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Valentino: Rediscovering an Icon of Silent Film (review)

Hideaki Fujiki

The Moving Image, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring 2009, pp. 243-245 (Review)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mov.0.0035>

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for further research on this topic. In addition, while the textual analysis in this book is thoughtful and precise, and is integral to supporting the author's model of early three-strip Technicolor color design, the passages that examine the internal memos and other documents that circulate within the production companies and Technicolor labs during this time are particularly interesting from a restoration point of view. One hopes that future color restorations of classic three-strip Technicolor productions would take into account such materials. Understanding the "look" of a Technicolor film resides not merely in examining the filmmaker's intent, but also, as *Harnessing the Technicolor Rainbow* demonstrates, in considering the color philosophies at play in the industry and the technological constraints of the color process itself.

Films

Valentino: Rediscovering an Icon of Silent Film

DVD DISTRIBUTED BY FLICKER ALLEY, 2007

Hideaki Fujiki

From 1914 through 1926, Rudolph Valentino became an eminent star whose image created fanaticism and sensationalism in America and beyond. Female fans' fervent devotion to him

was an extraordinary social phenomenon as many male critics openly placed on him "the stigma of effeminacy."¹ Yet, his screen persona was not forged overnight nor was it monolithic and unequivocal. Providing digital reconstructions of four silent films accompanied by newly arranged music scores, plus a variety of bonus features, *Valentino: Rediscovering an Icon of Silent Film* is an exceptional opportunity to explore how the attractive and sensational images of him onscreen were represented and transformed.

This DVD collection consists of two discs: one contains *The Young Rajah* (1922), *Stolen Moments* (1920), and *A Society Sensation* (1918), and the other *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1922). Each film is supplemented with a slideshow of promotional materials and still photographs. Besides these, there are a variety of supplements, which are both entertaining and informative. The supplements on Disc One are saturated with visual and audio materials, including documentary films on Valentino's funeral and on the activities of his fan clubs, recorded songs related to his films, and an interview with fans. Disc Two offers two types of supplements: "Landmarks" and "Who's Who in Hollywood." The former displays a map marked with four locations where Valentino lived and worked, including the Famous Players-Lasky Studios. We are guided through each location with ample stills, clips, and written text. The "Who's Who" section furnishes biographies of Valentino and other twenty people associated with him (including Jean Acker and Natacha Rambova, his first and second wives) as well as many actors, directors, and scriptwriters who worked on the four films presented here. Liner notes by Emily W. Leider, author of *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino*, provide synopses on the four films, production background, as well as a profile of his career—all of which are valuable resources about Valentino and Hollywood at that time.

These four films chart significant moments in Valentino's career. Born in southern Italy in 1895, he immigrated to New York in 1913. Moving from one low-wage job to another, including as a tango dancer, Valentino made his screen debut as an extra in the 1914 Vitagraph film, *My Official Wife*.² Appearing in more than thirty-six films

before his death in 1926, he did not become a prominent star until cast in Metro's 1921 big-budget epic *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, directed by Rex Ingram. Subsequently, Metro, Famous Players-Lasky, and later United Artists would tailor twelve pictures to market Valentino in such films as *Camille* (1921), *The Sheik* (1921), *The Eagle* (1925), and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926). That most of the films after *The Four Horsemen* were adaptations of popular novels by such authors as Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, Elinor Glyn, E. M. Hull, and Aleksandr Pushkin reaffirms the high-profile and big-budget status of these films as star vehicles.

Made under markedly different conditions, the films collected here represent a balanced range from Valentino's filmography. *A Society Sensation* (Universal) and *Stolen Moments* (American Cinema) cover his pre-star period while *Moran of the Lady Letty* and *The Young Rajah* (both Famous Players-Lasky) represent his star period. *A Society Sensation* was the first film in which Valentino played a lead role while *Stolen Moments* was his last role as a villain and the last before he attained stardom. *Moran* was produced right after the commercial hit *The Sheik* and both films capitalized on his star power by using the same director, screenwriter, and cameraman. *Rajah* was Valentino's last Famous Players-Lasky film before he went on strike—traveling through Europe for two years without making a film—and later filed suit against the company.³

Each film traces significant characteristics of and transformations in Valentino's screen persona. In most of his films, his character, whether morally good or bad, is a member of the upper or middle class. Corresponding to his social status, he usually appears in well-tailored suits and ties, with slicked-back hair, and surrounded by equally urbane interiors with high ceilings and refined furniture. Significantly, his character is always involved romantically with women characters and mutual eye contact and physical contact (in the form of kisses and caresses during courtship or dating) are key character motifs. This coupling of class sophistication with romantic passion is one of the most notable and consistent characteristics and is visible in *A Society Sensation*, *Stolen Moments*, *Moran*, and *Rajah*. Gaylyn Studlar

also argues that dance is a vital Valentino motif which derived from his experience as a professional dancer.⁴ While only evident in a few brief scenes in this collection, dance represents a unique balance common to all of his films—one between gentle manners and dynamic movement, sophistication and passion.

These motifs are indispensable components of Valentino's persona, but they are only parts. Miriam Hansen reminds us of "two fatally intertwined issues: his ethnic otherness and the question of his masculinity. In both aspects the perceived deviations from dominant standards of social and sexual identity that troubled and perhaps destroyed his career were the very qualities that made him an object of unprecedented fascination."⁵ Undoubtedly, ethnicity and sexuality are two of the most crucial categories sustaining the representations of Valentino and his characters.

Known as a "Latin Lover," the ethnic qualities that his characters embodied were not simply the oppositional Other of White America, but often more ambiguous. His characters were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Italians (*The Married Virgin*, 1918; *Cobra*, 1925), French (*The Conquering Power*, 1921; *Camille*), Spanish (*Blood and Sand*, 1922), and Russians (*The Eagle*). Moreover, their ethnicity often represented a complex mix such as that of Julio in *The Four Horsemen*, the son of a French father and a Spanish mother who emigrated from Spain to Argentina; Ahmed in *The Sheik* the son of an English father and a Spanish mother but raised by an Arabian sheik; or Lord Hector Bracondale in *Beyond the Rocks* (1922), an English nobleman with an Italian grandmother. If ethnic derivation is a dominant theme in the later films, it passes unmentioned in such early works as *All Night* (1918) and *The Delicious Little Devil* (1919).

What this collection illustrates is that Valentino did not consistently embody this ethnic ambivalence throughout his career, and we see that ethnicity has different meanings and functions in his earlier and later films. For example, *A Society of Sensation*, *Stolen Moments*, and *Moran* do not explore Valentino's ethnicity as ambivalence. While intertitles in *Stolen Moments* and *Moran* do indicate his character's ethnic roots (a Brazilian in the former, an Italian-American in the

latter), this quality is not attributed to any ethnic mixing. Instead, *A Society Sensation* centers on social class rather than ethnicity, as evidenced by the fact that the female protagonist can only marry aristocrat Dick Bradley (Valentino) after providing proof that she is the daughter of a duchess.

Such a restrained mode of ethnic representation is common in Valentino's pre-star films, yet even in *Moran*, which was produced after *The Four Horsemen*, the focus is not on his ethnicity but rather events, such as a kidnapping and a fire, that unite the rich Italian-American immigrant's son with the poor Norwegian immigrant's daughter in romantic love. Leider suggests in the DVD liner notes that Famous Players-Lasky "pitched *Moran*" as "one Valentino picture that steered clear of anything exotic" that the previous film, *The Sheik*, likely created.⁶

Rajah appropriates Valentino's character's ethnicity in a more nuanced, complex way. Here, Amos Judd (Valentino) is ambiguously introduced early on as the son of an Indian Maharaja while later it is revealed that his mother was an Italian countess. Further, Amos must overcome conflicts in his own ethnicity and although he prefers living in America, Indian vassals force him to accept his heritage as a Krishna and live in India. The female protagonist, however, while fascinated by him, hesitates to accept his love because of his apparent racial otherness. Finally, upon seeing him wounded at the hand of a rival, she trusts his love. What is significant throughout this process is that although his character changes from aggressive to gentle, his ethnic ambivalence is maintained.

These films succinctly showcase how the dichotomy between irreplaceable and exchangeable relationships—a basic binary opposition driving the narrative in Valentino's later films—is virtually absent in his pre-star films. Narrative conflict in *A Society Sensation* occurs mainly around the heroine's social status and not with the hero's moral attitude. In *Stolen Moments* two different women are victimized by his evil character but not on the

basis of his moral values. *Moran*, however, clearly introduces Valentino's character surrounded by women only becoming aware of "real love" in the course of a relationship with the female lead. *Rajah* does not foreground any moral dichotomy, but it does suggest (especially in the boat and party scenes) that the hero draws attention from many women and thus sets the stage for the fulfillment of his romantic relationship with the female lead.

This was the period when the star system, first established in the mid-teens, thrived as stars like Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford had the power to establish United Artists in 1919 in order to manage their careers themselves. It also was the age when the nativist movements in the U.S. responded to the influx of "new" immigrants from Italy and other areas of southern Europe, as well as a time when New Women unsettled social norms of gender and sexuality. When placed in this intriguing historical context, *Valentino: Rediscovering an Icon of Silent Film* should appeal not only to Valentino fans, aficionados of silent film, and archivists, but anyone interested in silent films and cultural history.

NOTES

1. Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 262.
2. Some critics claim that he first appeared as a dance extra in *The Battle of the Sexes* (1914), starring Lillian Gish and directed by D.W. Griffith, but Leider denies this possibility. See her *Dark Lover, The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2003), 62–63.
3. *Ibid.*, Chapter 12.
4. Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Chapter 3.
5. Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 254.
6. Emily W. Leider's liner notes, "Valentino Collection: Four Films, 1918–1922," in *Valentino: Rediscovering an Icon of Silent Film* (Flicker Alley, 2007).