

In Defense of the Perverse: Reflections on *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921)

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A pivotal sequence in *The Sheik* (George Melford, 1921), a screen adaptation of E.M. Hull's novel, acts as a microcosm of the film. We see a lone figure on horseback in the middle of a vast desert; as the camera gets closer to the rider, a medium close-up reveals a man attired in flowing robes and a turban. From under his headdress, a thick veil gently flutters at the sides of his face, highlighting his classically beautiful features. He is Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan (Rudolph Valentino), who is next framed in an extreme long shot: in the exact middle of the frame, the obvious focus for the viewer's attention, he gallops forwards. He is soon flanked by a multitude of other horse-riding Arab men, who form a veritable carousel around him. First in a triangle-shaped formation with Ahmed at its apex, then in a procession behind him, the group of riders is not unlike a chorus of tuxedoed boys making way for a diva in a glamorous musical number. However, the one female in this sequence, soon appearing on screen, is rather inconspicuous: she is also a horse-rider, Lady Diana Mayo (Agnes Ayres), and is looking with apprehension at the approaching posse of men. She and Ahmed have already met. The previous sequence had shown Diana, intrigued and attracted by Ahmed, dressing up as an Arab woman in order to enter his private rooms at a fashionable gambling establishment. On that occasion, after a brusque yet erotically-charged confrontation, Ahmed had firmly shown Diana the way out. This meeting is different. Galloping even faster and leaving his men behind, Ahmed rides up to her, immediately removing her from her horse and placing her on his saddle, in his arms. As Diana feebly attempts to free herself, an intertitle shows Ahmed's words: 'Lie still, you little fool'. She looks at him with a stunned expression, before bowing her head in total acquiescence.

This sequence encapsulates *The Sheik's* crucial aspects and impending narrative developments, which fed its extraordinary popularity at the time, and inform today's debate about it. Distilled into essential knots, there is the film's narrative frame, a generic, atemporal Orientalist setting, and the background for Rudolph Valentino's instant transformation in the world's biggest film star. There is Valentino's intensely emphasised screen image, which ambiguously straddles patriarchy and its transgressions. Lastly, there is the plot's sole motivation, a heterosexual relationship seemingly resting on female submission, turning into a sensational vision of glorious passion *because* of its muddled power dynamics rather than despite them. As Diana endures virtual slavery at the hands of Ahmed, she steadily falls for him body and soul; the film's sexy happy ending, in which she greedily strokes his hand while professing her love, leaves no doubt that this woman's kidnapping ordeal has brought about her happiness.

The ramifications and legacy of *The Sheik's* paradigm are huge. In the short term, Valentino's success as Ahmed produced fan hysteria comparable only to that experienced decades later by The Beatles; yet it also inexorably typecast him as the 'Great Lover', a stifling persona he would desperately and vainly try to shed. Despite his one-man strike in 1924 as a protest against the scripts forced on him, and the later move to United Artists in the hope to gain control of his career, Valentino never escaped *The Sheik*. His last film would be a sequel to *The Sheik*, called *The Son of the Sheik* (George Fitzmaurice, 1926). Released shortly after the star's untimely death at the age of 31, the film crystallised 'Sheikness' as Valentino's lasting identity for his fans, who took to the streets in a frenzy of grief, while at least one woman committed suicide.

Rudolph Valentino's stardom lives on, not least through today's active fan base who mark his death with emotional celebrations every year. Similarly, the significance and afterlife of *The Sheik* as novel and film, with their complex and perverse structures of meaning, continue to resonate. While the frames of reference may have changed, from a vantage point of almost a hundred years the gender, racial, and geopolitical contexts of *The Sheik* are persistently troubling.

At first glance, the film is exuberantly offensive on a number of levels: the abuse suffered by Diana resulting in her adoration of Ahmed; the overt rigidity of hyper-patriarchal gender roles; the stereotypical depiction of the 'East' and last-minute 'redemption' of Ahmed who is revealed to be European. Yet *The Sheik* offers surprising, fascinating challenges. Through Valentino's fetishised appearance and sex-symbol role, it shatters binary epistemological systems, subverting the dichotomy of masculine/feminine, subject/object, and powerful/powerless. Targeted by the camera and rendered an object of desire for both Diana and the audience, Valentino acquires a commodified status that uncannily prefigures scholarly discussions on the cinematic gaze.

In a film starring an attractive, at times glamorously dressed, female lead, it is notable how Ayres is all but eclipsed by her male co-star. Valentino's striking presence, defined by his intense expression, charismatic features, and extraordinarily elegant movements, is singled out by the camera and dominates the frame. To this must be added his costume: an elaborate layering of flowing robes, embroidered tops, head coverings, turbans, all complemented by jewellery. Such overabundance of frills and ornaments is clearly at odds with conventional screen masculinity of the era, and contributes to Valentino's presentation as the film's only erotic signifier. *The Sheik* guides the viewer to approach Ahmed as an object of visual pleasure, complicating a figure already nuanced in favour of ambiguity through

Valentino's performance. While gracefully strutting around, a vision of white veils and heavily-patterned clothes, he oscillates between eye-rolling mastery and melancholic vulnerability. Gentle sadness is a key factor in Valentino's performative patterns across all his films, and here it significantly muddles Ahmed's role as the strong domineering male.

The dynamics of the cinematic gaze – who is looking at whom in a film, and who is the audience guided to look at – are of crucial importance in film scholarship, and since Laura Mulvey's seminal *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), the issue has become a feminist one. Mulvey's argument, which has undergone almost endless analyses and revisions, including from Mulvey herself, is that the cinematic gaze is male. Women on screen are defined not by their own active looking, but by their quality of 'looked-at-ness', by their placement as objects for the male gaze. Outside the frame, in the audience, women viewers' only option is to align themselves with the male gaze.

Aside from its problematic monolithic view of 'audiences', and the heterosexual assumptions linked to 'women' and 'men', Mulvey's theory is also challenged on the grounds that film objectifies men too. More complex is to assess how, and to what extent, the dominance of the male gaze is indeed fractured or usurped, as cinematic conventions *do* tend to limit the female presence to the role of erotic object or target of the gaze. In light of this ongoing discussion, *The Sheik* astonishes for its reversal, almost a century ago, of orthodox economies of desire. An ambiguous male in performative and fashion terms, Ahmed is also, unequivocally, *the* sole object of the cinematic and spectatorial gaze. He is there to be looked at. And just as Diana does, as the camera does, we do look at him, in a radical subversion of scopophilic conventions.

However, despite these severe cracks in the film's heteronormative structure, there can be little doubt that today *The Sheik* would never be made, at least not for mainstream distribution. To have a kidnapped, humiliated, enslaved and possibly raped woman falling madly in love with her kidnapper would be too offensive for words, unless the woman was exposed as severely deluded, self-harming, a tragic pathological case. To validate the process by which Diana comes to love Ahmed, and to glorify process and result as one and the same, would be simply unthinkable.

The question, however, is whether *The Sheik* actually validates abuse and submission, and if so, in which cognitive and experiential context. Given the film's emphasis on its own absurdity – that is to say, on its unrealistic, oneiric, fancy-dress diegetic world – and given its offering of Valentino as an erotic delight for Diana and the audience, it is hard to see *The Sheik* as abusive fare. The mostly female fans who swooned at the sight of Ahmed were certainly enjoying themselves. Safe in their cinema seats, they were free to vicariously experience a fantastical, transgressive relationship, defined by 'exotic' sadomasochistic thrills which felt deeply pleasurable. Fantasy is so integral to *The Sheik* that role-playing informs its characters from the very start, as Diana masquerades as an Arab dancer in order to gain access to Ahmed. Even Ahmed is, ultimately, a European masquerading as an Arab. The respective meanings of 'European' and 'Arab' are unclear and irrelevant, as the film provides an opportunity – for its leading characters as well as for the audience – to try on fictional, unreal identities for the sake of erotic fun. And erotic fun was not, in 1921, something readily, safely available to most women.

So what should we do with *The Sheik* in 2020? Regardless of huge gains in women's freedom at all levels, we may want to reflect on what may have been lost: the freedom from the guilt of fantasy, especially erotic fantasy, and especially as a film viewer. The queer

studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote in 1990, '[m]any people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts they don't do, or even *want* to do' (emphasis in original, 25). To revel in highly improbable scenarios of pleasure, no matter how 'wrong' they may appear to reason, is a freedom deserved not just by women, but by all cinema-goers. Ninety-nine years since *The Sheik* was released, the need for and right to self-determination in matters of fantasy remains of fundamental importance.

Works Cited

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