



“A Good Concept Should Be both Very Concrete and Very Abstract.”

Interview with Lars Elleström

by Ágnes Pethő¹



You are Professor of Comparative Literature at the Linnaeus University in Sweden with an impressive research output, comprising several books, edited books, articles and book chapters written both in English and Swedish, some also translated into Portuguese and several other languages (listed in detail on the webpage of the university: <https://lnu.se/en/staff/lars.ellestrom/>). Besides several important articles, at least two of your books can be considered as real milestones regarding the theory of intermediality published in English: the edited collection of essays, resulting from an international conference that you organized in Växjö,

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Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality (*Palgrave Macmillan, 2010*) and the book summing up your major ideas regarding the theory of intermediality, entitled *Media Transformation: The Transfer of Media Characteristics Among Media* (*Palgrave Macmillan, 2014*). At present, you are heading two important institutions dedicated to studies of intermediality, you are the director of the *Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (IMS)* and you are the chair of the board of the *International Society for Intermedial Studies (ISIS)*.

How do you see your own journey towards the study of intermediality? How did you, a Swedish scholar trained in the study of literature, first become interested in questions related to intermediality? And, connected to this: was it the study of literature, or an interest in media studies or in semiotics that guided you more in this direction? Was there any specific theoretical or artistic work, or personal experience that steered you towards theorizing intermediality alongside your other major interests at the start of your career?

Long before coming to academic intermediality studies, my life was full of “interart.” Like most children, I liked picture books a lot and I still have vivid memories of many of them. My mother was an artist, and as a kid I could watch her drawing and painting for hours. My first and greatest artistic passion was, and still is, music. I liked to read adventure books until my teens, but it was not until I was 18 that poetry and so-called serious literature came into my life. When I later started my university studies, philosophy and literature came first, followed by visual arts, music and psychology, but this order was largely a reversal of my own development. Anyway, that did not matter much, because, as long as I can remember, I have felt the strong interconnections among various forms of art, entertainment and other forms of communication.

Apart from my strong interest in literature, of course, I probably chose to study for a doctor’s degree in literature because of the strong theoretical focus of the subject. I remember searching in vain for good ideas for a thesis on interartistic relations (Lund University, where I studied, was by then a stronghold of interart studies), but it ended up with a monograph on a Swedish poet. I was very interested in the theory of interpretation, which took me a bit, but perhaps not very long, on the way to theorizing about arts and media interrelations. I was also early fascinated by semiotics and realized that it might be important for the interartistic endeavours, but I simply did not know what to do with it by then. It ended up with some small publications, a few of them rather embarrassing. In brief, then: lived experience came first and theoretical ideas later, and I had a hard time matching them.

Could you trace the most important stages of your intellectual journey, the main ideas or areas of research that you became interested in along your career? Is there an evolution palpable in your work – an expansion of the areas of interests – or is it more like an intensification, a deepening of the same interest in your scholarly work throughout the years? How would you identify the main pillars of your research output? What do you think are the key issues and the most important accomplishments in your research work?

My favourite subjects at school when I was young were the natural sciences. Mathematics was always my strongest subject. I guess I saw some beauty in the abstract, and yet so real, universe of mathematics. It was also a bit of a game and a challenge to get things right. For me, it was very much about having inner images in the mind, where sizes, proportions and relations could be manipulated, so to speak, in order to find the solution. I liked the visual mathematical diagrams and found a great pleasure in mental calculation. Even though I left maths already before the age of 20, I find the relation between mental spatiality and material ways of communicating it through various forms of media intriguing – although it took me more than 20 years to come back to the area from the perspective of mediality!

When I had almost finished upper secondary school, however, I entered some sort of existential crisis that lasted for many years; maths and the natural sciences suddenly felt meaningless and could not help me cope with myself and the world. I started to read a lot and my university studies started with philosophy and literature, as I already mentioned. Even though I changed tracks completely, I have never regretted my early investments in the sciences, and I am still an avid reader of popular science. I would like to think that it helps me keeping an open mind and welcoming connections between the humanities and the natural sciences. Anyhow, the natural sciences definitely constitute stage one at my intellectual journey.

I finished my Ph.D. in comparative literature in 1992, and, for the next decade and a half or so, I published quite a lot (in Swedish and English) on poetry, gender issues, the concept of irony and interart – in various mixtures. I was (and still am) very engaged in gender questions but did not manage to come up with any really new perspectives. The concept of irony was intriguing to work with because of the intricate historical developments and the complex interpretive mechanisms involved. Irony is also a transmedial phenomenon, despite its clear roots in the verbal domain. Wrestling with irony in literature, music and the visual arts gave me the first genuine insights, I think, into the always delicate balance between

the specific qualities of external, material media products of various sorts and internal, mental mechanisms that deal with our perceptions of the external. Even though it might seem to be a bit of a truism that both media products and their perceivers have their parts in how meaning is created, I still believe that we must stubbornly continue to investigate how this works. Often, things that we see as self-evident are not properly examined just because we take them for granted.

My interart project on irony was concluded by a major book that was finished and first sent to the publisher in 2000 but not published until 2002 (in those days, most publishers still worked with paper proofs, so, having a US publisher meant sending them back and forth over the Atlantic Ocean again and again ...). Finishing this book, *Divine Madness*, while simultaneously teaching a lot, working as a literary critic and not having a tenure at the university, made me work much too much. One day, I collapsed. As so many others, I did not see it coming at all because I had suppressed my needs for such a long time that I believed it to be normal never being able to relax properly. It was a terrible experience to, literally, all of a sudden, fall to the floor and start trembling and crying. After a while, however, when I understood what was going on, I was extremely relieved. I just left everything and was immediately sick-listed, first full-time and then part-time, for half a year. It was one of the best things that have ever happened to me!

Since then, my working hours are very strictly regulated. I work much less but more efficiently and I feel so much better. I also decided that being overambitious wouldn't lead to much good for me, so, for many years after the collapse in 2000, I kept a rather low profile. I finished some old projects, tried out some new ideas that did not really work out, published rather little and bided my time.

In 2005 and 2006, I started to reflect anew on media interrelations. Interart studies was by then on its way to being transformed into intermediality studies, and, since I had started to feel somehow claustrophobic in the interart paradigm, I was enthusiastic about this broadening of the frames. I was lucky to get funding for a project on iconicity and media interrelations in poetry, but, when starting to work intensely with these issues again for the first time in many years, I had a hard time ever coming close to my announced literary material; I got so caught up in the more theoretical issues that I felt I had to wrap my mind around before I could start analysing the poems that I spent several years re-examining and rethinking intermedial issues. This resulted in publications on iconicity – signification based on similarity relations in a multitude of media types – as of 2008. It also resulted in the article *The Modalities of Media: A*

Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations, published in 2010 and still my most quoted publication. It was part of the book *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, that I also edited. The guiding thought of *The Modalities of Media* is very simple: every single media product and, hence, every media type must necessarily have certain material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic traits. Elaborating methodically on this almost axiomatic starting point, however, has some consequences for conceptualizing media interrelations that are perhaps not as self-evident.

Since then, I have worked in a focused way with interrelated issues that in various ways deepen or broaden ideas that are presented or hinted at in *The Modalities of Media*. I also decided to mainly publish articles (and now and then, perhaps, a short book) because I found the small format more efficient. I think many books in the humanities, including most of my own, are unnecessarily long. I have, thus, since then, in a pace directed by my strict working schedule, published several articles focused on particular media types from an intermedial perspective, and, of course, also articles with general perspectives on intermediality.

Mentioning a handful of publications may give an overall idea of the directions that my research has taken. In *Material and Mental Representation: Peirce Adapted to the Study of Media and Arts* (2014), I wrestle with Charles Sanders Peirce's most foundational semiotic concepts and try to find a way of making them as useful as possible for the study of communication and mediality. Peirce, who wasn't a communication or art scholar, but rather a mathematician and philosopher (among other things), can be rather irritating and confusing, but, the more work one invests, the more brilliant ideas one finds in his scattered writings. Semiotics does not provide answers to everything, of course, but I would find it very difficult to theorize about mediality without access to the basic semiotic concepts. The most essential semiotic principle is, again, very simple, and almost impossible to deny: our minds work in such a way that things such as perceptions, sensations, thoughts and ideas constantly trigger the awareness of other thoughts or ideas – in other words: “signs” make present to our minds “objects.” In the case of communication, media products act as signs because they trigger the perceiver to construe some sort of meaning or “cognitive import;” the media products represent something – if they do not, they are not media products. I believe that even scholars who do not deliberately use semiotic theory must subscribe to this basic principle. And, once one starts to disentangle the implications of this basic principle, many interesting and useful things are found ...

In the short book, *Media Transformation: The Transfer of Media Characteristics Among Media* (2014), I summarise my most central thoughts about diachronic media interrelations. A synchronic perspective on media interrelations means that one primarily focuses on a particular media product or media type and investigates how it is constituted in terms of multimodality and other characterising traits. A diachronic perspective means to pay attention to media traits that are shared by many media products or media types and, hence, potentially can be – or actually have been – transferred among media. This is the area of transmediality (which I conceptualize as a specific form of intermediality). One of my central concepts here is transmediation. Building on several earlier similar concepts, I define transmediation as media characteristics that have already been represented by some medium being represented again by some other kind of medium. Transmediation can have enormous implications in all forms of communication for the simple reason that meaning, or cognitive import, is necessarily somehow transformed in transmediation because of basic media differences. Sometimes, the transformation of meaning is marginal but other times it is fundamental.

In *Bridging the Gap between Image and Metaphor through Cross-modal Iconicity: An Interdisciplinary Model* (2017), my last and, I believe, most complete article on iconicity, I summarise the central implications for mediality of this important semiotic concept. Media types are always more or less dissimilar but also more or less similar. Dissimilarities among media constitute various forms of borders that may make it more difficult to, say, transmediate cognitive import from one media type to another. However, these borders are not in any way definite, which is easily proved by way of simply pointing to the many media interactions that constantly occur around us. One vital answer to the question how such transgressions are possible is that we have cognitive abilities to perceive connections among different material, spatiotemporal and sensorial modes – for instance, through similarity, the ground of iconic meaning-making. Perceiving an inorganic image, such as a drawing on paper, one may take it to be a representation of something organic, like a body. The mind, so to speak, takes a leap from an inorganic sign to an organic object. Similarly, it takes a leap from a two-dimensional sign to a three-dimensional object – we do not think that the represented body is flat! By the same token, our cognitive abilities of perceiving similarities between what we see, hear, feel, smell, taste and think are well-developed. A visual diagram, such as a curve chart, for instance, may represent changes in sound intensity as well as economical fluctuations. Understanding these crucial cognitive abilities and their interrelations are essential, I think, for

grasping intermedial relations; our minds provide cross-modal openings, so to speak, that make it possible to partly overbridge media differences.

I have talked a lot about communication so far, but it actually took a while after the publication of *The Modalities of Media* before I realised how truly important this concept is. In my article, *A Medium-Centered Model of Communication* (forthcoming in *Semiotica*) and some other recent publications, I make the framework of communication explicit. Modelling human communication as interaction among minds made possible through intermediate media products – that may consist of either our bodies and their immediate extensions or external physical objects or phenomena – makes it possible to methodically investigate media similarities and differences in a comprehensive way. I have also recently started to think a lot about how different media types can communicate truthfully in various ways. In a forthcoming publication, *Coherence and Truthfulness in Communication: Intracommunicational and Extracommunicational Indexicality*, I explore some of the most important functions of indices, signs grounded on contiguity, or real connections. Like *A Medium-Centered Model of Communication*, this is an investigation that starts with fundamental queries about communicative representation – such as how it is possible at all to reach the outer and inner realities through communication – in order to enable conceptualizations of media dissimilarities. The article is an initial contribution to the complex question of what happens to truthfulness when cognitive import is transmediated.

Today, with several decades of research behind you, do you consider yourself first and foremost a literary scholar, a media studies scholar, an intermediality scholar or a combination of these?

I am not sure ... To be honest, I sometimes feel that I do not belong anywhere. I struggle with forming concepts so that they may be broadly applied, which can also lead to that they meet resistance or indifference everywhere. My books are scattered on various shelves in the libraries and there are no journals that I feel to be safe bases. In a way, I like this situation, because it forces me to stay awake and watch my back – which is compensated by my stable and secure private life! When trying to explain what I do to non-academic persons, I say that I do research on communication and how various forms of media, such as speech, still images, gestures, movies and written texts, necessarily form what is being communicated: when you verbally describe a motion picture or an image in the newspaper, the meaning unavoidably changes in various ways. Everyone

understands that and, thus, also realizes that the research field actually has some bearing even on perfectly normal, everyday communication. So, perhaps I am a communication scholar with a strong interest in intermedial issues and a personal inclination towards music, film, literature and other art forms that help us to understand life better.

How do these areas of scholarship combine in your own work and how do you see their connection in general? I mean, a lot of researchers of intermedial topics have a basic training in the theory of literature or in media studies, so, how do you think this has shaped the state of the art in intermediality studies?

Things are slowly changing, no doubt, but intermediality studies today – at least the research that itself uses the label ‘intermediality’ – is strongly dominated by investigations of various art forms and artistic phenomena, perhaps particularly in relation to new digital techniques. Furthermore, the legacy of literary and linguistic theory, including Saussurean semiology, is still strong. Too strong. Although literary and linguistic theory, again including Saussure, has meant very much for the development of what is today known as intermedial studies, and still has a lot to offer, of course, I think that it, in the end, must be, if not abandoned, thoroughly adapted to a broad media perspective. In spite of the immense importance of language – understood as systems of habitual signs, symbols – and in spite of the impressive theoretical developments during the last century or so, communication in general cannot be subsumed under language – and, hence, the study of intermediality cannot really be theorized in terms of linguistic or literary theory (with the exception of, naturally, those parts of linguistic and literary theory that are already inherently transmedial, valid for all forms of media).

So, in a way, linguistic and literary theory has also been harmful for a sound development of intermediality studies and, for a long time, semiotics and structuralism (developments of Saussurean semiology) had, rightfully, a bad reputation for trying to force grammar and other linguistic structures on all forms of communication. I think this is also why my own initial steps towards intermediality partly failed; I could find no ways of using the available theoretical tools in a way that fitted my lived experience of various art forms. When I finally started to mature intellectually, and, simultaneously, slowly started to better understand Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics, I saw other ways of thinking about media interrelations; it was about integrating language in communication

in general rather than the other way round. I also got a little bit impatient with the traditional ways of thinking about “word and image,” “word and music” or just about anything as long as “word” was part of the parcel – a scholarly tradition that obviously has its roots in the predominance of literature researchers in the interart tradition. I guess this means that, no, I do not think my scholarship can any longer be characterized as focused on literature, for instance, although I quite often use this and related areas as resources for exemplification simply because I have been trained in them. Analysing literature does not necessarily imply that one uses literary or linguistic theories!

How do you evaluate the state of the art in the area that we can consider “intermediality studies” today? What do you see as the major challenge that researchers of intermediality have to face today? Do these challenges come from the “outside,” i.e. from the new and complex media phenomena that we encounter today in the digital age, the new theories that have emerged dealing with media relations, or do they come from the “inside,” i.e. from the specific methodologies employed by researches and the quality of researches on intermediality?

I think the main challenges come from the inside. Although today’s complex media phenomena deserve a lot of attention, of course, they cannot be seen in isolation from all those other complex media phenomena that we have always had around us and that have always seemed to be new. In my view, intermediality studies should strive for an integrated understanding of dissimilar forms of communication – synchronically and diachronically. Today’s advanced digital technologies for communication exist side by side and very much joined with analogue technologies and purely bodily-based communication that have been with us for a very long time indeed. The theories and methodologies of intermediality should reflect these deep connections, instead of pursuing research in separate tracks. For instance, the divide between art forms and other forms of communication still makes many intermedial studies look like interart research in disguise. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with interart as such, the shift to the broader notion of intermediality still holds many promises that have scarcely at all been fulfilled. This is partly because it is truly difficult to seriously transgress the borders between established research traditions. Nevertheless, I think that intermediality will eventually become marginalized if we do not broaden the relevance of the field; we simply have to engage larger areas of the field of communication studies.

Do you see intermediality as an established research area with important results, or something that still has to assert itself against other approaches of studying contemporary media phenomena? In what do you see the specificity and productivity of the notion of intermediality today?

Intermediality is a research field with fuzzy edges. Many researchers work with issues that are very much intermedial, understood as dealing with interrelations among various media forms, without really being aware of the existence of such a research field. Now and then, intermediality – either the term or the various concepts that it refers to – is reinvented by people who become interested in the perspective of comparing media forms. This is a good thing, because it shows that core questions of intermediality are relevant also for researchers who have not come across the field as such. I think that remediation, media convergence and media archaeology are concepts, or even research traditions, that are complementary and, largely, although perhaps not in all their details, parts of the field of intermediality. The way I see it, intermediality research is actually (or should be) much larger than the sum of those publications that overtly use terms such as intermediality or transmediality. Taking a look at the references in my own publications, for instance, one soon discovers that only a minority of them are explicitly intermedial. But I am perhaps not a very typical intermediality scholar. In my view, the potential strength of intermedial perspectives is in always starting with a wide-ranging outlook, which makes it much easier to generalize one's findings and find relevant connections to issues and research problems that are beyond one's own expertise. Without an intermedial perspective, researchers of human communication run the risk of not being able to communicate with each other ...

The most specific, truly intermedial research question that I have been working with, and will continue to investigate, is how cognitive import is necessarily transformed (enhanced or corrupted) when transferred among dissimilar media types. This is an immensely complex and, also, very important question that no doubt requires a profoundly intermedial conceptual framework. Whereas this question is specific because it is easy to succinctly formulate, it is, at the same time, overwhelmingly general because of its broad applicability. It, thus, requires empirical approaches that should be selected from different communicative areas where, also, more particular questions and problems can be formulated.

Much of your research work focuses on the fine-tuning of notions, the precise definitions of categories and operations involved in the relations between media.

Why do you consider this a priority? In your book, you criticise Bolter and Grusin’s notion of remediation as something that is inspiring but “severely lacks in-depth theoretical discussions” and is “acutely vague” (2014, 7). Do you think the same is true for other notions that we use in media studies today? Which are the areas regarding media phenomena where you think that scholars should work on further clarifications and in-depth theoretical discussions?

Whereas I do not think my critique of Bolter and Grusin is wholly unjust, it is perhaps a bit presumptuous and unnecessary. Sometimes, one has to demarcate certain differences to make one’s own contributions more visible, however, and it would have been impossible to simply ignore their influential book on remediation. But, perhaps, our ways of thinking about intermedial relations are so blatantly different that my pigheaded critique is superfluous. Anyhow, I think there may be great value in research that opens doors and windows for us to discover interesting territories – even if its concepts are a bit vague. When a research field is under development, one, furthermore, cannot expect everything to fall into place immediately. I, therefore, refrain here from listing other vague notions. In the end, it is rather easy and not always very fruitful to point to conceptual vagueness if one does not, at the same time, offer clearly better solutions. In-depth discussions of concepts also require a common view on why and how the concepts are expected to be used.

Finally, however, research is about producing new knowledge, and that cannot be achieved without fine-tuned concepts. Producing new knowledge within the humanities is very much about making it possible to see things clearer, making the mental image more fine-grained – and, without fine-tuned concepts, vital differences between and interrelations among, so to speak, conceptual forms, colours and textures of mental images cannot be properly discerned. A good concept should be both very concrete and very abstract: concrete in the respect that it is properly and, in some detail, defined in relation to neighbouring concepts, and abstract in the sense that is applicable to more than one very specific area of investigation. Fine-tuned concepts can be used for forming conceptual models that make it possible to chart complex occurrences and, perhaps, even to discover or predict the existence of hitherto unknown phenomena. A lack of fine-tuned concepts is, furthermore, likely to lead to fruitless scholarly debates fuelled by basic misunderstandings of positions and arguments.

Studying intermediality as a theoretical investigation in your work owes a great deal to semiotics and so-called multimodal studies. In terms of theory, do you see other approaches that may open up new paths in researching intermediality in the future?

Having in-depth theoretical discussions and trying to clarify things is, no doubt, an eternally ongoing process. It is an unavoidable and vital feature of all research. As you mention, I have profited from research areas such as semiotics and multimodality, which provide useful theoretical models to wrestle with, and, in the future, intermedial studies might, perhaps, also profit more from cognitive science if we can find ways of actually collaborating. After all, the way human cognition works is central for how we use various media forms.

Related to the previous question, what do you think are the most important topics or areas which should be approached from the points of view articulated in the scholarship on intermediality? What are the key issues to be tackled by intermediality studies today?

Because of its broad scope, as I envision it, intermedial research can be used for so many issues that I really cannot survey all. One truly important area, however, is to develop our understanding of truthfulness in communication. Communication always somehow puts us in contact with what we perceive to be realities in the world, but dissimilar media types may do that in rather different ways that complement and interact with each other. I believe that an intermedial perspective is essential for a nuanced conception of truthful communication – a huge challenge!

And, also, to pose the question from a different perspective, should we apply the notion of intermediality to ever-new areas of research (and, thus, keep up with the evolution of new media in the digital age), or should we leave it behind and try to elaborate other, new concepts instead? In short, how do you see the future of intermediality studies?

When I was a Ph.D. student in comparative literature in the years around 1990, we were just about to leave a paradigm behind us saying that you can only study authors that are dead or, at least, very old. Nowadays, most young researchers in the humanities study contemporary, rather than historic, phenomena. I think we

will always need both perspectives, and, additionally, research that tries to bridge over such differences. My vision is a field of study that incorporates both old and new ways of communicating and, hence, never falls out of fashion, so to speak. This means creating theories that are abstract and robust enough to withstand all kinds of changes in the world and in our ways of investigating it, and that, at the same time, incorporate concepts that, as such, are adaptable to ever newly emerging communicative phenomena. In my generation of literary scholars, it was for some time a deadly sin, and a safe way to ridicule and dishonour, to use terms such as “universal,” but I am convinced that there are vital phenomena in the study of media that will completely escape us unless we are ready to recognize that some things are, at least, much more universal than others. I am primarily thinking about vital cognitive abilities that have been developed for hundreds of thousands of years and that are shared by all people from all cultures; cognitive abilities that cannot be overlooked if media interrelations are to be understood. While isolating such “universals” is perhaps as difficult as isolating “cultural specificities,” ignoring them means to cripple one’s understanding of basic communicative capacities.

I have increasingly come to understand my field of study as *mediality*, a research field that basically covers the area of human communication, but with an emphasis on the intermediate entities between what I call “producer’s mind” and “perceiver’s mind:” the media products. Only when this field is thoroughly developed can we properly conceptualize interrelations within one and the same media type – intramediality – and interrelations among dissimilar media types – intermediality. Conceptualized on such a high level of abstraction, I think that yes, we both can and should apply notions such as communication, mediality, intramediality and intermediality to ever-new areas of research.

You are the founding member and the leader of the International Society for Intermedial Studies. What can you tell me about the history of this organization, its main goals and range of activities?

In 1995, Professor Ulla-Britta Lagerroth arranged the highly international and very successful conference *Interart Studies: New Perspectives* at Lund University, Sweden. I was one of the members of the conference committee, and it was during this conference that the initiative to form the Nordic Society for Interart Studies (NorSIS) was taken. After that, the society arranged several conferences and, ten years later, in 2005, I myself arranged a NorSIS conference at Linnaeus University (in Växjö, Sweden). For some reason, the work of the board then stagnated and no

new NorSIS conferences were announced. I, therefore, offered myself to arrange yet another conference in 2007 to keep the pace up, and I was by then also elected as the new chair of the board. At the General Assembly that same year, the society's name was changed to Nordic Society for Intermedial Studies (still abbreviated as NorSIS) because of the broadening of the field that was underway. By then, the NorSIS conferences were already profoundly international events, so all involved found it natural to, once again, in 2011, change the name of the society, this time to International Society for Intermedial Studies (ISIS). Since then, ISIS conferences have been organized in Romania, the Netherlands and Canada. This year, 2018, we will be in China, and, after that, it is back to Europe and France.

Although we have had many ideas about how the society could work, it has, in effect, mainly been a tool for arranging conferences and supporting networking. I have always wanted to keep it as simple as possible, which means that we have no membership fees and a minimum of administration. There is a basic website and, also, regular email notifications of calls for papers that are relevant for the members. In line with this straightforwardness, our statutes simply say that “intermedial studies focuses on interrelationships between art forms and media. These relations are viewed in a general cultural context and apply to art forms in the broadest sense. [...] The aim of the Society is to promote intermedial research and postgraduate education by means of conferences, seminars and projects.”



Lars Elleström at the Rethinking Intermediality in the Digital Age conference in Cluj-Napoca, in 2013.

There have been renewed suggestions that the Society should change its name, or, at least, its acronym, because of the unfortunate coincidence with the name of a well-known terrorist organization, but you have been one of the staunch supporters of keeping the name and abbreviation as it is, arguing that we expect people to be able to separate the areas of politics and science (even if, perhaps, search engines may confuse them in the realm of the internet). I am not interested in renewing the discussions around this, but I am interested in your views regarding the connection between intermediality and politics in general. In an article published in 2010, Jens Schröter discussed how intermedial techniques in the arts have been both dismissed as manifestations of the “capitulation to the society of spectacle” (in the view of Rosalind Krauss), and praised as a revolt against the idea of pure media reflecting the capitalist division of labour (in the view of Dick Higgins). By identifying such connections between thinking about media and politico-economic aspects of society, he contends, we can speak of a political dimension of intermediality. Do you see this dimension as something relevant?

According to my view, intermediality is, first of all, an analytical perspective. Virtually all forms of communication can be scrutinized and discussed in terms of multimodality and intermediality with some profit, although I agree that some communicative phenomena are probably in more dire need of an intermedial approach. From this line of reasoning follows that an intermedial perspective can and perhaps even should be applied to also all those forms of communication that are political or have political implications. Intermedial analysis must certainly be able to be integrated with other research perspectives. However, I do not think there is a political dimension of the intermedial perspective as such. The example of Krauss’s and Higgins’s different positions can probably be explained by a closer look at their own norms and what kind of artistic communication they refer to, more precisely. What I mean is that political perspectives and values are parts of a communicative reality that intermedial research can certainly embrace. Although the intermedial research perspective is not political as such (research should provide knowledge, not values), it may certainly be helpful for understanding political issues. I am convinced that, for instance, transgression of conventional media borders can have all kinds of very different political functions that can be highlighted through intermedial analysis.

The Society has recently launched its collaborative online platform (<http://isis.digitaltextualities.ca/>). What is the main goal of setting up such a platform?

In what way will this platform develop? What will be the impact of this platform in the research community, in your view?

The primary goal is to facilitate communication among researchers interested in intermediality. Right now, the platform is under development, but, hopefully, it will be easy to advertise all kinds of events and projects. It will also be possible to engage in debates and discussions of one's own choice. The amount of possible happenings will depend entirely on the activities of the members, who will also be able to post information about themselves and their publications. The platform will additionally work as a more ordinary website, providing basic information about the society. It is really an experiment to see if there is a demand for such a platform or not; if people will engage properly, it will hopefully lead to more and better research cooperation on an international level.

There are several ongoing research projects connected to the Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies at Linnaeus University. What can you tell me about these? And what are you working on at the moment?

The projects at IMS, consisting of around 25 researchers, are too many to be discussed in detail here. As indicated, we strive towards combining and partly integrating the research traditions of multimodality and intermediality. The group consists of scholars from subjects such as media and communication, comparative literature, musicology, film studies, visual studies and linguistics, working with collaborative as well as individual projects. We have defined four very general, overarching perspectives: meaning, interaction, learning and narration. Apart from more theoretical work and a diversity of smaller projects, we have collaborative research projects on empirical areas such as teaching science, news in emerging media forms, narration in criminal trials and aesthetic narratives of the Anthropocene.

At the moment (i.e. April 2018), I am finishing a small but compact book on transmedial narration that will, hopefully, be published before the end of the year. As one might guess, it will be highly theoretical on a rather abstract level, which is necessary if one wants to embrace all possible kinds of media. I will actually even include some pages on narration in mathematical equations here! As usual, I often feel very enthusiastic and convinced while writing but sometimes rather terrified and sceptical when reviewing my drafts ... I presume that is quite common. As all of my publications from the last ten years are parts of a conscious strategy, I

will, sometime before I retire, in ten years or so, try to put together a major work including the most important results of my research on mediality.

The International Society for Intermedial Studies connects researchers from all over the world. Do you think that the scholarship on intermediality, which deals with mutual influences – “border crossings” – and often involves interdisciplinary methodologies, can be seen as something so abstract that it transcends cultural boundaries? Or do you think that our approaches are more or less determined by the cultures we live in or come from? What are your personal experiences about the relevance and productivity of this cultural dimension in researches on intermediality?

I am very happy about how easy it has been to find people in, so far, Europe, North America and Asia who are willing to organize our ISIS conferences. I think it is really important to spread the activities over the continents, even though I am acutely aware of the fact that many researchers do not have the possibility to travel extensively. The alternative would be to simply stay in Europe and, hence, indirectly exclude those who do not stand a chance of coming here. It is also a great opportunity to be able to create a truly international research environment at my home university. IMS, or the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies, as the full name reads, has a spine of researchers with permanent tenure and more than a third of us have our roots outside of Sweden. A great majority of our (not so many) Ph.D. students come from abroad (Brazil, Denmark and Iran). This year we will, additionally, have five or more international postdocs. I get into some detail about this because I am a bit proud over how things have developed. The strong internationalization of the research centre has also meant a lot for my own development. Not wanting to exclude anyone, my personal international contacts (if one thinks in terms of several invitations, followed by various forms of interactions and collaborations) are especially developed in Denmark, Germany, England, Czechia, Romania and, not the least, Brazil. So, yes, I am more than convinced that intermedial research transcends cultural boundaries!

In order to answer your question in a more nuanced way and from a slightly different angle, however, I must recall my distinction between basic media types and qualified media types. Sometimes, we mainly pay attention to the most basic features of media products and classify them according to their most salient material, spatiotemporal, sensorial and semiotic properties. We think, for instance,

in terms of still images (most often understood as tangible, flat, static, visual and mainly iconic media products). This is what I call a basic medium (a basic type of media products), and it is relatively stable. However, such a basic classification is sometimes not enough to capture more specific media properties. So, we qualify the definition of the media type in question and add criteria that lie beyond the basic media modalities: we also include all kinds of aspects of how the media products are produced, used and evaluated in the world; how they are situated in geography, history and culture. We may want to delimit the focus to still images that are, say, handmade by very young persons – children’s drawings. This is what I call a qualified medium (a qualified type of media product), and it is more fluid than the basic medium of still image simply because the added criteria are optional, vaguer and more culture-dependent than those captured by the basic media modalities.

So, thinking about interrelations among the communicative phenomena that we perceive and study, there are, broadly speaking, two kinds of media interrelations. On the one hand, there are relations among basic media types – such as still images and written verbal (symbolic) texts; this can be understood as intermediality in a narrow sense, which is less culture-dependent and more universal. On the other hand, there are relations among qualified media types – such as children’s drawings and restaurant menus; this is, then, intermediality in a broad sense, which is more culture-dependent and less universal simply because qualified media types are much less stable. This means that, even though the analytical perspective of intermediality in a narrow sense (among basic media) is globally useful, the perceived phenomena of intermedial relations in a broad sense (among qualified media) may vary a lot through history and across cultures. For instance, what appears to be a perfectly normal way of speaking in one context may be perceived as an intermedial mixture of speech and song in another context. Hence, the cultural aspect is often crucial and can hardly be avoided in intermedial studies, even though it does not provide answers to all our questions.

Furthermore, do you think that it is by sheer accident that the idea of founding an international society for intermedial studies came from Scandinavia, where it started its activity under the name of Nordic Society for Interart Studies? Is there a tradition in Nordic countries that steered scholars in this area towards the study of intermediality?

I can only speculate. Much interart theory was initially developed by literary scholars. Sweden and our neighbour countries had a strong tradition of concrete

poetry from the 1950s and onwards, which directed many researchers towards thinking about the relation between literature and other (artistic) qualified media types during a period when the development of literary theory exploded – let us say, from the 1970s and onwards. Also, in Brazil, concrete poetry was strong and gained an international reputation, so one might presume that it became important for their literary scholars to be able to cope with the phenomenon properly – hence, the strong Brazilian interest in intermediality today. Perhaps many factors like these together can provide some sort of explication.

Do you find that research centres or scholars active in different countries bring diversity to the field? Is there a different approach in research methodology or topics in Scandinavia, Germany, Brazil or Canada, for example? Or do you think that the real “fault lines” (if there are any) are not drawn by cultural differences but by the diversity in the theoretical approaches and influences (i.e. semiotics, post-structuralist philosophies, cultural studies, cognitivism, media phenomenology, etc.)?

I lean towards your latter suggestion: the diversities of the field can be traced, also, very much within nations, regions and cultures. Although I very much feel at home academically in Scandinavia, I may sometimes feel more deeply connected to researchers that I meet in, say, Estonia, Czechia, Ukraine, the Netherlands or Brazil. If there is a Scandinavian school of intermedial studies, it should, perhaps, be described by someone from the outside! I do not think much in those terms myself. But language differences do matter, of course, so intermediality in French-speaking countries is often not really the same as intermediality in German-speaking countries because of different intellectual traditions carried by the respective languages.

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