

The Eve Made from the Rib of Female Spectators: The Construction of Rudolph Valentino's Effeminate Screen Characters Under the Female Gaze — Case Studies of Three Films Starring Rudolph Valentino in 1921

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Abstract

The objective of this essay is to analyze the construction of Rudolph Valentino's effeminate cinematic characters in the early 1920s Hollywood cinema, specifically case studying three films, namely, *Camille* (1921), *The Sheik* (1921), and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921). Through textual analysis, it would illustrate how these characters were crafted in terms of three pivotal aspects: melancholic romanticism, ethnic exoticism, and meticulously designed aesthetics, which together foster the sense of otherness and objectification that imitate the common situation of womanhood, and thus evoked profound resonance among female spectators. Through referring to the gaze theory of Laura Mulvey and the mirror theory of Jacques Lacan, this essay would further distinguish the male and female gaze, arguing that Valentino's on-screen presence facilitated a reversal of the conventional looking pleasure and created a unique form of female gaze that mirrored their subjective projection and the experience of being gazed upon. This positioning of Valentino's characters as both the object and the embodiment of feminine sensuality and suffering also symbolizes the self-awareness and empowerment in female spectatorship.

Keywords

Rudolph Valentino, Character Construction, Female Spectatorship, Gaze theory

1. Introduction

In 1975, Laura Mulvey's landmark article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" reveals the mechanism of patriarchal ideology operating in films. Utilizing psychoanalysis as a weapon, Mulvey (1975) points out women's situation as 'the other' - the images of women on screen are the object being gazed at, embodying the fantasy and desire of the male gaze. Tracing back to the 1920s, it is notable that, at the onset of the classical Hollywood, a significant uptrend of the female gaze occurred in a reversed but similar mechanism. In this specific period, there was a controversial and representative figure who cannot be forgotten: Rudolph Valentino, who captured the fascination of a considerable number of female fans while suffering humiliation from public critiques. After the 1980s, feminist scholars started seriously researching his seductive appeal for women (Studlar, 1989). According to Hansen (2018), Rudolph Valentino's films had an important meaning in defining the pleasure of female spectatorship, while his roles had a common effeminate idiosyncrasy, which emancipated female spectators from desiring conventional patriarchal manliness.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss further questions about Valentino's effeminate cinematic roles. How were those characters constructed and how did that kind of constructions result in considerable female reception? And what is the difference between the female gaze and the male gaze? My individual case studies will include three of his films in the early 1920s, namely, *Camille* (Smallwood, 1921), *The Sheik* (Melfor, 1921), and *The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse* (Ingram, 1921). From comprehensive analysis, I would argue that the effeminate sensuality of Valentino was established from three aspects: firstly, the

melancholia from the sense of loss and a passive situation in a romantic relationship; secondly, his ethnic identity which results in a sense of exotic and erotic attention; thirdly, his designed appearance, which consists of make-up, facial expressions, and posture. Those elements together contributed to his designed effeminate images, and created a sense of otherness and objectification. Therefore, this kind of feminisation generates the sympathy and resonance of women spectators. In view of these aspects, I would say that, for female spectators, gazing at Valentino on the screen is like gazing at themselves. He is situated as the other; he was under the gaze; he was suffering what they had experienced: being objectified, being exploited, and being constructed as a sexual symbol. Just like Eve made from Adam's rib, Rudolph Valentino was created from the rib of female spectators. He is the epitome of feminine sensuality and pain of womanhood, representing the awakening of female self-consciousness.

2. Vulnerability, Passivity, Melancholia

'a useless ornament - a play thing - a bird of passage - a momentary aurora'

This is how people gossip about the heroine Marguerite Gautier, the lady with the camellias, in the film *Camille* (1921). To some extent, those phrases can also be used to describe Rudolph Valentino who plays the hero, Armand Duval, a law student who indulges in a short, broken romantic relationship. According to Girelli (2015), most of Valentino's characters are constructed with 'a sense of loss, powerlessness and a lack of control' (p. 7). He is not only the object under the female gaze but is also the passive partner in a romantic relationship. He is easy to seduce and lacks aggression; he is the one to be provoked and be abandoned in love. These factors shaped the uniqueness and feminine connotations of his characters.

In *Camille*, Armand becomes obsessed with that impossible woman from the first glance, when they met on the crowded staircase of a theatre. His eyes rest on her through the crowd while the admirers cluster around her. After Marguerite comes over, and Armand is introduced to her, her gaze just quickly skims him then turns back to her fellows. She makes fun of him while squinting at his reaction; she is just flirting. But the following close-up of Armand's facial expression shows that he has already taken the bait: he frowns and looks down sorrowfully, and his nostrils move as if he is sobbing. It seems that he can no longer maintain calm and self-control. Another shocking sequence is when Armand offers his most reverent and humble statement. After Marguerite asked him to go home and forget that they ever met, Armand suddenly kneels at her feet and holds her legs tightly. The following close-up shot portrays his face clinging to her legs, he says *'I wish I were a relative - your servant - a dog'*. He holds this position and continues begging for a chance to prove his devotion. Finally, Marguerite is moved and opens up to him. The contradiction lies in their status differences. Although Armand has a better background, he is situated in a lower place in this romantic relationship as the one who fell in love earlier. He comes from a bourgeois family and is well-educated but has to beg the love of a courtesan. The contrast deepens the tragedy of the character, even though he has momentary happiness. The rest of his life will be immersed in the throes of betrayal. Throughout the film, he seldom has a subjective initiative in his destiny. Marguerite ends the relationship unilaterally, and Armand never knows the truth, even after her death. He is thoroughly a vulnerable and melancholic object.

Girelli (2015) defines Valentino's interpretation of this kind of character with the term 'sexual melancholia', which refers to 'the dramatisation, or evocation, of a physical and erotic experiences' (p. 9). And this kind of character is replicated in his other films, such as *The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse* (1921) and *The Sheik* (1921). Although in the latter Valentino plays a barbarian with more conventional connotations of patriarchal manhood, compared to Armand, he is also thrown into sadness after he falls in love with Lady Diana. In the film, when the young sheik, Ahmed Ben Hassan, witnesses the woman he caught crying, his reaction reveals the destruction in his heart. A series of full shots, perspective shots and close-ups are used to illustrate his movements, Diana's trembling back, and his facial expression. His expressions gradually soften. The fierceness, menace and aggression on his visage are succeeded by a sense of shock and confusion, and ultimately turn into Valentino's classic melancholic look.

In Radway's (1987) book about romance narrative, he points out that heroes are usually equipped with particular qualities such as hard, angular, and dark, which can construct spectacular masculinity. However, the softness, tenderness, and vulnerability on display in Valentino's roles may threaten the conventional American patriarchal masculinity. Conventionally, in the media narratives, men are aggressive and dominant in a relationship while women are usually pre-set to be passive, sensitive, emotional, and trapped in love. Valentino is endowed with those feminine qualities on screen. I would argue that the unusual feminisation and objectification of Valentino in screen romances, to a large extent, fascinated his women admirers.

Female spectators may identify with his feminised interpretation and constitute the transformation from patriarchal cinema to a female-demand oriented cinema, which takes the experience and pleasure of female spectators into consideration. Though scholars use such phrases as ‘incomplete’ (Hansen, 2018) and ‘damaged males’ (Slater, 2010) to describe those characters constructed with femininity, I consider those factors give Valentino a more complete persona as the effeminacy of a male reveals the well-rounded inherent nature of a human, not just a certain constructed gender. And that is what contributes to the appeal of Valentino.

3. Ethnic, Exotic, Erotic

It is undeniable that Valentino’s allure partly comes from his exoticism, which is inevitably relevant to his off-screen race. His identity as an Italian immigrant determined that he would be constructed as a pan-ethnic person who is extraordinarily malleable (Lawrence, 2010). His characters are always foreign and mixed-race, such as Spanish-British in *The Sheik* and Argentine-French in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. Female spectators are content with his various ethnic roles, as a sense of exoticism is usually associated with erotic fantasy. In *The Sheik*, the silk and satin costumes worn by him, with ornaments like sarongs and turbans, increase not only the exotic feel but also the feminine sensuality (Studlar, 1989).

And such a sense of ethnic eroticism is connected with the construction of his effeminacy. On one hand, ethnic otherness, to some extent, has the same connotation as gendered otherness; they are subordinate branches of the hierarchy system which emphasises the dominant status of American white men. Women, the gender group who were marginalised within mainstream society are reasonable to have sympathy for the non-mainstream qualities represented by Valentino. On the other hand, eroticism and sexual appeal also lead to objectification and fetishism. According to Studlar (1989), Valentino was considered no more than a ‘sexual symbol’ (p. 21) compared with his fellow Hollywood actors – conventionally this position was taken by female stars. Such a reversal of the male gaze mechanism resulted in the pleasure of female spectators and Valentino’s popularity.

In *The Sheik*, the dual-layer exoticism of Valentino is constructed by alienating the Western-Eastern and American-European ideals, respectively. For the first layer, for example, the notable expression, ‘world’, is frequently used to distinguish the gap between Diana and Ahmed. The subtitles use ‘a man from her own world’ to define the friend of Ahmed, a French novelist – which suggests that Arabia and France are not the same world. This is the attitude of Western countries towards the Oriental at that time. To a certain extent, the cross-country combination is popular with audiences as it increases the plot twists and drama. Elinor Glyn, the British novelist and script writer, commended the interracial romance that brings fresh blood to the popular culture; however, it was restricted in the ‘mannered confines of the upper classes’ (Horak, 2010, p. 80). One piece of evidence is that, at the end of the film, Diana knows that Ahmed is not a barbaric Arab but an English-Spanish orphan. The truth of his identity removes the last barrier to their love.

Besides this, another constructive element is the European manner of Ahmed, which strengthens his appeal and challenges the traditional American masculinity. From the perspective of the audiences in the United States, Europe was considered another world. And Ahmed is the epitome of the mixed European culture that impacted American society. He is the child of a British father and a Spanish mother, and he was educated in France. Otherwise, Valentino’s real-life experience as an immigrant and tango dancer (Barrett, 2018) also contributes to his unique interpretation of this complex character. For instance, when Ahmed has just captured Diana and wanted to take possession of her, even though his behaviour was brutal and domineering, his movements were graceful. The background music of this sequence was quiet and slow, consisting of a single sound from an ancient Oriental string instrument, which enhances the atmosphere of the mysterious East and elegant pace. In contrast to Diana’s fear and panic, Ahmed behaved in a mannered way. He raises the curtain and makes orders just like a European aristocrat. Studlar (1996) has mentioned that Valentino’s dance-like action can alleviate the discomfort of sexual assault. And Girelli (2015) also demonstrates that Valentino interprets aggressive and stereotyped male behaviours in a ‘feminised mode of expression’, which can restrict the barbarous and uncourteous aspects of American masculinity.

Valentino’s stylised character distinguishes him from other typical American heroes, impacting the relationship of gender groups in America (Bertellini, 2005). As men were resentful of women’s fascination with Rudolph Valentino, his popularity provoked misogyny. Critics satirised him with the Pink Powder Puff attack; his admirers also received negative press (Lawrence, 2010). While public opinion placed Valentino and his female fans in the same situation, the resonance and connection between them were enhanced. The

obsession with Rudolph Valentino represented a deconstruction of American hegemony in aspects relating to ethnicity and gender, embodying the rebellion against the male-dominated culture and reflecting the advancement in female desire and subjectivity.

4. Appearance, Posture, Expression

The feminine characteristics of Rudolph Valentino's screen roles were constructed by well-designed make-up, costumes, movements and emotions written on his face. It cannot be denied that this peculiar construction worked in the same way when shaping female roles in Hollywood cinema. His iconic feminised make-up and dance-like postures helped create his gender ambiguity and shorten the distance to female audiences.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is considered as one of the first anti-war films and is also the landmark film that made Rudolph Valentino a star (Bertellini, 2005). In comparison with Armand in *Camille*, Valentino's Julio in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is a character with more malleability and depth – as an Argentine youth, a charming dancer in France, and a volunteer soldier, in different stages of his life. In other words, this film can be seen as one of the best examples to illustrate how make-up styling can shape an actor. Valentino was given various costumes, in the opening of the film, Julio is a carefree grandson indulged by his rich grandfather in Argentina. He wears a cowboy hat with ornaments and loose pants with a tunic. The sweatband of the hat sketches the contours of his face to make him delicate and beautiful, and the tunic accentuates his waist to fully utilise his sexual appeal. In the studio, he wears a long coat dyed with paint, but his tie is scrupulously knotted, and his hair is slicked-back and glossy. This contrast forms the tension of his erotic complexity – he can fight for a chance to dance with a woman, while he can quietly draw pictures of a naked woman with indifference. After Julio joins the army, he wears a military uniform and has a beard, which makes him look darker and rougher. It can be noted that Valentino can be made to have this kind of traditional manliness. Although his most iconic look was not formed in this way – when Julio was dancing at the Tango Palace or dating Marguerite, he wore formal suits – this look is closer to his most common screen image as an effeminate 'fictional European nobleman' (Horak, 2010, p. 86). Resembling Valentino's other roles of a young European gentleman, Julio has the classic expression of Valentino, which displays sorrow and melancholy on his face – his eyebrows frowned, eyes looking down without focus, and lips pressed tightly. Moreover, Julio's make-up established the typical look of Valentino – flawless skin, well-shaped thin eyebrows – those elements usually appear on a woman's face. Traditionally the eyebrows of male characters are thick, straight with clear angularity. But Valentino's eyebrows have a curved arch, which makes his eyes extraordinarily soft and affectionate. He could naturally express the emotion of obsession and sadness of love through the subtle changes of his eyes and brows.

Furthermore, Valentino's personal, stylised performance initially conceived in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), made Elinor Glyn, the romance novelist, notice him. Valentino's expression in this film was precisely an interpretation of a 'philosophy of love' highly prized by Glyn, which referred to promoting patrician manners and using limited body contact to evoke erotic feelings (Horak, 2010). In the film, when Julio goes to see his lover in Lourdes, she has decided to take care of her blind husband to atone, and turned her back to him. He held the side of her handkerchief and kissed it tenderly and reverently. His complex emotions – a deep love for her, the sorrow of losing his love, shame of his wastrel life, and determination to fight for her country – were condensed in this one action. Then, she responds, a medium shot is used to portray their movements – they approach and hug, Julio wants to kiss her lip but finally gives up, he just grasps her hand and kisses it many times. In particular, hand-kissing is a distinctive gesture of Valentino, which occurs repetitively in his films and is endowed with a 'deliberate and sexualised' meaning, making him an erotic symbol in the film (Girelli, 2015).

The classic mould of Valentino – a young European aristocrat in suits with a melancholic face – was usually placed in historical films and costume films. Because of the historical and cultural alienation, he was put in a suspended context for viewing. Additionally, with film language, more shots – especially close-ups – were used in Valentino's films to reveal his appearances, subtle expressions and postures. Most of them were point-of-view shots taken from the heroines' perspective during their interactions. Female spectators were offered the opportunity to gaze at him and he satisfied their pleasure. Mulvey (1975) suggests that using the other as a sexual object through gaze arouse the pleasure of scopophilia, and Valentino's presence was a reversal of the conventional looking pleasure between 'active/male and passive/female' (p. 11). Mulvey (1975) also defines this pleasure with the term 'fascination with the human form' and argues that cinema

satisfies scopophilia from a narcissistic aspect. She uses the mirror theory of Jacques Lacan to illustrate why mirror image misleads our recognition of ourselves and how men projects their narcissism on the male characters. Based on her interpretation, I would distinguish the female gaze and male gaze with their different modes of operation. While men project their look on the hero and gaze at the heroine from the inside of the screen, female spectators' gazing at Valentino depends on their identification with him. To be more specific, if we compare a screen to a mirror, Valentino's screen images were reflections of women. With the awakening self-consciousness of women, they began to identify with themselves, and that resulted in their high reception of the effeminate screen images of Valentino – not only because of the compensation of reversed gaze relationship but also because they unconsciously brought a part of themselves into him.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Rudolph Valentino and his cinematic roles have left emblematic marks in the history of the classical Hollywood cinema as his existence challenged the myths of American cultural masculinity (Hansen, 2018). He was one of the pioneers in the system of voyeuristic objectification as an erotic symbol. And he was looked at as an effeminate male and situated in a 'systematic feminisation' (p. 12) constructed by his unique qualities of melancholia, ethnicity, exoticism, and other particular shaping of appearance. Such constructions gained the approval of female spectators.

It is undeniable that Valentino's performance in his early films has developed the space for female spectatorship and redefined the visual pleasure of female spectators. Nevertheless, the female gaze on Valentino in this discourse differed from the male gaze, and Mulvey's (1975) initial gaze theory was insufficient in analysing the visual pleasure of female audiences. According to Stacey (1988), the motivations of the female gaze are not voyeurism and fetishism, but narcissism. Female spectators look at themselves through Valentino as his screen images were created partly from them. Just like 'woman' is a constructed gender, Valentino was constructed by female gaze – he was established as a reflection of females on the screen. And he was forced to be shaped through objectification, sexualisation, and marginalisation which had been endured by women for thousands of years.

Valentino was a creature of the modern society under feminising impact (Anderson, 2011), he represented a rebellion against the conventional American masculinity, even though the construction of his characters essentially follows the logic of patriarchy. As the feminist scholar Doane (1982) points out, such a reversal of spectator roles only offered female spectators the opportunity to embezzle the gaze in order to verify the patriarchal rule of vision, she argues for conducting more research on female spectators' viewing behaviour instead of relying too much on psychoanalysis. Mulvey (1975) also continuously reexamines, reflects upon and adjusts her early theories in subsequent research within broader theoretical framework and societal context. However, I would consider it as an inevitable process and a necessary step of development. As female spectators projected a part of themselves on Valentino inside the screen, their fascination with him served as a groundbreaking step toward self-consciousness and subjectivity.

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