reflex cameras (SLR cameras) on the one hand, and social media accounts on the other, make video production ubiquitous. These circumstances starkly contrast with the situation that the first generations of video activists in the 1970s faced. To film they had to carry heavy equipment, find a way to access expensive cameras, and organize public screenings for their videos.[4] With the explosion

4 A good overview on the early community video movement in the 1970s and 1980s is offered in Nigg, *Rebel Video. Die Videobewegung Der 1970er Und 1980er-Jahre*.

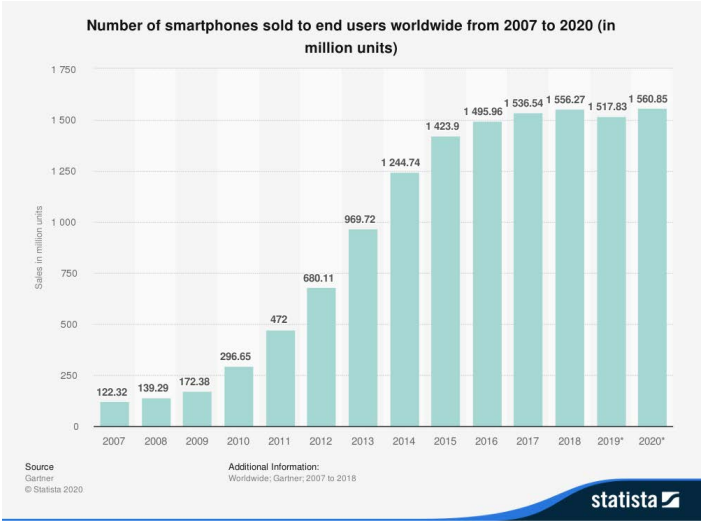
of production and distribution possibilities since the early 2010s, the ›digital revolution‹ dramatically increased the ease and speed with which videos are disseminated. Digital video activism based on smartphones and social media blossomed and transformed the relationship between movements and their media.

Simultaneously to the technological leap in video production a new »cycle of contestation«[5] began with a wave of protests in 2010/2011. The Arab Spring, the Spanish 15-M Movement as well as other anti-austerity movements in Southern Europe, and the worldwide Occupy! camps are only a some of the examples from this first wave in this cycle of contestation. Two years later major upheavals in Brazil, Turkey,[6] Ukraine and Hong Kong erupted and were broadcasted live from the streets by non-professionals. In 2019/2020 widespread protests in Sudan, Lebanon, Haiti, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia and Chile peaked. Today in early June 2020, the Black Lives Matters marches are in their third week. The video of the brutal murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin played a decisive role in sparking outrage. Despite all differences in claims, contexts and constituencies mobilized, two defining features characterize this cycle of contestation: the body politics of occupying public squares and the use of social media for communication.

In this research I look at the beginning of the tumultuous decade of 2010s. The period of 2010 to 2016 marks the period in which Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro attracted global attention as hosts of the sport mega events of the FIFA Worldcup and Olympic Games. This period is equally characterized by major urban movements in both cities and the emergence of digital video activism. With a critical and multi-sited ethnography of protests and police violence, this research aims to capture the nuances involved in the process of video making and distribution. It is based on in-depth conversations and participatory observations in both cities, although the case of Rio de Janeiro has been researched in greater depth due to practical constraints. During this time, new practices of covering protests and police violence emerged. The examination of the South African

5 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 144.

6 The Turkish collective bak.ma has been a critical source in providing video testimonies from the Gezi park uprising in Istanbul 2013 and beyond. Over time the collective has managed to develop new forms of autonomous archiving, which show the remarkable breadth and depth of digital video activism emerging from Turkey. (Çelikaslan, Archiving the Commons; Çelikaslan et al., eds., Autonomous Archiving; Erensoy, »From Activist to Demonstrator. The Evolution of Video Activism in Turkey.«) In 2022 we organized a panel discussion at the Re/Assembling Conference in berlin 2022, which brought to light striking similarities especially between video activist practices in Turkey and Brazil.



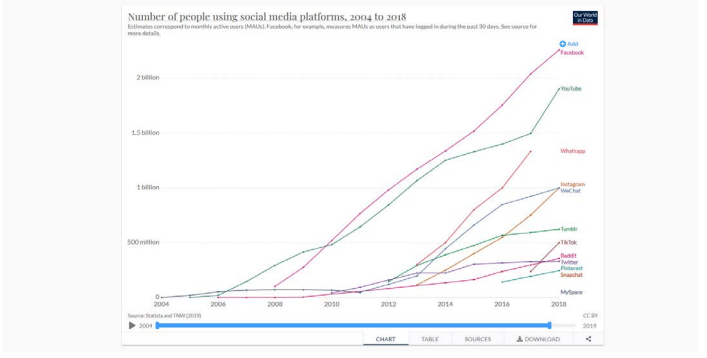


Fig. 2 Smartphones and Social Media

and Brazilian contexts illustrates how videos of protests and police violence circulating online have increasingly become a normalized »repertoire of contention«.[7]

7 Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires*. The fact that video as technology shifted patterns of communications globally, was on display in the exhibition »Signal. How video transformed the world« at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I visited the exhibition twice to closely look at the rich materials ranging from Argentinian video art experiments to the documentation of the fall of Ceauşescu in Romania – every piece underlining the myriad ways that video technologies shaped art and politics (Comer and Cuo, *Signals. How Video Transformed the World.)*

The optimism expressed by the »evangelist of social media«[8] – overwhelmingly white scholars in the USA – initially celebrated technological innovation as the driver of sociopolitical change around the early 2010s. Corporate social media from Silicon Valley were branded as »liberation technologies«[9]. Authors such as Clay Shirky in 2008 saw digital technologies as enabling force for the »power of group action«.[10] Andrew Sullivan interpreted the 2009 protests in Iran as evidence for his claim that »The revolution will be tweeted«.[11] In a similar vein, Jared Cohen[12] described the relation of movements and their media in a simple formula: »One Egyptian says: ›facebook [is] used to set the date, twitter [is] used to share logistics, youtube to show the world, all to connect people‹ #Jan25«.[13] In opposition to this Wael Ghonim, the founder of the Facebook page ›We are all Khaled Said‹ and influential activist from Cairo has become highly skeptical of the political effectiveness of corporate social media.[14] He argues that

> »…social media experiences are designed in a way that favours broadcasting over engagement, posts over discussions, shallow comments over deep conversation […] talk[ing] at each other instead of talking to each other.«[15]

The explosion of available smartphone cameras and the new opportunities to distribute videos online certainly has effects on political communication, but technology does not determine socio-political processes as I argue in my research. For social movement scholar Paulo Gerbaudo, techno-determinism – whether optimist of pessimist – falls into the trap

8 Gladwell, »Small Change. Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted.«

9 Diamond and Plattner, *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy*.

10 Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody. The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, 7.

11 Sullivan, »The Revolution Will Be Twittered«.

12 Jared Cohen, an influential figure in Silicon Valley, is the CEO of Jigsaw, a subsidiary of Google's parent company, Alphabet. With Eric Schmidt he co-authored a book that lays out their visions of digitalization (Schmidt and Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business)*.

13 Cohen, »Tweet: One Egyptian Says.«

14 Khaled Said was a victim of police brutality in Alexandria, Egypt. He was supposedly beaten to death by police officers and the images of his corpse ignited anger and unrest in Egypt in 2010. Wael Ghonim consequently started the Facebook site »We are all Khaled Said«. Kara Alaimo argues in her case study about the Facebook page »We are all Khaled Said«, that the »grievances and ideas shared on this page were remarkably substantive and that the movement was not a network but rather a hierarchy, led by Ghonim until his imprisonment« (Alaimo, »How the Facebook Arabic Page ›We Are All Khaled Said‹ Helped Promote the Egyptian Revolution,« 1).

15 Ghonim, »Let's Design Social Media That Drives Real Change.«

of simplifying political struggles to a point where »media are endowed with mystical qualities that only obscure the work of the groups and organizers using them«[16] and thus reflecting a »neoliberal ideology, incapable of understanding collective action«.[17]

In my work, I argue that not only the relations of movements and their media, but also their embeddedness in urban spaces demands careful consideration. The comparison of video activism in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro illustrates how bottom-up video production is grounded in the specific urban spaces[18] from which it emanates and which it simultaneously transforms.

Video Activism and the Right to the City

To disentangle the relations of urban space, social media and protests in video production my work draws on French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre argues that »the *right to the city* cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*.«[19] Drawing on the right to the city as a concept my research analyzes how urban movements' and urban citizens' claims and demands are amplified from the streets into the net by video activist practices. Henri Lefebvre's writing offers key theoretical entry points as to conceptually grasp the mutual infiltration of the streets and the net that make up video activism. At the same the right to the city as »concrete utopia« offers an emancipatory vision resonating with core claims of most urban movements discussed in this work.

My research applies these conceptual concerns to an empirical study of grassroots video production in Rio and Cape Town in the period from 2010 to 2016, developing an explorative ethnography of video activist practices conducted between 2014 and 2018. As critical ethnography[20] my research is positioned and privileges the perspectives, positions and practical circumstance of grassroots video activists to understand their practices. The objective is to narrate from a perspective ›from within‹ activism and hence the inner logics of policing practices or the practices of conservative traditional media for example are not being explained in this work. It would certainly be relevant to study those in detail, but

16 Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, 8.
17 Gerbaudo, 9.
18 Diener et al., *The Inevitable Specificity of Cities*.
19 Lefebvre, »Right to the City,« 158.
20 Madison, *Critical Ethnography. Methods, Ethics, and Performance*; Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*.

this is beyond the scope of this research. The extensive sample of interviews builds on more than forty semi-structured interviews with film producers, artists, academics, people without homes, campaigners and community organizers, journalists and politicians from Rio and Cape Town. These interviews were systematically transcribed and carefully interpreted, adding to the innumerous informal conversations and many months of participatory observations in Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town. Practical limitations in the time to conduct fieldwork, however, have led to privileging the depth of study in Rio de Janeiro over Cape Town, which in certain parts may reflect in the writing.

The selection of Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro as sites for research intentionally contrasts two cities that share relevant commonalities and significant differences at the same time. Cape Town and Rio are dominated by a neoliberal urban planning agenda further incentivized by the hosting of sport mega events; harsh socio-economic inequalities and high levels of violence; a legacy of an oppressive regime of military dictatorship in Rio and Apartheid in Cape Town. However, the intense socio-economic divisions formed two distinctive urban topographies layered on the geographic conditions of the two cities. In Cape Town geographical and social distance converge, whereas in Rio de Janeiro geographical and social distance diverge. This means that while in Rio de Janeiro marginalized neighborhoods border some of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Brazil, shootings in Favelas can sometimes still be heard by those who can afford to sit in their roof terrace swimming pools. In contrast, Cape Town is marked not only by deep racialized segregation, which reflects decades of separate urban planning. Another contrast can be found with the effects of sporting mega events held by both cities. The sport mega events of the FIFA World Cup in 2010 in Cape Town had a limited impact on urban transformation, whereas the FIFA World Cup 2014 and the Olympic Games 2016 in Rio pronounced and reshaped urban development drastically. In Rio the two events catalyzed a top-down remodeling of the city at a rapid pace, which in turn provoked widespread protests and outrage in 2013. Rio de Janeiro witnessed an explosive growth of video activism during the Jornadas de Junho[21] in 2013 – a wave of protests during the FIFA Confederations

21 For an overview about the Jornadas de Junho see for example: Frechette, *Copa Pra Quem? Olimpíadas Pra Quem? Arte e Megaeventos Esportivos No Rio de Janeiro – Contranarrativas Na Cidade Turística*; Souza and Rodrigues, *Planejamento Urbano e Ativismos Sociais*; Bringel and Pleyers, »Les Mobilisations de 2013 Au Brésil: Vers Une Reconfiguration de La Contestation.«; Gloría Gohn, *Manifestções de Junho 2013 No Brasil. E Praças Dos Indignados No Mundo*; Marciato, *Cidades Rebeldes. Passe Livre e as Manifestações Que Tomaram as Ruas Do Brasil*; Moraes et al., *Junho*; Pinheiro, »›Nada é Impossível de Mudar‹«; Ruediger et al., »June Journeys in Brazil«; Segurado, »Os Movimentos Sociais e a Internet: A Apropriação Política Do

Cup that swept all over Brazil and mobilized a multitude of citizens from different strata of society. The power of these protests and the biased reporting by corporate media turned the city into a global hub for establishing contemporary forms of video activism. Cape Town presents the contrasting case. Here the student movement RhodesMustFall (RMF)[22] had the strongest impact on practices of video activism in 2016/2016, whereas the widespread ›Service Delivery Protests‹ (SDP)[23] struggled to establish video production about their movements, not least due to a lack of internet accessibility. Social movements, hence, reflect social and geographical proximities and distances in both cities.

The core of my argument is that video activist practices have become an essential part in struggles for the concrete utopia of the right to the city. They shape the cities from which they emerge and they are being formed by the sites of their emergence. The new ubiquity of smartphones and SLR cameras as well as social media accounts enables more urban movements and urban citizens than ever to audio-visually document their struggles for emancipation and capture moments of power abuse and oppression by authorities on camera. The evidencing of police violence, creation of counter-hegemonic narratives and amplifying of voices through videos, however, needs to be grasped by embedding the concrete video activist practices in their specific urban situatedness. In fact, as the case of Rio shows convincingly, it matters to grasp the cathartic moment of popular protests during the Jornadas and the importance to confront biased media reporting to trigger a collective video activist organization. With the availability of smartphones and social media the occupation of squares and other central urban spaces is increasingly being complemented by movements' digital media production. Even though, the new tools augmented the possibilities for communicative »autogestion«[24] – self-governance – for urban social movements and

Facebook Durante as Jornadas de Junho«; Teixeira, »As Manifestações de Junho e a Política No Brasil Contemporâneo: Um Convite Ao Debate.«

22 For studies about the RhodesMustFall and the related FeesMustFall movement see for example: Boersema, »Re-Racing South Africa: Rhodes Must Fall as Antiracist Movement«; Bosch, »Twitter Activism and Youth in South Africa: The Case of #RhodesMustFall«; Duncan and Frassinelli, »The Right to Protest? An Account of Human Rights Violations during #FeesMustFall, #OccupyUJ and #EndOutsourcing Protests at the University of Johannesburg«; Dawson, »Protest, Performance and Politics: The Use of ›nano Media‹ in Social Movement Activism in South Africa«; Ahmed, »The Rise of Fallism: #RhodesMustFall and the Movement to Decolonize the University.«

23 Bringel and Domingues, *Global Modernity and Social Contestation*.

24 The notion of autogestion is one of the central elements in Lefebvre's thinking about concrete utopias, which nevertheless presents itself as a difficult and conflictual claim (Lefebvre, »Theoretical Problems of Autogestion«).

urban citizens, the role of corporate social media channels – YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and others – should not be underestimated in designing the newly emerging topographies of visibility. The video activism that my empirical investigation describes finds video activists confronting challenging contradictions. For example, they aim at amplifying the »cry and demand«[25] for the right to the city while at the same time depending on corporate social media that colonialize and exploit user data. Video activism practically has to deal with this contradiction while working towards a horizon of emancipation. By applying the concept of the right to the city to the video activist movements, I develop the notion of *utopian practices of video activism* in my work to describe how filming protests and police violence has become a form of bottom-up city making in the early twenty-first century.

Structure of the Book

The writing is organized into four parts. The first part presents the framework for my analysis by discussing the conceptual and methodological approaches. The second part contextualizes bottom-up video production and its protagonists in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, while the third develops my analysis of video production. The fourth and final part concludes the book by proposing to conceptualize bottom-up video making as a form of utopian practices.

Chapter Two outlines the theoretical framework. My analysis approaches video activist practices as tools in a struggle for the right to the city, situating video activism within a digital-urban nexus that plays out simultaneously on the ›streets‹ and in the ›net‹. Chapter Three translates this framework into a research design with corresponding methodologies for data collection and analysis. The second part explores the context in which video activist practices in Cape Town and Rio developed. Chapter Four therefore examines the specificities of the urban spaces and urban movements in both cities, while Chapter Five introduces the protagonists behind the cameras and analyzes the media landscapes in which they operate.

The third part (Chapter Six to Eight) turns to an analysis of video activism itself by exploring the experiences of bottom-up video production.

Mark Purcell describes autogestion as utopian horizon of the right to the city: »Autogestion and democracy are always constituted by a movement toward a horizon, an ongoing project for people to increasingly manage their affairs for themselves« (Purcell, »The Right to the City: The Struggle for Democracy in the Urban Public Realm,« 318)«.

25 Lefebvre, *Right to the City,* 158.

Concrete examples of videos are employed here to illuminate certain aspects of practicing video activism. Chapter Six investigates the practices of recording videos. By systematizing the wide range of videos of protests and police violence into a heuristic typology of activist, witness, and journalist videos, a vocabulary for the ensuing analysis is introduced. This typology allows for a more nuanced understanding of how videographers relate to events – as involved insiders (activist videos), unpredictable spectators (witness videos), or professional outsiders (journalist videos) – and enables a categorization of three forms of video making in relation to their potential for bottom-up city making through emancipatory audio-visual production.

Chapter Seven shifts attention from video production on the ground to the dissemination of videos online. It analyzes the emerging topographies of visibility and the unequal distribution of attention in the digital sphere. While a few videos go viral, the vast majority remain unseen – especially videos of peaceful protest marches. The chapter explores how activist, witness, and journalist videos circulate differently, and how their visibility is shaped by platform algorithms, media gatekeepers, and the graphic nature of their content. It also examines the tactics and strategies employed by video activist collectives to navigate or resist the constraints of corporate social media, including opaque moderation mechanisms and the dominance of commercial content. These dynamics reveal the contradictions of relying on platforms that simultaneously enable and limit bottom-up communication.

Chapter Eight focuses on violence as video activism's overarching and most dominant theme.[26] It begins by examining hegemonic understandings of violence – often used to delegitimize urban movements – and shows how video activist practices seek to counter these narratives. The chapter explores how witness videos help to gather evidence of police violence and how activist videos frame such incidents not as isolated events, but as expressions of systemic, racialized, and class-based oppression. It also reflects on the risks faced by those who record violence, the emotional toll of watching such footage, and the power of audiovisuals to expose everyday repression. The two strategies – creating counter-narratives and documenting evidence – remain central to how bottom-up video production makes repression visible and contributes to struggles for the right to the city.

The final chapter of the book reconnects the dots by linking the research question and theoretical framework to the analysis of the

26 Other works on the use of videos in political struggles likewise emphasize the prevalence of violence as a topic and theme in audio-visual production. See for example: Askanius, »Protest Movements and Spectacles of Death: From Urban Places to Video Spaces«; Razsa, »Beyond ›Riot Porn‹: Protest Video and the Production of Unruly Subjects«.

ethnographic study. The appropriation of new technological tools in the early 2010s opened space for radically democratized, emancipatory forms of communication. This shift enabled urban movements and citizens – especially in Brazil – to circumvent the dominance of ›traditional‹ media hegemons and create new channels for bottom-up communication. Yet, as traditional mass media lost influence, new hegemons such as Google and Facebook emerged. The new gatekeepers' opaque algorithmic calculations, their profit-oriented platform designs, and their global concentration of ownership pose genuine problems for the bottom-up organization of video activism.

The experiments and experiences of video activism in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro constitute a form of bottom-up knowledge production with critical potential to inform scholars in urban studies, as well as urban planners and practitioners willing to ›listen‹. Through the notion of utopian practices of video activism, this work conceptualizes the recording of protests and police violence as steps toward realizing the concrete utopia of a right to the city. At the end of the book the videography presents key facts about the videos and a list of interviews.[27]

Today, video activist practices have become increasingly institutionalized and consolidated as a repertoire of contention.[28] One decade later, journalism has effectively integrated witness video footage as a source of information; the majority of radically autonomous video activist collectives have either disintegrated or professionalized, giving up some of their radical independence; and new forms of online journalism – as well as the figure of the YouTuber or influencer – have emerged. The institutionalization[29] of video activism is an ongoing process, and new technologies

27 While the list of interviews is ordered chronologically, the videography followed the sequence of the videos mentioned, although this chronologically is not strict after text revisions.

28 The New York based NGO Witness is a key player in the field of institutionalizing video activist practices globally. With more than a decade of engagement in the field and a significant budget, they played a crucial role in connecting local video activist initiatives. Sandra Ristovska has closely examined the role of NGOs and their mediating position between international law insitutions, journalism, and grassroots video activism. What she describes as a proxy profession, is the increasing push to adapt to insituionalized logics. The NGOization as it can partiall be seen in the South African context has its own ambivalences. For Ristovska's book and a review see: Ristovaksa, Seeing Human Rights; Geuder, »Review: Seeing Human Rights«.

29 In a sociological sense, the notion of institutionalization designates the development of routinized practices that reiterate shared meanings and roles. The resulting patterns of interpretation and ›rules‹ are implicitly taken for granted and hardly formalized in video activist practices, since »a sense

– especially the capacity of AI to cheaply produce deepfakes – as well as new urban movements, may further transform it. By examining the period from 2010 to 2018 in both Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, we can witness the roots of digital video activism and how it has (re-)shaped the relationship between movements and their media, as well as influenced the use of social media as a channel for political communication from the bottom up. Videos of protests and police violence show how emancipatory urban movements may multiply the cries and demands for a right to the city when audio-visually pointing to their repression. In doing so, videographers constantly oscillate between here and there, between the streets and the net, between power and vulnerability, when documenting the struggles over the right to the city.

emerges and is sustained that there is a right way of doing things« (Nicolini, »Practice Theory as a Package of Theory, Method and Vocabulary: Affordances and Limitations,« 318).