

## Chapter 14

# A Critique of Operativity: Notes on a Technological Imperative

**Dieter Mersch**

*Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The concepts of “operation” and “operational sequences” are central for Actor-Network Theory. They have also become key-terms for cultural and media studies and in specific the so-called German Media Theory. However—this is the thesis of the article—whoever starts with the assumption of operativity or privileges operational sequences in the context of cultural practices is already treading on the ground of the technical and thus has accepted what they set out to prove: the interpretation of culture solely on the basis of technical approaches and the prerequisite of an a priori of technique. Instead the article insists on the difference between operation and practice which serve as a criterion for a cultural analysis beyond any universalization of technology.*

*Whenever we start insisting too hard upon ‘operationalism’ or symbolic logic or any other of these very essential systems of tramlines, we lose something of the ability to think new thoughts.*

*Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 75)*

### **TERMINOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY**

In recent times, “operation” has become *the* cultural and Media Studies’—as well as some areas of media philosophy—catchall term for multifarious practices, without however providing a precise definition of “operation” or “operativity.” Related terms such as “act” or “action,” which mark the beginning of the philosophical history of the term, have gone out of style. Similarly, there has been no analysis of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0616-4.ch014

## A Critique of Operativity

the relationship between operativity and performativity. It seems as if operations do not need to be performed, nor, apparently, do they exhibit performative power. The relationship between operation, praxis, and thought is just as unclear. Rather the popularity of the term, in particular in media theories that focus on the concept of “cultural technology” and build on Actor-Network-Theory, is the result of—and this is the thesis of this article—an entirely technical perspective. Whoever starts with the assumption of operativity or privileges operational sequences in the context of cultural practices is treading on the ground of the technical and thus has already accepted that which they set out to prove: the a priori of the technological. Put another way, praxis is interpreted as technology and thus strategically predetermined.<sup>1</sup>

The thesis at hand, which is a critique in the original meaning of *krinein*—to differentiate, to separate, and to judge—starts from a model that insists in contrast that there *is* a difference between operation and praxis and more importantly that operativity is not praxis, but that the latter precedes and first provides a foundation for the former. From this follows that when actions become operations, we are dealing with a reduction or limitation. Action itself is given a teleological form and placed within a technical register. It is thought of as function and syntax; that is to say, as a kind of vectorial space.

And in fact the terms “operative,” “operation,” and “operator” as well as the “chains of operation” or “operational sequences”<sup>2</sup> that stem from them put us in mind not only of rules and procedures, but also of the transformation of symbols and their conformity to rules. In this, operations are given meaning in an operative realm (to be demarcated more clearly below) that from the beginning is technically dictated and incidentally always follows a linear order. “A single operation is not an operation at all,” Jean Piaget (1960) explained succinctly in his 1942 seminar at the Sorbonne, *The Psychology of Intelligence* (p. 34): operations are always systemic. That concurs with Wittgenstein’s argument on the impossibility of a private language: a rule cannot be applied one time only, but, as a concept, must be repeatable. The same is true of signs: they are not singular phenomena, but are always in a relationship with other signs. Similarly, operations situate themselves in a context of complexities that point towards a network of relations. The vector of this network in turn rests on a set of conditions that defines the operation as an arrangement resembling a mathematical system. We shall return to this point later. The structural homologies are striking: semioticity and structurality as well as operationality and syntacticity have—through their immanent grounding in mathematics—a figural relationship to one another. Piaget (1970) also remarked upon the connection, as regards their structure and ordering, between operativity and transformation (pp. 20 et seq.),<sup>3</sup> which subjects operations to a particular concatenation. That means at the same time that any theory of the cultural that has “operation” as a fundamental concept tends—and this is its particular type of reductionism—to always already have addressed and specified the realm of the technical/mathematical. That can also clearly be seen in the postulate that operational sequences precede operative elements, as for example Erhard Schüttzel (2006) has claimed.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, this aids the delineation of the concept of “cultural technology” and on the other hand helps to avoid an instrumentalist theory of technology that starts with apparatuses and their uses rather than their connections, for such antecedence can only exist where the relationality of the sequence constitutes all of its elements and not vice versa. Relation thus comes before existence. Consequently, the materiality of the operators recede behind formalism: “people, artefacts, and signs are formed through operational sequences” is how Schüttzel expresses this (p. 98). However, de facto, that is true only of signs, which—like operations—do not exist independently but are determined by their “grammar,” unlike things or people, whose singularity and manner of existence pulls the rug out beneath the theory of antecedence.

The aim of this theoretical maneuver seems to be clear: to replace an ontology of these concepts with their relationality. However, that cannot be achieved consistently, for relations do not comprise their own

13 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/a-critique-of-operativity/164092](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/a-critique-of-operativity/164092)

## Related Content

---

### The Tsunami of the Pandemic in the Context of Japanese Cinema

Maria Roberta Novielli (2024). *Transformed Communication Codes in the Mediated World: A Contemporary Perspective* (pp. 109-121).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-tsunami-of-the-pandemic-in-the-context-of-japanese-cinema/335358](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-tsunami-of-the-pandemic-in-the-context-of-japanese-cinema/335358)

### Transforming English Language Education Through Collaborative Digital Tools: Peer Interactions and Virtual Communities

Vivit Rosmayanti (2026). *Adaptation and Challenges of Remote Teaching and Digital Tools* (pp. 387-410).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/transforming-english-language-education-through-collaborative-digital-tools/394437](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/transforming-english-language-education-through-collaborative-digital-tools/394437)

### Battling Against Demeaning and Abusive Selfie Sharing: Empowerment Through Activism After Image Abuse

Amanda E. Fehlbaum and Katelyn Bowden (2020). *Young Adult Sexuality in the Digital Age* (pp. 30-53).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/battling-against-demeaning-and-abusive-selfie-sharing/255499](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/battling-against-demeaning-and-abusive-selfie-sharing/255499)

### Audiovisual Laboratories, Digital Literacy, and Artificial Intelligence: Effective Educational Communication Strategies in Virtual Environments

Allan Herison Ferreira and Ana Carolina Trevisan (2026). *Effects of Education Communication in Digital Learning Environments* (pp. 335-384).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/audiovisual-laboratories-digital-literacy-and-artificial-intelligence/388200](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/audiovisual-laboratories-digital-literacy-and-artificial-intelligence/388200)

### Masking and Transfiguration of Advertising in Digital Entertainment Culture

Jesús Bermejo-Berros (2023). *Handbook of Research on the Future of Advertising and Brands in the New Entertainment Landscape* (pp. 1-30).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/masking-and-transfiguration-of-advertising-in-digital-entertainment-culture/316985](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/masking-and-transfiguration-of-advertising-in-digital-entertainment-culture/316985)