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2021-12-13

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17290>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Melamed, Laliv: Operative Imaginaries. In: *NECSUS\_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Futures, Jg. 10 (2021-12-13), Nr. 2, S. 59–65. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17290>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/operative-imaginaries/>

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## Operative Imaginaries

Laliv Melamed

NECSUS 10 (2), Autumn 2021: 59–65

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/operative-imaginaries/>

Considering how our field shifted in the past decade, I find it to be a telling irony that NECSUS, which launched a decade ago with an issue on ‘Crisis’, marks its anniversary with an issue on ‘Futures’.[1] In this essay I deliberate how the paradigm of the operative image shapes the way we imagine both crisis and future as tightly related and pertaining to modes of representation. The paradigm of operative images corresponds with contemporary techniques while allowing us to ask certain questions about mediated temporalities. It marks a number of phenomena that are the concern of scholars studying image and sound-based media, such as the compression of imaging and operations, the mechanisation of interpretation, and the instrumentalisation of our imagination, all at the service of an optimised and secured future.

In the current technological era more and more spheres of operation and information are coded into our optics; mechanised, virtualised, standardised. The operative image is a means to an end, where action (mostly mechanical) is already contained within the visible. An operative image is an image applied with operative logic, making it instantly analysable. Operative optics reinvigorate an imminent question: what are images – and media in that regard – as things in the world? What is it that images do? In a text from 2003 Harun Farocki offers the most prominent, albeit preliminary, reference to the operative paradigm: ‘Pictures made neither to entertain nor to inform, “operative images”. These are images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation.’[2] Farocki joins a few other thinkers who deliberate the mechanical functionality of images. As Thomas Keenan notes, Farocki’s ‘operative image’ resonates with Allan Sekula’s ‘instrumental image’, likewise an object of mechanical reading.[3] Farocki himself is thinking with Vilém Flusser’s category of the technical image.[4] These authors open up a different way to understand the *work* of images. Their stances are amplified

these days when even what we considered to be within the realm of human action and interaction, beyond work or techniques, are scrutinised and optimised.[5] With their form of condensation – compressing image and action – we might worry that operative images take over human intelligence work attributed to images: contemplation, interpretation, and reasoning. While the category of the operative opens up space for investigating the intimidating wonders of technology and to further theorise the image, it also provides an insight into a whole imaginary.

## From the operative image to image operations

What can be gained by thinking with operativity? Have we not been thinking about this already? Non-fiction and documentary studies probe images and media that are usable and instrumental or are practiced utility, embedded in disciplining institutions such as medicine, bureaucracy/security, food supply, military, science, and industrial production.[6] Media archeologists and media historians delimit a long *durée* of operativity, noting that similar ideas about media had different technological affordances throughout the years.[7] According to Aud Sissel Hoel, the recent interest in the paradigm of operativity as a critical category within film and media studies provokes questions related to representation, culture, and technology.[8] She indicates some of the slippery slopes in these approaches, mainly the ways each compound of inquiries stems and revolves around the tension between the human and the machine. In semiotically oriented inquiries the image is tossed between the representative and operative frameworks, however the kind of operations at stake, although performed by optical media, do not necessarily produce what can be filed under classical categories of images. Cultural studies seems to accentuate the notion of images provoking action, or *doing something*. This reading is quite loose, making all images, and thus none, operative. Are not all images ultimately doing something in the world? A technological approach risks being subsumed under the operative logic in which the sphere of action is technologically determined rather than socially implied. Shifting perspective, I suggest looking at the *operation*, rather than the image, as a way to start, and defining a new visual paradigm.

First, *the operation determines what is operative in the image and how it operates*. An operation is a nexus of resources, tools, and tasks organised by an executive order. Ideally, operations are linear and technical, ordered by a concrete

outcome, or as input and output. Analysing the logistics of contemporary capitalism, Brett Neilson and Sandro Mezzadra demonstrate how operations are dynamic, how their design is prompted by vision and aspiration, and how the amalgam of resources, tools, and tasks is never pre-determined.[9] Linearity is perhaps an operation's organising logic, but operations entail potentiality and multiple sequences and consequences. An arrangement of transactions — never an isolated, concrete act — operations as a whole are interconnected and branched-out. Media operations, in particular, are elastic and connect to a multiplicity of usages and reusages. Thomas Keenan notes that specified modes of interpretation of technical images are now supplemental to the technology itself, making the image operative.[10] Operations, like institutions, are epistemic sites, their logistics hinges on knowledge specific to, and constitutive of their acts (and vice versa). This is where optics, and images for our case, come into play. Each operation defines and redefines what is an image, what operates in and through it, and how.

Second, *operations entail representation*. Farocki proposes that the operative be defined negatively, as what it is not: not entertainment and not information. Here he misses something, and I believe this is what Hoel points out as well: it is information that becomes operable. Towards the end of her essay Hoel suggests Peirce's category of the diagrammatic, a paradigm that draws on the mathematical and evidentiary, as a potent point for theorising the operative. She reappropriates the operative image as a semiotic signifier (a means of representation), with the exception that the knowledge it brings forward is instrumental. Indeed, the operative erodes a certain breadth that comes with images, their being open and excessive. It affiliates images with a capitalist logic of excavation and utilisation. These transactions are not outside representation but tap into the contemporary technological and social imagination. Lastly, executive as they are, operations participate in what is termed a 'theatre of operations',[11] a representative gesture that makes operations accountable to and mandated by those operating, those financially supporting them, those in need of them, and — hopefully — those whose worlds are shaped by them.

In the fall of 2018 I visited a meteorological station with a group of PhD students. Data drawn from the atmosphere is inscribed into multilayered, split-screen maps, and graded in a spectrum between norm to extreme. Is this cartography of elements, the constant pulsing of planetary movements, an operative image? The data specialist points at the map; a consistency of clouds moves above Spain. 'There is always a culturally defined system of

signification underlying what we do' she says, noting that meteorology orients itself according to a territorial logic of the nation-state. 'It is about prediction', she adds, 'a *forecast*, not about determined action'. Paul Edwards contends that computer models of climate measurement catered, as of the 1970s, to the narrative of global warming, warning of a foreseeable future.[12] A complex mechanism of sensors, transmissions, and visualisation operates, not by doing something here and now but calculating alert and prevention. In their operative modes images are often not simply performing an act but turn a space or a thing operable. In that sense, the operative orders a future. In the case of climate change, this future seems always already close and overdetermined.

## Operative futures

In February 2019 I had a call with an imaging engineer. In a later email he defined himself as an 'AI evangelist'. 'There is much worry today about artificial intelligence', he tells me. 'But human intelligence is too complex to be taken over by artificial one', he reassures.[13] Current day imaging technologies, he says, follow two logics: predicting and enhancing.

He has been working in the field for more than two decades, developing computer vision technology for security, medical treatment, and industrial mass production. When I meet him in June that year, he explains that engineering is propelled to solve problems. Prediction and enhancement are both future oriented. Prediction orders or prevents the perils of a pending event. Enhancement, on the other hand, can be thought of in terms of optimising our bodies in order to save or heal them, to further equip potent bodies or enable those bodies deemed as needing repair.[14] Presenting his program of crime prevention, a software that excavates data from CCTV footage, my AI informant articulates the dynamic slightly differently. Operative optics are underlined by solutionism and calculation, yet as automated as they are, these operations are intimately linked to our bodies, our critical interests, and our fears.

Following the logic of enhancement, the operative image gestures towards an uncharted, unintelligible territory. Operative images perform acts that human intelligence and physical boundaries cannot support; they allow us to see things ungraspable to the human eye. One of those things we cannot

see is the future. What is the future ordered by the operative? A possible future, argues Jacques Derrida, can come only from the impossible, or else it will be a program, a 'calculable operation'.<sup>[15]</sup> An operation makes the future commensurate with its design.<sup>[16]</sup> Most often, such a future is forged by risk, a future to enhance or to predict, predicated on the catastrophic, a future to avoid, not a welcomed unknown.

The operative image is not the future of film and media studies but their very present. As I noted earlier, it can even be located in their past. Autonomous vision, machine readable images, and self-operating mechanisms — all already here — put pressure on questions such as: What is an image? What is vision? How do they operate? And, what are the stakes when images are given an executable mandate? The field's rotation towards infrastructural and logistical studies, non-theatrical film histories exploring the notion of instrumentality, cross-disciplinary studies that situate film and media outside its common dispositif, works which critically track the interconnected and far-reaching impact of the rise of the digital, among others, already start tackling these questions. But to invoke the future one needs to tap the imaginary. Digital media, argues Wendy Chun, fuel a nonstop temporality of a perpetual crisis, pertaining to the gluttony of a hyper capitalist world.<sup>[17]</sup> Operative images or images as operations draw on crisis to create a linear future paved through technological progress. Not to reproduce that very linearity of a programmed future in our studies, I propose paying attention to their social and political imagination, and even extend these imaginations into less marked paths, asking 'can it operate otherwise?'

In a recent address to the Royal Geographical Society, Achille Mbembe describes a programmed future as 'technological eschatology', subscribing capital, empire, and self to the same technological, virtualised excess.<sup>[18]</sup> He urged the audience (virtual as well) to turn to what he termed 'the planetary archive', to resurrect a different future. After our visit to the meteorological station we had lunch with the meteorologists. One of them tells my colleague Andrea how, upon suffering a heart condition, he went to do an electrocardiogram (EKG). Looking at how signals sent from his heart appear on the computer monitor, inscribed into diagrams and graphic simulations, he tried to draw on his experience to decipher the image. I like this moment when the body and the atmosphere cross paths, when operations, or at least their image/imagination coalesce, when heart and sky pulses come together.

## Author

Laliv Melamed is a research fellow at Goethe University, Frankfurt. Her writings appeared in *Discourse*, *Millennium Film Journal*, *Social Text* (online), *World Records*, and *American Anthropologist Review*, among others. Her book, *Sovereign Intimacy: Private Media and the Traces of Colonial Violence*, is scheduled to be published in spring 2023 with University of California Press. She is currently working on a second manuscript with the title *Optics of Opacity: The Cultural Life of Operative Images*. Melamed is also the co-director of Visible Evidence XXVII and a film programmer for Docaviv Film Festival and a guest curator for the Left Bank Cinema Club in Tel Aviv.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Andrea Polywka, Antoine Balga-Prévost, Philipp Röding, Luiza Santos, and Guilherme Machado for joining me at the Image Operations seminar at Goethe University, Frankfurt throughout the academic year 2018-2019.

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## Notes

- [1] See the NECSUS editorial board's opening statement in: 'Crisis,' NECSUS, Issue 1, Spring 2012. <https://necsus-ejms.org/editorial-necsus-1-spring-2012-crisis/>

- [2] Harun Farocki, 'Phantom Images', *Public*, no. 29, 1 January 2004, p. 17. This much cited text by Farocki is based on a talk delivered at ZKM Karlsruhe, Germany in 2003, translated to English by Brian Poole.
- [3] Thomas Keenan, 'Counter Forensics and Photography', *Grey Room*, 55, Spring 2014, 58-77. Allan Sekula, 'The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War' in: *Photography Against the Grain*, Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984, 32-51.
- [4] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Yonatan W. Soan, trans, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012 (in Hebrew. Originally published in German in 1983).
- [5] Fenwick McKelvey and Joshua Neves, 'Introduction: Optimization and its Discontents', *Review of Communication*, 21:2, 2021, 95-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.1936143>. McKelvey and Neves lay out the stakes with optimisation today and provide an insight to how it plays into different forms of political power, market, and self.
- [6] Here is a non-exhaustive list that engages with some of these questions: Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1995; Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011; Patrick Vonderau and Vinzenz Hediger, eds., *Films that Work: Industrial Films and the Productivity of Media*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009; David Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron and Dan Streible, eds., *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Films in the United States*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.
- [7] See the work of Antonio Somaini on the idea of machine vision in film and media history, most recently published in: Antonio Somaini, "'Unlearning to See Like Humans': Trevor Paglen on Machine Vision", *Moving Pictures, Living Machines: Automation, Animation and the Imitation of Life in Cinema and Media*, Greta Plaitano, Simone Venturini, Paolo Villa, eds., Film Forum, 2019, 63-68 or the project taken by Jussi Parikka to study the operative paradigm through the lenses of media archeology (<https://www.famu.cz/cs/vyzkum-a-zahranici/granty-famu/operational-images/>).
- [8] Hoel 2018.
- [9] Mezzadra and Neilson 2019.
- [10] Keenan, 'Counter Forensics and Photography'.
- [11] This term is used by Joseph Masco for example to link social anxieties in the US with executive manifestations of military power. See: Joseph Masco, *The Theatre of Operations: National Security Affect From the Cold War to the War on Terror*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
- [12] Edwards 2010.
- [13] This is a paraphrase, not verbatim. The conversation took place on 5 February 2019.
- [14] For example, the use of optics to enhance physical performances in military/security industries, or the use of immersive media to treat spinal injury or mental illness in medical research and industries.
- [15] Jacques Derrida, 'As if it were Possible "Within Such Limits"', *Ethics and Politics Today*, translated by Benjamin Elwood with Elizabeth Rottenberg, 347
- [16] Elsewhere I noted the importance of models and simulations for operative images as a mode of preemption and speculation, see: Laliv Melamed, 'Documentary Speculations', *Millennium Journal*, Fall 2021.
- [17] Chun 2011.
- [18] Mbembe 2021.