

# Promotion vs. suppression : intermedial relationships between early narrative film and its fan magazine fictionalizations

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# Promotion vs. Suppression: Intermedial Relationships between Early Narrative Film and its Fan Magazine Fictionizations

Johannes Mahlke

At least since 1977, when the innovative marketing strategy of *Star Wars* showed film producers how much money could be made with tie-in products, Hollywood studios have come to appreciate movie fictionizations as a lucrative source of added income. Essentially adaptations of screenplays into prose fiction, they are routinely published alongside major cinematic releases, providing easy entertainment while boosting awareness of the films they adapt. Such fictionizations from the early days of cinema, between 1911 and 1915, published as short story versions in monthly magazines, can be seen as having served an additional and more vital function: along with other paratextual phenomena like lantern slides, expository intertitles, and film-accompanying lectures, they clarified the often crude and obscure narrative techniques employed by the fledgling new medium. This essay draws attention to the variety of ways in which filmmakers relied on the established medium of written narrative in order to explain and promote the new, visual one. By comparing various examples, the essay shows to what degree a concept of textual unity in early film can be understood as extending beyond the boundaries of film itself.

Before the release of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) showed the world the capacity of film to successfully tackle complex stories, audiences often had difficulty interpreting how the events presented on the screen fitted together to produce a coherent and unified narrative whole. Film's lack of synchronized sound and filmmakers' lack of experience in the development of continuity in editing and framing, as well

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as the attempt to limit the use of intertitles (because they disrupted the continuous flow of the moving images and were thus considered undesirable), required additional verbal assistance from *outside* the medium itself. Lecturers explained the visual events as they unfolded on the screen; synopses displayed in theaters – in print or as lantern slides – explained key points of the story before the film began; and fan magazines featured short story adaptations of upcoming releases which contained and elaborated plot-relevant details.

This essay focuses on the latter of the three strategies, the short story versions or “fictionizations,” which occupy a special position due to their greater temporal and spatial independence from the film experience as well as their comparative multi-functionality. My main point of interest is the dual relationship between the fictionizations and their cinematic counterparts: on the one hand, as an advertising tool designed to promote both individual films and the emerging film industry at large the fictionizations’ potential stand-alone value is sidelined.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, because they belong to an “old” but fully developed and autonomous narrative medium, they can be viewed as surpassing the capabilities of the still struggling “new” medium of film, thus laying bare the latter’s technical drawbacks. Taking into consideration the theoretical concepts of intermediality and remediation, I will examine two one-reelers from the early 1910s – namely *The Adventure of the Hasty Elopement* (1914, Charles M. Seay) and *From the Submerged* (1912, Theodore Wharton) – and compare them with their written narrative supplements. By considering both the fictionization and the film stills published alongside it, the essay will shed light on the complex relationships between an established and an emerging narrative medium as well as the ambivalent power relations that exist between the seemingly “new and exciting” and the seemingly “old and outdated.” Before going into detail, however, I will briefly sketch some general features of the fan magazine, its circumstances of production and its origins.

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<sup>1</sup> The clearly intended subservience of fictionizations to their filmic counterparts is implied in the title of the earliest fan magazine, *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, as well as in the disclaimer presented in its table of contents: “These stories were written from photoplays supplied by Motion Picture manufacturers, and our writers claim no credit for title and plot” (December 1912 issue, ii).

*The Early Fan Magazine*

The first fan publication, *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, started its monthly publication in 1911 under the auspices of J. Stuart Blackton, head of the film studio Vitagraph. *Photoplay* followed the same year, and the two remained the leaders among a multitude of similar periodicals – both monthly and weekly ones – that began to flood the American market in the mid-1910s. Initially each issue featured around a dozen fictionizations, along with photo galleries of famous picture players, interviews and articles about stars, filmmakers and about the film industry in general. Furthermore, magazines included advertisements for screenwriting manuals aimed at would-be scenario writers, as well as for various kinds of merchandise ranging from postcards sporting photographs of famous players to little flags emblazoned with a studio logo. A significant feature was the “Gallery of Picture Players.” The December 1912 issue of *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, for instance, devotes the first sixteen pages to large prints of photographs of actors who smile into the camera, their pictures often being elegantly framed with drawings of flowery wreaths, butterflies and the like. The gallery alone leaves no doubt as to the promotional intent of the magazine as a whole.

Cinemagoers could read the fictionization before watching the corresponding film, thus guaranteeing they could make sense of what they would later see on the screen, or they could read them afterwards, to make sense of what they had seen on the screen. An early editorial in the British fan magazine *The Pictures* claimed that “whoever has read the story follows the film with vastly increased facility and enjoyment” (qtd. Shail 186), thus admitting, at least implicitly, the deficiencies of film as a narrative medium. Not *explicitly*, of course, since fan magazines and the film industry quickly became “trusted friends” (Slide 8) that profited far more from complimenting rather than criticizing each other.

One element that distinguishes the movie fictionization from conventional short stories is, of course, its highly limited freedom of innovation, the adaptation being strictly bound to the chain of events as related in the filmic source. For the purposes of the early fictionization, however, this was considered an advantage rather than an (artistic) drawback. The editorial of the first issue of *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, for instance, proudly announced that:

unlike the dramatic novel, which frequently makes radical departures from the published book, these stories adhere closely to the original tale, and the reader will find no disappointment in the pictured drama thru the violence done to preconceived impressions of the various personages.

(qtd. Slide 18)

The short story style (and thus “literary” style) of the later fan magazines’ fictionizations can be seen as having developed out of early descriptions or synopses published in film catalogues. Intended as advertisements for exhibitors, who would then acquire or rent from the producing studios the films they believed to be most interesting, these brief synopses passed through three stages during the age of the “cinema of attractions,” which André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion describe. In the period between 1904 and 1908, when films could still draw audiences based on the novelty effect of the moving images alone rather than on well-developed stories (see Gunning 6), the descriptions consisted of simple *translations* of the cinematic images. This means that the language was minimalist and subservient to the movement on screen, trying to mimic it as much as possible. If shots cut back and forth between two scenes, then each shot would be described, staccato-style. Such subservience, however, did not last long, and the descriptions soon developed into the second stage of *transpositions*, where the mimicry of describing what happened on screen was abandoned in favor of a focus on the narrative content, briefly synopsising the events relevant to the development of the plot. As *adaptations*, in the final stage, the written language was freed further from restrictions and was now able to use all the devices that literature offered in order to provide (ideally) a thoroughly readable and engrossing experience (see Gaudreault and Marion, “Filmico” 26-29). For the exhibitor, this meant that the written text no longer allowed conclusions to be drawn concerning how the film was put together in terms of editing and framing.

In their attempt to offset the deficiencies of an arguably still underdeveloped filmic grammar, exhibitors endeavored to satisfy *all* audience members in order to secure profit. In their choice of added explanatory materials their challenge was to find the right balance between two undesirables: *lack* of information about story events on the one hand, which could result in the viewer leaving the theater confused and frustrated, and *excess* of information on the other, which could result in boredom. Concerning the latter, an anonymous contributor to a 1909 issue of *The Bioscope* gives the following advice: “It is necessary to avoid ‘giving away’ too much of the plot, for otherwise there are no thrills, and the charm of the unexpected has gone” (3). Ben Singer lists this as one reason why in the 1910s, after a brief period of popularity,

short movie fictionizations in the fan magazines became fewer and fewer (495). Fictionizations may have given away all the thrills, but at least the reader was left to decide which version to read/to watch first, or whether to read it at all.

*The Adventure of the Hasty Elopement*

In order to examine the apparent need of early film for accompanying texts, I turn to *The Adventure of the Hasty Elopement*, the ninth installment of the then popular serial “Octavius Amateur Detective.” The very beginning, namely the second title card, advertises the fictionization: “Read this story of Octavius in PICTORIAL REVIEW for October.” Further promoting the new medium’s dependence on the old is the fact that, in at least one instance in the film, a causal relationship between subsequent events is not readily intelligible for the viewer. Following an intertitle reading “Octavius buys an automobile,” the first shot of the film shows the interior of a dealership, in which we see the detective and the salesman inspect a car. Then they both leave the room. (That Octavius actually *buys* the car we can only gather from the intertitle, even if a visual cue – as, for instance, an enthusiastic handshake between Octavius and the salesman – might easily have suggested the information.) Then another intertitle appears: “The next morning.” Now we see Octavius reading the newspaper while his butler serves breakfast. The headline is inserted: “AUTO THIEVES – Many Cars Stolen Recently About Rosedale.” Octavius sports first a concerned, then a determined, look and points offscreen to the butler, who exits and re-enters the frame carrying the detective’s coat. Then we see the intertitle: “I shall investigate this.” What the previous scene should lead us to add is: “Because I bought a car yesterday and do not want it to get stolen.”

The synopsis of the film in the Edison trade journal *The Kinetogram*<sup>2</sup> describes the events thus:

When Octavius read in the newspaper that auto-thieves had been making havoc in the vicinity of the Rosedale Country Club, his soul was stirred to extraordinary effort. He had just bought a car himself, and naturally felt a keen interest in anything affecting even remotely his new and cherished possession. Then again, there was of course his Duty to the Public. In his capacity as an amateur detective Octavius was above all else a relentless bloodhound in the public interest.

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<sup>2</sup> The synopsis of the film can be found in *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*.

There are two things to note here: the order of the information about Octavius buying a car and reading about the theft is inverted in the two versions. More crucially, only the written version makes the detective's motivation for investigating the case explicit, giving not one but two reasons. The film's opening shot thus apparently has no other function than to provide the detective with a motivation for hunting the thieves: a motivation that (at least as presented in the film) appears weak and does not justify the excessive length of the opening shot. From the amount of information the viewer is given, Rosedale could be miles away from where Octavius lives (although a previous installment of the serial may have made evident that it is the detective's home town). His having bought a car might then not be enough for the viewer to account for his sudden eagerness to pursue the case. The kinetogram's synopsis, in short, establishes a causality more easily and more successfully in a few sentences than the film does in its opening three minutes.

If we accept the function of fictionizations as a means of narrative clarification as being of significance, then we can say that the dominant new medium depends more on the evidently subordinate and "old" one than the other way round. The film needs the story version, but, ironically, the story version does not need the film, at least not in terms of narrative clarification. Since the medium to which it belongs, i.e. written prose fiction, had enjoyed a long and prosperous tradition, there is little risk that its narrative will be confusing, even if it is a narrative that is badly written.

While fan magazines may have helped to make a film's narrative more intelligible, this was not their only – and certainly not their primary – function. They were also intended to serve as a guide for audiences, helping them to decide which film to watch. In the editorial of the first issue of *The Pictures* (October 1911) we read: "Knowing beforehand, as fully and clearly as words can tell them, what they may expect to see, they [cinemagoers] have all the materials necessary for making an intelligent choice of those pictures which appeal most to their tastes" (qtd. Shail 190). In a way the function of the synopses to help the exhibitor choose which film to rent is here transferred to the potential viewer. The shift from the brief and largely perfunctory style of the synopses to the elaborate literary style of the fictionizations reflects the interests of the target readership. Due to the exhibitors' purely commercial interests anything more than basic information in the synopsis would be distracting. Audiences, on the other hand, want to be entertained, and a short story, if well written, can double the entertainment of the film.

Commercially, the advantage of coupling the two media of film and prose fiction was highly reciprocal: since both were forms of

entertainment technically independent from but nevertheless explicitly linked to each other the films increased sales of the story magazines (or newspapers, where they were sometimes published) and the story magazines increased public awareness of the films about to be released. One of the chief functions of the stories, then, was simply to advertise the films. Just as the beginning of *The Adventure of the Hasty Elopement* asked viewers to read the story version, a fictionized installment of *The Perils of Pauline* (1914, Louis J. Gasnier), featured the line: “READ it Here Now – THEN See It All in Motion Pictures” (*The San Francisco Examiner*, 22 November 1914).

### *From the Submerged*

The narrative of the film *From the Submerged* is simple enough to suit both the temporal limitations of the one-reeler (with a running time of approximately 15 minutes) and the medium’s limited techniques available at the time. The story, in brief, is this: Charles, the protagonist, is down-and-out and desperate, and wants to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. A woman who happens to be there persuades him not to. Later, while waiting on the breadline where the poor are fed, he reads a newspaper ad placed by his dying father who claims to “forgive all” and asks him to come home. This he does, and by doing so re-enters the world of the rich. Two years later, he tries to propose to a wealthy woman at a party but is repeatedly deterred. Instead the two participate in a “slumming party,” in which the rich visit the slums for their own amusement. He finds himself again on the breadline, and watches with disgust how his chosen one laughs at the misery she sees. Back at home, he tears up the woman’s photograph and has a vision of the poor woman on the bridge who once saved his life. He goes there looking for her, finds her – desperate and miserable – and saves her by marrying her.

In terms of continuity, the film does not seem to contain any of the continuity violations that can be observed in other films of the period.<sup>3</sup> This, however, is due more to the comparatively undemanding methods of framing and editing employed rather than to superior craftsmanship. Throughout most of the film one shot (two at the most) equals one scene and setting (the bridge, the breadline, the party, etc.), with enough spatial and temporal distance in between to avoid carefully set-up match cuts or elaborate crosscutting techniques like those perfected by D.W.

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<sup>3</sup> Except one: the torn-out newspaper ad shown as an insert looks very different in size and shape from that which Charles is holding in his hand in the shot that follows.



Griffith. As for the temporal distances in *From the Submerged*, they are sometimes made explicit via expository intertitles<sup>4</sup> (one reading “Later,” another “Two years later”), sometimes not. In any case, the transitions between one shot and the next always follow a clear and unambiguous logic. Furthermore, except for one brief flashback shot towards the end (introduced by the intertitle “From out of the past”), the film strictly follows a single and continuous line of action, with events unfolding chronologically. Given the socially relevant subject matter – poverty – evident claim to realism made by the film is thwarted somewhat by the fact that the actors perform against a number of obviously painted backdrops: most notably, the city street-view that includes several highrise buildings in the breadline scene. In short, while Griffith’s films show powerful signs of cinema’s growing emancipation from earlier media via kinetic (if imperfect) editing and skillful crosscutting, *From the Submerged* still seems in many instances more like a cinematic “remediation”<sup>5</sup> of the stage drama. If we agree with Gaudreault and Marion’s suggestion that “cinema’s singularity as a medium is the result . . . of a slow process of maturation, despite its historically demonstrable irruption as technology” (“Genealogy” 13), then Essanay’s one-reeler is still a step or two away from being “cinematic” in its truest sense.

In formalistic terms, John Olden’s fictionization of *From the Submerged* (which appeared in the December 1912 issue of *Motion Picture Story Magazine*) remains largely true to the film’s simplistic *histoire*,<sup>6</sup> but differs vastly in relation to its *discours*. The information we get (at least that which is most relevant) remains the same, but the order in which we receive it is not. The most striking instance is Charles’s reading of the newspaper ad which is followed, rather abruptly, by several paragraphs that describe the sordidness of Chinatown, here the slumming party takes place two years later, with Charles now wearing a rich man’s clothes. The information about what happened in the interim is revealed by a third person narrator that refers back in time at a relatively arbitrary moment, namely when the woman reveals her callous attitude towards the poor, which climaxes in her statement that “these

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<sup>4</sup> While *dialogue intertitles* come from within the story action, their content thus being part of the diegetic environment, *expository intertitles* summarize the ensuing action or set up a situation (see Thompson and Bordwell 33).

<sup>5</sup> The term is borrowed from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s eponymous book, and refers to the tendency of a new medium to take up and refashion techniques specific to older media (273).

<sup>6</sup> Overall simplicity, due to the one-reeler’s time constraints and lack of innovative filmic techniques, was one of the industry’s most important and obvious recipes for ensuring narrative comprehensibility (see Keil 53).

people could be decent, if they wanted to.” (65) This incites Charles to pause and reflect on past events:

He was thinking of the vast difference between his life tonight and the life he had been living two years ago, when his dying father's message had called him home, to receive his blessing and share in his vast fortune. He felt a sudden impulse to tell this girl all about the follies that had sent him from home; the pride and rebellion . . . abject poverty . . . ; the message that had called him back. If he was to marry her, it was her right to know. . . . He had tried to propose to her, first in the conservatory, then, when an interruption came at an inopportune moment, he had led her out to the balcony, to try again. (65)

After these musings, we are returned to the slumming party, with the girl stating that the best part of it is yet to come: a visit to the breadline.

In the film, all relevant information is, as mentioned before, revealed chronologically: a) Charles reading his father's message, b) his coming home, c) his newfound wealth, d) his attempts to propose, e) the slumming party. In the fictionization, on the other hand, the order is a), c), e), b), d). What may here look like a hopeless and confusing mix-up between story-time and discourse time is in fact, as the above passage shows, not confusing at all but comes across as a discontinuity that is perfectly continuous, reasonable, readable and coherent, all due to the flexibility of language made possible by the use of the past perfect tense (see Chatman 123).

Although to a great extent “only” an accessory to and an advertisement for the main event that was the actual film, in terms of style and rhetoric ficitonizations (as the above example has shown) were often more elaborate than one might expect. As Slide points out:

even in the earliest years, the writing in the fan magazines was erudite and often bordering on the heavy-handed. . . . The style was often closer to Charles Dickens . . . than to the type of writing that audiences whose second language was English would be drawn. (10)

Because of this “erudite” style, we may doubt the extent to which the masses actually used fictionizations as a means of clarifying narrative causality. After all, the most significant proportion of movie audiences (as Slide himself suggests) was formed by the large number of immigrants in America at the turn of the century, along with the urban poor (see Bowser 61). Films and fictionizations may in fact have catered to two different audiences, with the “heavy-handedness” of the stories thus opening doors to a new class of readership. For a few years at least, fictionizations were printed not only in the special interest fan

magazines like *Photoplay* or *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, but also in more highbrow publications, notably the Sunday editions of newspapers like *The Chicago Sun Tribune*, which led to a readership of millions around the country. It can thus be argued that, even if they were not of literary quality per se, their presence in the newspapers alone contributed to a gradual increase in appreciation of the new medium among higher social spheres. Via a “retrograde” remediation<sup>7</sup> of the simple narratives developed specifically for the one-reel format, and enhanced in terms of style as befits the short story’s medial specificity, fictionizations can be seen as feeding back into film and to further its constitution as an independent medium for artistic expression. A medium’s own assertion of independence, after all, needs a society’s stamp of approval in order to successfully graduate from the status of a technology to that of a (narrative) “medium.”

Gaudreault and Marion’s analysis of the gradual development of the forerunners to fictionizations leads to an interesting “inverted” parallelism (so to speak) when placed alongside the development of film. Early film, as Tom Gunning has shown, slowly graduated from a cinema of attractions to a narrative cinema, and in doing so passed through (at least) two stages of remediation before its “second birth” (Gaudreault and Marion, “Genealogy” 13) as a truly autonomous medium rather than merely a new technology. The first stage, during the cinema-of-attraction phase, is a remediation of late nineteenth-century magic theaters and forms of *trompe l’oeil* (see Bolter and Grusin 155); the second is a remediation of the dramatic theater (with its lack of camera movement, elaborate editing and with its “stagey” framings the likes of which we sometimes find in *From the Submerged*). Similarly, the three stages through which film’s written accompaniment passed (from *translation* via *transposition* to *adaptation*) can be seen as a gradual emancipation from the moving images via an inverse or, as Bolter and Grusin call it, “retrograde” remediation. In its final stage of autonomy (with the establishment of the classical Hollywood narrative), film emerged as a proper “new” medium. The fictionization, on the other hand, emerged as a proper “old” one: the short story which, independent of film, had of course existed all along.

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<sup>7</sup> That is, a kind of remediation “in which a newer medium is imitated and even absorbed by an older one” (Bolter and Grusin 147).

*Pictures from the Pictures*

The complex intermedial relations between film and fictionizations can be observed not only in terms of a word-and-image-, but also in terms of an image-and-image relationship. Apart from offering a more elaborate written transposition from the filmic medium, fictionizations also featured numerous pictures in the form of stills or photograms taken from the films they adapted. These photograms were also frequently adorned with framings reminiscent of those used for paintings. Indeed, in the magazine fictionization of *From the Submerged* this form of remediation goes even further. Some of the stills themselves have been manipulated in order to resemble more closely paintings than photographs, and thus are doubly removed from their original purpose (namely to provide an illusion of movement and appear “true to life”). Not only are they no longer moving, they are also deliberately transformed into less naturalistic representations of life than they would have been had magazine employees not reworked them in a cross-medial post-production process. It is a phenomenon similar to Bolter and Grusin’s idea of “retrograde” remediation, only in this case the old medium, unable to *imitate* the new (since pictures printed on paper cannot provide an illusion of movement as films do), does the opposite: it takes one unmoving element of the new medium and refashions it in order to make it look not only older than the photograph (which *can* be printed on paper), but older than writing itself, since paintings existed long before the development of a written language. In the fictionization, the photograms’ painterly makeover veils what is otherwise the only direct connection to film as a medium – apart from the mention of the production company, Essanay, beneath the title – bespeaking its ambivalent relationship to a medium to which it refers but does not *need*. It almost feels as if readers are not *meant* to be reminded of the film which the story adapts. This would run counter to the publishers’ intention (which is evident in other parts of the magazine, like the film ads and actor galleries) to promote the new medium. Promoting film by concealing one of its most appealing properties, the authentic representation of nature, seems like a most unusual marketing strategy.

However, if the painterly qualities of the photograms veil the connection to film (or at least to photography) on a technical, medium-specific level, then on the level of content the connection is maintained. Even if the images are stylized, viewers may recognize an actor’s face from other films they have seen, and the organization of the various

elements within the frame of the abstracted photograms are reminiscent of the *mise-en-scène* of films in general.<sup>8</sup> Other than the photographs in the “famous players’ gallery” in the first pages of the magazine, in which actors and actresses smile into the camera, the composition of the photograms bears all the trademarks of the respective film’s diegetic universe. Possessing the quality more of a snapshot, they implicitly evoke a sense of a *before* and *after*, and thus of both movement and diegetic-narrative potential that are not present in the static poses for the camera.<sup>9</sup>

Film, as Gaudreault and Marion state, remediates photography by “subsuming’ . . . the multiple [i.e. a string of photographs as in Eadweard Muybridge’s studies] into the singular [i.e. the illusion of continuous animation], . . . which . . . causes the thing being subsumed to disappear into the thing doing the subsuming” (“Genealogy” 13). The magazine stills, in a sense, simply invert the process by making film disappear into the (made-over) photograph.

### *Conclusion*

Early film passed through several stages of remediation of older media (most notably perhaps, the theater and photography) before constituting itself as an autonomous medium in its own right. In an analogous process, written descriptions of early films underwent a gradual process before constituting *their* autonomy as a genre: the fictionization. This autonomy, it must be added, can be understood only in relative terms, since its function as advertisement has remained salient and thus, at least in a commercial sense, has chained the fictionization to its visual counterpart.

From the very beginning producers were committed “to construct filmic narratives that audiences could comprehend regardless of the extratextual supports” (Keil 52). Thus Ben Singer’s notion of film and fictionization as “two halves of . . . a larger, multi-media, textual unit” (489) sounds like a happier marriage between media than it could ever possibly have been. Both Singer and Shail link the gradual fading of fictionizations in the late 1910s with the fact that “film’s narrational

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, readers are, of course, aware that they are not looking at illustrations of an original short story but at (manipulated) movie stills, for the simple and obvious reason that the magazine they are holding in their hands is titled *Motion Picture Story Magazine*.

<sup>9</sup> It must be noted, however, that impressionistic paintings like Renoir’s *The Oarsmen’s Breakfast* have very similar qualities – and they can, in fact, also be seen as retrograde remediations of photography, refashioning the snapshot specific to that medium.

‘grammar,’ with the aid of motion picture stories and the schemas deduced from trial-and-error film-watching, became generally understood” (Shail 186). Films, they claim, no longer needed the fictionization. While to some extent this may be true (and the example of *The Adventures of the Hasty Elopement* would support the claim), it can only be part of the answer. Fictionizations, particularly those published in general newspapers rather than in specialist film-related fan magazines, helped to establish film as an independent medium. They did this not by explaining film’s insufficient narrative but, paradoxically, by building a connection to the already well-established medium of literature – by *being* literature.

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