

Black or White: Rudolph Valentino, Icon of the Golden Age of Jazz and Pride of the Italian Fascist Regime

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Abstract:

This paper intends to demonstrate how, whatever the historical, the political, and the socioeconomic background was, a single figure, in this case an Italian American movie star, was looked at from different perspectives transcending national borders. Indeed, it will show how this legendary actor was despised by white American men who considered him responsible for the effeminacy of their gender. At the same time, his style and the exotic roles he played in his films were enthusiastically appropriated by African American men and by the actors of the nascent African American Cinema. The racist regime of Benito Mussolini also turned to the elegant and charismatic Rudolph Valentino, when it wanted to divulge an image of Italians in America different from that of the coarse Italian immigrant, pervasive in the American culture of the time. Valentino was, in sum, a highly contested character, in which antithetical stances confronted each other, revealing the transnational interconnectedness of culture.

Keywords: History; Cinema; Race; Gender; Fascism