

# «Everything is intermedial»: A Conversation with Lars Elleström

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## Abstract

Lars Elleström needs no introduction to intermediality and comparative literature scholars. Massimo Fusillo and Mattia Petricola had a conversation with him just a few weeks before the publication of his new, major theoretical work. The conversation discusses the evolution of Elleström's theory over the last decade, his formation and influences, Peirce's semiotics, the history of intermediality, and the notion of media literacy.

## Keywords

Intermediality, Transmediality, Semiotics, Interart studies, Total Work of Art, Truthfulness, Narrative Theory, W.J.T. Mitchell, Werner Wolf, Richard Wagner, Charles S. Peirce.

## «Everything is intermedial»: A Conversation with Lars Elleström

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As the author of a number of publications that have redefined the theory of intermediality over the last decade, the director of the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies, and the chair of the board of the International Society for Intermedial Studies (ISIS), Lars Elleström needs no introduction to intermediality and comparative literature scholars. Massimo Fusillo and Mattia Petricola had a conversation with him just a few weeks before the publication of his new, major theoretical work.

**Mattia Petricola:** It has been ten years since the publication of your groundbreaking article *The Modalities of Media* (Elleström 2010). Where would you like to begin this conversation? From ten years ago or from today?

**Lars Elleström:** These two options are actually strongly connected, since I have just submitted the proofs for a follow-up study of *The Modalities of Media* (Elleström 2020), in which I update and considerably expand my theory from ten years ago. No matter what I wrote and published after the publication of the *Modalities* in 2010, this continues to be my most read and quoted study, and will probably continue to be read. It is relatively short, you can read it in a few hours, whereas my new article is ninety pages long. Two years ago, I realized that the *Modalities* would remain an important part of my research, so I decided to pick up where I left off eight years before. That article was a breakthrough for me on more than one front. Although I had already

published internationally before, it was thanks to the *Modalities* that scholars started to notice me. More importantly, it was the point of my research on intermediality where everything finally came together. I had been working for decades on questions similar to those that I tackle in the *Modalities*; however, I had been unable to find a truly personal approach to these questions within the interart studies framework that was dominant at the time. I knew that there was something important there but I just could not find a way to make concepts work. It was only when I moved to intermedial studies and semiotics that everything finally changed.

**MP:** When and how exactly did semiotics come in? Was it already part of your background?

**LE:** I have been fascinated with semiotics for a long time. I had worked—and struggled—with it several times before the *Modalities*. I had abandoned it more than one time, and more than one time I had come back to it. Everything began a little more than thirty years ago, when I was a PhD student in comparative literature. I was very interested in semiotics back then. However, it was mainly based on Saussure. On the one hand, I thought it was an invaluable method for understanding language; on the other hand, I found Saussure's language-centered attitude to be quite problematic. Of course, Saussure's semiotics is supposed to be language-centered, but this didn't really match my broader interest in other art forms and their interaction. I think I have been stuck for quite a long time, perhaps for decades, coming back to semiotics and then leaving it, coming back to interart studies and leaving them, coming back to semiotics once again and so on. It was only when I started studying Peirce that I finally found a way in, so to speak.

Even though I had obviously known his work for a long time, my knowledge was only textbook-based, elementary and simplified. This is how notions are supposed to be treated in textbooks, of course. The problem is that Peirce's theory of signs was often adapted in textbooks to match Saussure's terminology. Sometimes, for instance, one reads in

a textbook that, according to Peirce, symbols are arbitrary signs. Oops! That's what we are used to in Saussure, but that is not at all how Peirce's theory works. He defines symbols as signs based on habits, conventions, or even laws. Once I learned more about Peirce, I realized that there was a way to actually grasp the complexity not only of the arts but of communication in general, along all the spectrum of its manifestations. This is what got me out of the impasse I had found myself in.

**MP:** So Peirce was the catalyst of the breakthrough that led to your 2010 study.

**LE:** It was one of them, definitively.

**MP:** And what were the others?

**LE:** The other catalysts were the paradigm shift from interart studies to intermedia studies and the developments in the latter field. A couple of decades ago, many people began to broaden the scope of the research on arts and media, studying the interrelations not only between the arts but also between the arts and other media types.

**Massimo Fusillo:** The paradigm shift from interart studies to intermedia studies was absolutely fundamental. Interart studies were strictly focused on a sort of one-to-one comparison between art forms, without really taking into consideration the broader communication system of which these art forms were part.

**LE:** Exactly. The paradigm of the 'sister arts'.

**MF:** A paradigm in which you only compare forms of expression that are similar and related to each another. Related in the way members of a family (*sister arts*) are related. This framework does not allow one to take into account the complex and conflictual nature of our communication system.

**LE:** Interart studies were of course grounded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century idea that literature and art scholars should be interested exclusively in what today we call highbrow art. There is nothing wrong with highbrow art, of course; I love highbrow art. This is not the problem. The problem is that you just cannot understand mediality if you only focus on a very, very small section of the very, very large system of culture and communication. A couple of decades ago, it became quite clear for many scholars that you cannot stick to such a narrow perspective and focus only on the 'fine arts'. You need to enlarge your view to film, comics, graffiti and so on, even to cookery, perhaps. It also became clear that there were technological transformations, like the rise of the Internet, that needed to be taken into account in order to really understand culture and communication. I was fascinated by the complexity of these new research areas that aimed to enrich and transform the study of the interrelations between the sister arts.

**MP:** In the *Modalities* there seem to be two perspectives on media-interrelations with which you are particularly engaged: Mitchell's (1986) on the one hand and Wolf's (1999) on the other.

**EL:** Mitchell and Wolf were influential in a sort of paradoxical way, because they are very different thinkers. Somehow, I wanted to take what was good in their respective theories, while at the same time avoiding what I thought was not that good in them. Mitchell constantly argues for the idea that 'all media are mixed media'. He always tries to open up new perspectives, to make you understand that mediality is a slippery subject, that everything is embedded in a complex web of political, cultural, historical, and aesthetic factors. This was very intriguing to me. On the other hand, Mitchell is reluctant to make categorizations or give definitions. The idea that all media are mixed media was an excellent starting point, but I wanted to add something. Yes, all media are mixed media, but media are not all mixed in the same way. I wanted a little more structure. And Wolf, on the other hand, is all about structure. He manages to be very

systematic without disregarding the complexity of culture. He is systematic without being a structuralist. That meant something to me. I felt that I belonged to both these schools of thought. I really think that the world must be understood as systematically as possible, while at the same time acknowledging the incredible complexity of the mind, of culture, of knowledge, of communication.

My research as a whole takes as its starting point the idea that virtually all forms of communications can and should be understood in terms of intermediality and multimodality. More than ten years ago, I realized that if you take Mitchell's theory of media and follow it to the bitter end, so to speak, it becomes virtually impossible to find some form of communication that is not intermedial or multimodal. At first, this way of thinking may seem counterproductive. One might think that, if you do not draw the line somewhere, your theory becomes a mess. If you say that everything is intermedial or multimodal, it seems like you become unable to make any meaningful distinction. And this is exactly where Peirce came in. His theory of signs combines a very clear conceptual framework, which makes it possible to see clear differences and make categorizations, with a radical and pragmatic openness towards the complexity of any form of communication. This allowed me to reconcile model-making with an open attitude in which I do not necessarily need to draw the line somewhere. Sure, Peirce sometimes contradicts himself, but one of his famous definitions remains an excellent starting point:

A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object (Peirce 1960: par. 2.228).

**MF:** Since we are on the subject of signs and categorizations—I find it fascinating that in your work distinctions are always very clear—I have a question about indexicality. I have been working on

photography recently and, as you know, there are many indexical interpretations of photography. In his *L'acte photographique*, Philippe Dubois (1983) argues that, starting from Duchamp's ready-mades, indexicality has become widely diffused in performance, installation, and contemporary art in general, where there seems to be a refusal of representation in favor of indexes determined by contiguity, as well as a fascination for what one may call the pre-semiotic level of communication. I believe that Peirce's notion of indexicality could really illuminate the study of contemporary art. Do you have any thoughts on these matters?

**LE:** There are, of course, many ways of using the term 'indexicality'. I would say that, in a broad perspective, indexicality generates representation in the strictly semiotic sense of the word. It makes something stand for something else. For Dubois, perhaps – I'm not familiar with his work – as well as for many other authors, representation is much more related to iconicity. In a painting, for example, a painted horse stands for a real horse.

**MF:** Or, in the theater, an actor stands for a character. On the other hand, in performance, Marina Abramovich stands for herself. She refuses the idea of impersonating a character and stands as herself, for herself.

**LE:** This is a good example of how basic semiotic types can be used to understand complex forms of art, even whole art movements. The difficult thing is—and this is one of the things I really struggle with when I write—that sign-types can be used, produced, and perceived on so many different levels and in so many different grades. The index-icon-symbol trichotomy may appear simple at first, but you soon realize that signs are never just signs. There are always *chains of signs*. As soon as you interpret a sign, then, you have to move on to the next, and this might change your previous interpretation. We can say, for example, that language is basically symbolic; we cannot understand a language unless we are familiar with its symbolic system. But then a

whole world of sign functions opens up to you. There are, for example, a lot of metaphors on the cognitive level, and this is where iconicity comes in. As we know from court trials, language also leads to indices. Through very sophisticated procedures, you can transform what one says into indices, thus connecting it to the real world.

When the analog camera was supplanted by digital photography, it became easy—and popular—to say that there is no connection between photography and indexicality; that there is no truthfulness in photography, only construction. This probably contributed to making indexicality the most under-researched of the sign-types. Things have become even more complicated today, but I believe that the idea of a connection between photography and the exterior world is still valid, even in the digital age.

**MP:** When talking about photography, you put it in relation with truthfulness, which is a notion you have worked on (Elleström 2018). How does your study on truthfulness fit into the more general framework of your research?

**LE:** It is something that emerged from my research on indexicality which, in turn, derives from my work on the *Modalities*. Right after writing the *Modalities* I decided to continue working on the concepts that I posited there, so I broadened the area and dug deeper. After focusing on iconicity, I moved on to indexicality. During that same period, several of my colleagues became very interested in matters related to indexicality. A wide international debate on subjects like fake news and misinformation was also beginning. I had colleagues working on education in the natural sciences, or on communication in court trials, for example. In the end, such studies try to answer the question ‘how do you get things right?’, so to speak. How do you find the murderer? How do you *really* know things? To sum up, I wanted to write about indexicality because it was part of the framework that I had sketched in the *Modalities*, and I was also strongly influenced by my colleagues and by what was happening in the world. These are now some of the most important lines of inquiry at the Linnaeus



University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies, where I work. As you know, I am quite theoretical in my approach, but it comforts me to know that matters related to indexicality are extremely close to real-world matters.

**MF:** Which leads us to the relation between our research and the non-academic community, a subject that I would gladly explore with you. But first, since we are talking about some of the key terms around which your research revolves, I would like to ask you a question about one of them: meaningfulness. In a recent book (Elleström 2019) you define narration as a temporal sequence of events that are «interrelated in a meaningful way»<sup>1</sup>. While I agree with this definition, I tend to ask myself: how can experimental forms of mediality fit into this framework? Experimental media, by definition, constantly push the very limits of mediality, and I think that experimental art and literature have been challenging the notion of ‘meaningfulness’ at least since Joyce’s *Ulysses* and are still doing so today. Can we still see narration as a series of events that are meaningfully interrelated? You also apply the notion of narration to the experience of a sequence of smells or tastes<sup>2</sup>. We can construct a meal as a narration but, again, how does

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<sup>1</sup> «I propose defining a narrative as a virtual sphere, emerging in communication, containing events that are temporally related to each other in a meaningful way. Thus, the core of a narrative is exactly this: *represented events that are temporally interrelated in a meaningful way*. As the core consists of several elements, it might also be described as a scaffold. I also suggest that a whole virtual sphere containing such a core and normally also other media characteristics should be called a *narrative* and that the scaffolding core should be called a *story*. *Narration* should simply be understood as *the communication of narratives*» Elleström 2019: 37 (italics in the original text).

<sup>2</sup> «I presume that it would also be possible, in principle, to construe language systems mediated by taste or smell. In practice, however, they would probably be rather inefficient as a speedy decoding of symbols requires quickly performed sensory discriminations. However, taste and smell can no doubt be used to create at least rudimentary narratives. A well-planned meal

this relate to meaningfulness? I think that meaningfulness can be quite a problematic notion, especially when one aims at constructing a coherent and totalizing theory of communication.

**LE:** The short answer to your questions is: it is all in the eyes of the beholder. Or in the nose of the smeller. I believe that an important characteristic of narration is that events are arranged in such a way as to make sense, *in some ways*. As to give the sense that certain things belong together, so to speak. That is why the study of narration has become so important in fields quite far from literary studies, like psychotherapy. To understand things means to interrelate them. It is true, on the other hand, that I left the idea of ‘meaningful interrelation’ quite open in that little book, and I did that for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted that book to be concise; secondly, I thought that attempting to give a more precise definition would lead me too far away from the book’s conceptual core. This is one of those cases where I go back to the fundamental definition of sign that I mentioned earlier. If we think about the events that are represented in a narrative, we can say—simplifying a bit—that each event is represented through sets of signs that are, in turn, interconnected. Narrative events are the result of a concatenation of signs that for someone, at some point, means something. In this sense, different people can interpret a certain sign system as being narrative or non-narrative. One person perceives something as a narrative, another doesn’t. In someone’s mind determinate sets of events interrelate meaningfully, in someone else’s they don’t. This is not simple relativism. To me, this is the most accurate way to understand how minds work. There is no such thing

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with several courses served in a certain order may be construed as narrative to the extent that tastes and taste combinations may be developed, changed, and contrasted in such a manner that gives a sense of meaningfully interrelated events. A series of scents may be presented in such a way that represents, say, a journey from the city through the woods and to the sea, including encounters with people and animals with smells that reveal certain activities» Elleström 2019: 56.

as a set of signs that has the same meaning for everybody and there is no such thing as a narrative that is a narrative for everybody. However, in a more precisely defined context, where a group of people share what Stanley Fish—an author who was very influential on me, as he was for many people doing research in the '80s—called an 'interpretive community', there is certainly more intersubjectivity when it comes to interpreting signs and understanding narratives as narratives. Nevertheless, the notion of meaning no doubt remains problematic. Therefore, I nowadays often prefer to reason in terms of 'cognitive import' to point to a broader and less value-laden idea about things going on in the mind in less determinate ways. Much communication no doubt results in 'cognitive import' in the perceiver's mind without being 'meaningful' in a narrower sense.

**MF:** Another fundamental aspect of your research is the key role that music plays in it, whereas intermedial studies usually tend to privilege audiovisual media. Like you, I am a music lover. Do you think that Wagner's utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, has something to do with intermedial studies? Or is it confined to Wagner's aesthetic theory? In other words: can Wagner still tell us something about the synergy between media?

**LE:** I am sure that Wagner has something to say to intermedia scholars. Unfortunately, my research has led me quite far away from these regions. My opinions on Wagner depend more on my personal tastes in music than on my work in intermedia studies. I have listened to Wagner a lot over the years, but I have not read his writing for a long time. I have found out that if I tackle such questions in my writing, it becomes difficult to make my theory work as general model for the study of communication. Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is probably one of the earliest attempts to create a work of art that crosses all kinds of border. Such attempts have been repeated over and over, for example during modernism, then with the avant-garde movements, all the way through the '60s. Since Wagner, there has been a perpetual drive for some artists to embrace more and more media in a totalizing

work of art. Does this totalizing approach work? I think this is up to each of us to answer. There is a bit of a paradox here: I research intermediality, studying any kind of communication and any kind of media border-crossing. However, when it comes to my personal taste, I am quite conservative. I work with intermediality not necessarily because I like so-called intermedial works of art—a category that changes from historical frame to historical frame and from culture to culture. I work with multimodality and intermediality because they are general conditions for all communication that are vital to understand.

**MP:** Especially when one reflects on the genealogy of the intermediality theory, Wagner cannot be ignored. When did we start to think about intermediality from a theoretical perspective? In respect to this question, I found it fascinating that, in the *Modalities*, you mention Moses Mendelssohn's *On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences* (1997 [1757]). Were you attempting to draw a genealogy of your own research there? After the *Modalities*, have you come across other authors that helped you reconstruct a genealogy for your work? Was genealogy one of your concerns?

**LE:** I have never published anything that claims to tackle the history or genealogy of interart/intermedial studies. Claus Clüver (2009; 2016 [2007]), among others, did quite a lot of research in that direction. I think that much of the modern genealogy of interart studies, covering approximately the last 100-150 years, remains hidden for many, since it mostly developed in Germany. In my new version of the *Modalities*, I do write a little bit more about the historical background of my research. I also write on Roman Jakobson, whom I neglected ten years ago. But it was never my ambition to tackle these subjects. From a broad perspective, one might think about the history of intermediality as developing in parallel along two lines, one scholarly and one artistic, so to speak. We should ask ourselves two questions: how long have intellectuals and scholars been thinking and writing about such issues? And how long have artists been practicing intermediality? Wagner obviously belongs to both these lines. From

these same two lines, in a way, two different approaches within the field of intermedial studies have developed. Dick Higgins was perhaps the first person to use the term 'intermedia' in a theoretical text. There are some scholarly ambitions in his work, but his thought is much more rooted in artistic practice than in academic reflection. So much important theory has been made from a perspective similar to Higgins'. While going in somewhat different directions, these two lines of inquiry cross-fertilize each other. They help each other answer questions like: what is an intermedial work of art? In which ways can artworks be intermedial?

For my part, I feel I belong to the scholarly, academic line. Music gives me immense satisfaction, pleasure, and well-being; however, my interest for semiotics and communication led me to put aside a direct engagement with aesthetics and the analysis of works of art. I feel that I belong to a long scholarly tradition in the humanities in which people think about the arts in very abstract ways, and I would like to spread this kind of knowledge to other research areas as well. For example, I try to communicate with the field of multimodal studies, which is not that far away from the field of intermedia studies. It is made up of scholars working mostly on language and education. It did not take me long to realize that many of these otherwise brilliant people, who work in a neighboring discipline, have no clue about what the humanities have been finding out about multimodality for many years. One possible mission of my work might be to try to write something that can reach at least a few disciplines beyond intermedia studies, so that they can cross-fertilize each other.

This spirit of border-crossing between disciplines is also part of my background. I approached the study of literature and the arts quite late in my life. When I was young I was all into maths, physics, chemistry, and the natural sciences.

**MP:** You mentioned this in one of your previous interviews (Pethő 2018). You said that, at one point, you had to abandon these interests to focus on literature and philosophy. Do you think that these interests have somehow remained active in your scholarly personality?

It is not by chance that a literary scholar with an interest in mathematics becomes a semiotician, I think.

**LE:** I do not believe in chance either. After all, Peirce was a mathematician.

**MP:** And taxonomy and categorization, which are among the main goals of your research, are also two of the main objectives of the natural sciences as an intellectual enterprise.

**LE:** I am sure that I have been deeply influenced by those interests. I still read a lot of popular science books. However, I believe that the gap between the humanities and the hard and natural sciences cannot be bridged easily. On the other hand, I do believe that humanities scholars have a lot to learn from the methodological approaches and the ambition to create models that animate these disciplines. I mean, I create models; that is what I do, all the time. My model of the modalities of media is actually a conglomerate of a lot of different models. Anyhow, what fascinates me the most about working in the humanities is that, contrarily to what happens in the hard and natural sciences, we will never find the 'x' particle. Our work is not about finding things like that; the difficult questions will always be pushed forward and the truth will always be postponed over and over again. Nevertheless, I think that we can and should strive towards frameworks that are increasingly fertile, and this is where models come in. A model does not aim to represent something as it *really* is. It represents certain sets of *relations*. This, in turn, makes it possible for us to understand things in a better way. If we make a model of climate change, in fifty years we will know if that model was correct. This is not the case with a model of intermedia relations. We will never know if it is right or wrong, but we will certainly know if it has been useful or not.

**MP:** Which leads us to the relation between our research and the non-academic community that Massimo mentioned earlier. Artists like

Peter Greenaway (2011) constantly argue for the need of a better visual literacy among people. We are painstakingly trained to understand written forms of communication but we are never really trained to understand images. When we go to a museum and see a painting – this is Greenaway’s classic example – the first thing we often tend to do is read the little plaque on the side of the painting which contains the artist’s name and the painting’s title. In other words, our visual literacy is not nearly as developed as our linguistic literacy. Have you ever thought about literacy in general and media literacy in particular? One of the books that you quote in the *Modalities* has to do with the construction of critical media literacy among students (Semali – Pailliotet 1998). Do you see a relation between your work and media literacy?

**LE:** Yes, I often think about media literacy. There certainly is a connection between my work and the notion of media literacy. Several of my colleagues with whom I often discuss my research work with education, communication, and mass media. They are deeply involved with questions concerning media literacy. Even if we start from different premises, our respective studies meet at some point. Those who study media literacy often start from a practical, hands-on perspective, whereas I start from a more abstract point of view. It is not my academic style to work in such a way as to make my ideas readily applicable in the real world, but questions about literacy are always in my mind. In the end, what I think and write must have some practical consequence, although I am not inclined to link the theoretical and the practical levels myself. I am very happy, though, that several people who research media literacy know my work. As I said, cross-fertilization between disciplines is one of the aims of my research, so I am truly glad when my publications reach readers outside the field of intermedia studies.

**MP:** We could conclude our conversation with two very classic, interview-like questions. The first question is aimed at students and PhDs who are just approaching intermedia studies: what advice would

you give to a younger version of yourself, knowing what you know today? Is there any advice that you usually give to your students? Are there any suggestions or hopes that you would like to transmit to the readers of this conversation?

**LE:** The first thing that came to my mind while you were asking these questions is: *je ne regrette rien!* But seriously, in hindsight it would be easy for me to say things like: if I had not been engaged in writing for newspapers, I might have saved some time; If I had not spent much of my time studying Swedish poetry, perhaps I would have reached international recognition sooner. The only problem is that, at the time I was doing those things, it was impossible for me to make up my mind about my goals. I followed my instincts and my interests as they transformed over the years. When I was eighteen I was not even that interested in literature. I felt embarrassed when people talked about poetry! But when I started my university studies, the only thing I knew was that I was not interested in maths and the natural sciences as much as before. I had a sort of existential crisis. I felt bad for many years and the only things that kept me going were reading, listening to music, working, and studying philosophy. These interests kept me alive and, at the time, I had no idea where they would lead me. After four years of university studies, I hardly knew what a PhD was. I had only very vague ideas about what it meant to be a doctoral candidate and to work in a university. Nevertheless, I had the opportunity to work along this path, and that is what I did. In the end, what I would say to the person I was thirty or forty years ago probably is: well, Lars, you may be lucky! Even though you have no idea of where you are heading, things may work out quite well anyway. Also, I think that all the detours I made in my professional life, doing this and that, inside and outside academia, not really knowing where I was going, and being interested in so many different subjects as an academic, were all invaluable things for me. Perhaps it would be too simplistic to sum everything up in a cheesy slogan like 'just follow your heart' —even if, in a way, this is what I am saying. Or perhaps I should say: OK, follow your heart, but also, do not forget to work really hard. I think a lot



about how lucky I am to be able to live the life I live, spending my time studying what I love and being paid for it. I think that one must be allowed to make mistakes and take many wrong turns. Unfortunately, the current academic system, while having more than one positive side, often does not allow for this anymore. We must provide the opportunity for people in general—and for young researchers in particular—to wander around a little bit more and to work from a more interdisciplinary perspective.

**MP:** Second question: where do you go from here? What are your next projects?

**LE:** I will go on developing the research that I began ten years ago with the *Modalities*. I have already mentioned that my new study on the modalities of media is about to be published. There is some research left to do on symbolicity, so I will write an article on symbolicity. After this, I will do everything all over again, one more time, trying to put everything together in a major publication. There are so many things that still need to be developed. I think this research will keep me busy for quite some time, maybe until my retirement. We will see.

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## The Author

### Lars Elleström

Lars Elleström is Professor of Comparative Literature at Linnaeus University (Sweden). He leads the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (IMS) and chairs the board of the International Society for Intermedial Studies (ISIS). His latest publications include, among others, *The Modalities of Media II: An Expanded Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations* (2020) and *Transmedial Narration: Narratives and Stories in Different Media* (2019).

Email: [lars.ellestrom@lnu.se](mailto:lars.ellestrom@lnu.se)

### Massimo Fusillo

Massimo Fusillo is Professor of Literary Criticism and Comparative Literature at the University of L'Aquila and member of

the Academia Europaea. He is the author of *The Fetish: Literature, Cinema, Visual Art* and the coeditor of *Imaginary Films in Literature*.

Email: massimo.fusillo@gmail.com

### **Mattia Petricola**

Mattia Petricola is postdoc research fellow in comparative literature at the University of L'Aquila (Italy). His research interests sit at the crossroads of thanatology, speculative fiction, and media studies. He has published articles on Peter Greenaway, Bill Viola, Philip K. Dick, and the notion of spectrality in media studies. He is the Italian Ambassador of the Association for the Study of Death and Society (ASDS).

Email: mattia.petricola@gmail.com

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