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No Half Measures for Beauty Queens: Criteria for Beauty

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I ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic survey carried out in Salsomaggiore (North Italy) in September 2001, during the Miss Italia competition, the authors compare the figure of the beauty queen and the modalities of her election in different periods (19th and 20th centuries) and places (France and the United States). Beauty contests allow us to discern the evaluation mechanisms and the criteria for beauty that prevail in both civilian and expert juries. These contests, complex and subtle in their organization, use a careful combination of criteria referring to the measurable and the non-measurable, to the body and the soul, to rigorous (objective) norms and personal (subjective) judgements. They are thus extremely useful in observing the formalization of a special norm that evolves with time and culture and is significant both locally (regional and national contests) and globally (international contests).

Keywords: beauty, body, voting, measure, beauty queen

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The various experiences that society offers oblige people to sharpen their tools for observing and understanding the world. Knowledge requires classification of the elements of the universe. This categorization is more than just a simplification of complex realities. It allows us to normalize them, in order to generalize data and make knowledge accessible (Maily 1946). Through comparison, the quest for cultural standardization can become a quest for distinction and selection. Measurement is central to this principle.

The human body is no exception. In fact, it was measurement that made the first work on human morphology possible. In the nineteenth century, physical anthropology sought to differentiate races and demonstrate hereditary predispositions.¹ Although medicine studied human anatomy, later, it also used body-mass indicators and nutritional and morphological norms to help prevent illness and provide care. Social psychology has studied the impact of stereotypes and anatomical representations on individuals and groups. Measurement of the body is not a purely scientific interest; it is also used in politics, commerce,² and art. Our perceptions of absolute beauty do not escape this “taxophilic urge” (Morris 1978, 279). Since

“the age of humanism, the search for proportions has been accompanied by anatomical observation. Artists tirelessly observed, measured, and tried to establish rules for the body” (Borel 1992, 31). In their concern to depict the body, they sought the ideal form, the “perfect” measurements of which were transmitted by their work and changed over time (Hubert 2000). The body, particularly the female body, has always been an object of fascination: a model for painters and photographers, a muse for writers, or a selling point for advertisers. From sacred art to pornography, beauty has always been and remains ambiguous. The social sciences, generally open to questions about the body (Duret and Roussel, 2003) are reluctant to engage in study of this subject: “Not really knowing how to precisely evaluate or measure its effects, about which common sense never ceases to comment, sociologists generally prefer to act as if it were unimportant” (Duret 1999, 88).

French scientists often pay no attention to beauty queens or other beauty ambassadors. However, Jackie Assayag (1999) insists that this apparently trivial subject conceals important questions about conditions for women. In 2001, in Salsomaggiore, Italy, we observed



1. 2. 3. Taking contestants' measurements with a measuring stick, stadiometer, and scales, carried out by Physicol (the Physical Education Institute). The purpose of this activity was also to establish the proportions of the "Venus of the century" (photos: Federico Patellani, San Remo, Italy, in 1949. © Federico Patellani collection, Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Villa Ghirlanda, Cinisello Balsamo, Italy).

the Miss Italia Pageant, which is extremely useful in understanding how the selection and evaluation mechanisms for beauty are established (Monjaret and Tamarozzi, forthcoming).

On the surface, these competitions look like factories: the young women's bodies are prepared for evaluation by various exercises combining modeling and bodily expression. The evaluation of beauty appears to rely upon both looking at and exhibiting the body, leading to a ranking of the participants. Candidates are progressively eliminated (in regional and national heats), and the title awarded to the woman who succeeds in incarnating the aesthetic ideal of perfect femininity.

It seems to us that the evaluation of beauty is neither entirely subjective nor entirely objective, and this study aims to understand the appraisal process and its methods of implementation. It asks whether this slow and delicate operation is an intelligent combination of criteria (both measurable and non-measurable).³

■ Measuring the Body

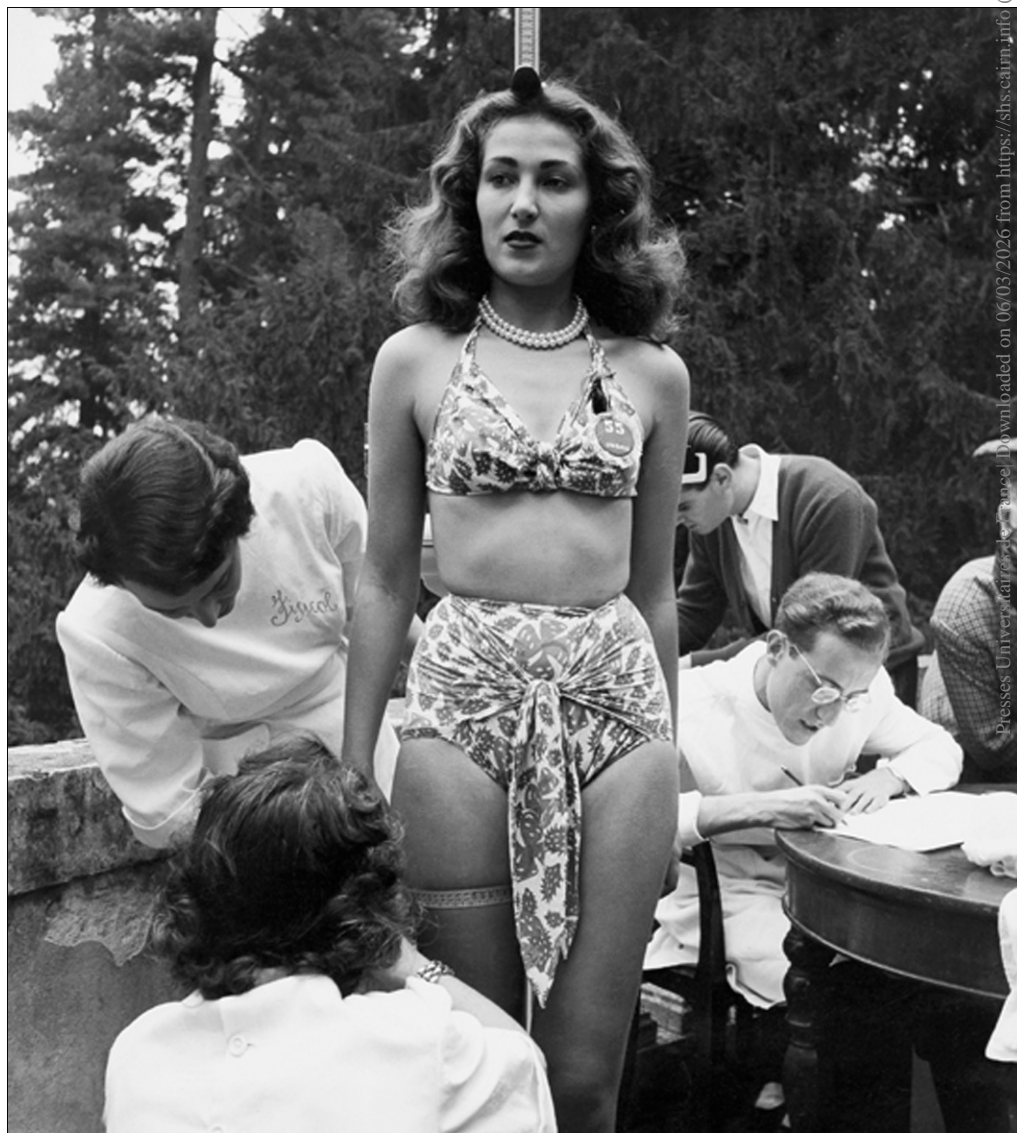
Across centuries and continents, humans have pursued the dream of perfect "gynometry."⁴ For example, in Indian tradition, a dancer must have three rounded, graceful folds around her waist. In France, Joséphine



2.

Bonaparte's breasts were supposedly used as a mold for the shape of champagne glasses. The body serves as a model, but it is also subject to measurement. For example, the "correct" proportions for Nordic beauties, particularly their legs and bust (two-thirds and

one-third of the woman's height) are the subject of Mediterranean male fantasy. In more extreme cases, the body can be sculpted to bring it closer to a cultural and historical ideal of absolute or Venusian beauty. Jacques Gélis (1984) and France Borel (1992) draw attention



3.

to the different possible methods and tools for altering the body, including clothes, hairpieces, shoes, bandages, and surgery. Their varied and complex list does not include the tools used to measure and calibrate the body, which are indispensable in deciding upon the aesthetic modifications to be made. The beauty queen's body is, *a fortiori*, subject to measurement. Juries play an essential part in these often preliminary checks.

- *The Dream of Perfect "Gynometry"*

A competition includes several rounds of judging,⁵ and the young women who make it beyond the regional heats go before the increasingly qualified eyes

of juries chosen for their proficiency. Juries are more specialized in the later rounds: beauty and health professionals and artists and spectators come together to scrutinize the girls from every angle, before casting their vote.

In the Miss Italia competition, there are multiple rounds of judging. After the Second World War, the technical panel was composed of health professionals who checked the competitors' vital statistics. In 1949, the Physical Education Institute "Physicol" carried out this medical inspection, based on its expertise. A photographic report by Federico Patellani (Bolognesi and Calvenzi, 2002)⁶ shows doctors and nurses in white



4. Miss Marche, candidate 28, in a swimsuit that leaves her shoulders bare, being evaluated by a jury (photo: Federico Patellani, San Remo, Italy, 1949. © Federico Patellani collection, Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Villa Ghirlanda, Cinisello Balsamo, Italy).

uniforms inspecting competitors' teeth, weighing them and taking chest, waist, hip, thigh, and ankle measurements. As Paul Ginsborg (1989) points out, postwar Italy was receptive to the image of efficiency and performance from the United States. Expert opinions and equipment were deliberately based on this model. Gauges, tape measures, and compasses were used. The highest possible precision was sought, to offer the nation a Miss Italia as beautiful as she was healthy.

The magic 90/60/90 statistics for the chest, waist, and hips long dictated the ideal silhouette. This was only abolished in 1990, at the initiative of the president of the judging panel, because it was considered outdated and insufficient to define modern beauty. Since

this date, the technical commission has been composed of fashion and showbusiness professionals, whose only measuring instrument is their own expert eye.

However, before the finals in Salsomaggiore, the horde of competitors is subject to other regional and national prequalification proceedings. All those judged too young or too thin, those with a disfiguring disability, or those of doubtful character are harshly excluded. These selection criteria, which generally contribute to the appraisal of the women's beauty, will be further examined later in this study.

Today, the preselection procedures use measuring instruments with greater discretion. They are still used, but are combined with indicative cards and photographs. The Miss France committee asks the candidate,

beginning with the entry form (structured like a technical-specifications sheet), to provide a long list of information, including her physical constitution, health, and conduct.⁷

Although the competition rules specify that the vital statistics are not exclusive criteria, the 2002 Miss France committee included the paleontologist Yves Coppens,⁸ who was an expert in human morphology. Charmed by the beauty and sparkle of the contestants, he admitted in interviews with journalists that he “made only very limited use of his anthropological eye.” Based on certain body parts (facial features, waist, legs, hair, etc.), he compared winner Sylvie Tellier to “Lucy” and was careful to emphasize human evolution, showing that criteria for beauty change greatly over time. Different

physical characteristics have been favored at different periods, making the body subject to a fragmentation which is renewed according to the values of the time (Fourmaux 2001, 209).

- *The Part Stands for the Whole*

In 1939, the first Miss Italia competition looked for a beautiful face and a radiant smile. The teeth, and above all the mouth, implicitly contributed to commonly recognized and practiced seduction games. In 1946, the whole body was evaluated, meaning that the girls had to be reduced to parts to allow measurement. To judge these physical characteristics, it is necessary to see the body not as a whole, but as a collection of parts. These parts were thus sculpted and “trained:” the face and body were enhanced, body hair



5. Members of *Tempo* magazine audition a candidate for the title of Miss Tempo. The winner would compete in the national competition (photo: Federico Patellani, Milan, 1951. © Federico Patellani collection, Museo di Fotografia Contemporanea, Villa Ghirlanda, Cinisello Balsamo, Italy).

was removed or left according to fashion,⁹ and hair was styled (Monjaret 1989). To make the body more pleasing, its angles were softened, features like the nose, ears and chest were enhanced or reduced to conform to norms, over-obvious “racial” traits were eliminated, and the skin made to gleam (Baudrillard 1970, 255). The aim was to make the body pliable and weightless; that is, to remove its corporeality. “Docile, the body lends itself to metamorphoses. We are continuously experimenting. In a playful manner, masks, jewelry, adornments, and clothes expand, reduce, disfigure, and magnify the body or parts of it” (Borel 1992, 34).

Similarly, the legs were subject to scrutiny and comparison. Glazed, set, and embellished by tightening creams, they were the pride of every ball, majorette parade, or assembly of beauty queens.

Previously, candidates had to choose their own costumes and hairstyles, while conforming to the model expected (or even imposed) by the committee. Today, sponsors (who are sometimes on the judging panel), together with the organizers, take charge of the competitors’ wardrobes, hairstyles and makeup, in order to connect their brand to the event.¹⁰ Economic criteria therefore come into play. For example, legs may take pride of place when the competition is sponsored by tights manufacturers. Advertisers and industrialists measure the commercial impact of designer swimsuits or makeup.

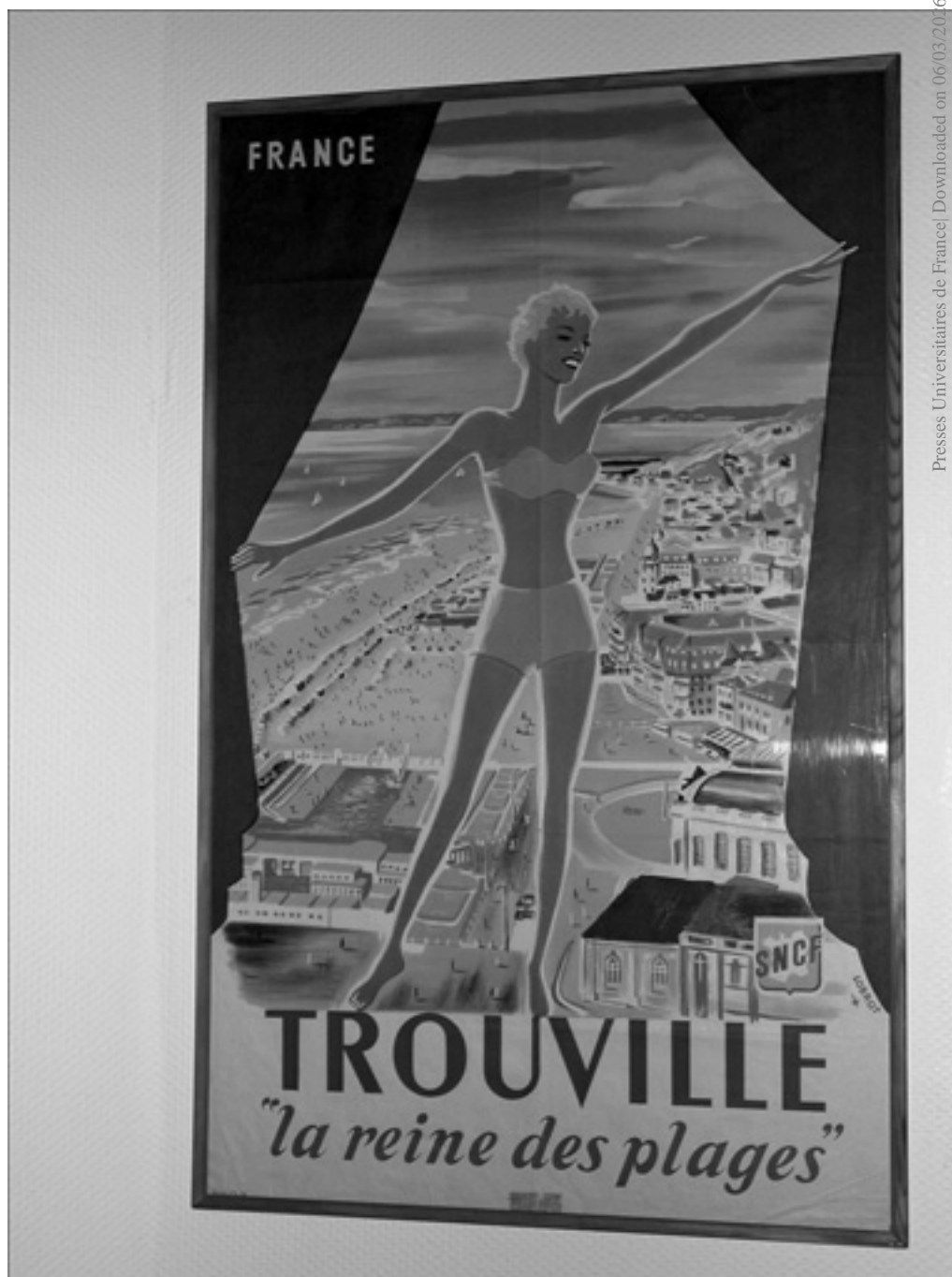
Sometimes, aesthetic preferences for a given body part are linked to political interests. Thus, in postwar Germany, it was not until 1957 that blondes returned,¹¹ their hair color having been considered an Aryan stigmata.



6. The contestants in their beach pajamas and covered by large sunbonnets posing in this photograph (taken around 1930) are vacationers having a good time. This is all still a long way from the professionalism that is imposed on candidates today (Musée Montebello holdings, Musée de Trouville-sur-Mer collection).

The girls' bodies, costumes and adornments have never stopped evolving. By tracing their history, it is possible to trace the history of the society and culture behind them. When tracing changing trends for Miss America winners, Claude Fischler (1993, 360) cites Roberta Pollack Seid (1989). Upon analysis of winners'

vital statistics from 1920 to 1970, the change in their waist size, much more significant than in Europe, is immediately noticeable. Although the winners generally weighed less than the national average in the first competitions, they progressively became thinner over the years. This fashion for slimness was created



7. Beauty contests often liven up holiday and spa resorts, and it is not uncommon for a city holding a competition to identify itself with the beauty queen (Musée Montebello holdings, Trouville-sur-Mer tourism office collection).

by Poirier and Coco Chanel and had stars and famous women as its icons.¹² Global exchanges raise the question of whether it is still possible to speak of local stereotypes or specific criteria for beauty, or whether we should instead speak of worldwide uniformization of beauty, which would suggest that measuring criteria have been globalized (Assayag 1999). The question remains open. However, in the French competition, “exotic types” are clearly emerging, represented by citizens from overseas departments, and in the “Miss Italia nel mondo” competition, the “Italian type” is sought in the form of young, Italian women living abroad.

■ Towards the Non-Measurable

Whether it be at local or global level, the beauty queens all look the same at a first glance. They make up a beauty lineup of variations on a theme. This helps to define them as a “class,” all of whom possess “common properties which make them similar but not identical” (Morris 1978, 280). The organizers use uniformity, efficiently highlighting the properties that make comparison between the bodies possible. The young women appear in various outfits that are often similar or even identical. Wearing just a bathing suit, the competitor exhibits herself and is exhibited among her fellow competitors. She is identified by a number that allows her to be recognized without really being known. Her body is evaluated as one might assess the proportions of a beautiful animal. Paradoxically, the tools used by the judges are also the beauty queen’s weapons of seduction. The bathing suit, for example, the simplest element of the competition, allows the beauty queen to be both evaluated and shown off. “The pursuit of the forms accepted as ideal” combines with “the search for a more individual appearance” (Duret and Roussel 2003, 61).

The entrants must both fit in with and stand out from the group. Throughout the competition, the different rounds lead to a progressive unveiling and emergence of the women’s identities. They will attempt to seduce the public, showing different sides of themselves, to fit the imposed ideal or to exhibit their individual qualities. This alternation between the subjective and the objective, between the norm and the exception (Monjaret and Tamarozzi, awaiting publication), entails a passage from the measurable to the non-measurable.

• *The Whole*

Although each body part receives specific attention, the silhouette is not neglected. It allows an overall physical appraisal and, as stated by Lindoro, a spa client at Salsomaggiore: “You know a beautiful silhouette from behind, because you can’t cheat with your back turned.” The elegance of the silhouette and the graceful walk reveal the personality. Through dance, pageants, and other physical tasks, the competitors show off their assets and the panel members evaluate characteristics other than just appearance, such as grace, muscle-mass equilibrium, elegance, etc. The “whole” is another evaluation criteria and therefore another way in which the candidates can stand out.

During the shows, the beauty queens’ bodies are measured and their appearance scrutinized. The panel examines each criterion, looking for a balance between naturalness and artifice, and for elegance of the overall silhouette and shapes of individual body parts:

Above all, the observer appraises this “generous personality” displayed through visible features: elegance, grooming, makeup, accessories, posture, etc. Moreover, the hair, face, chest, hips, and legs are the most eloquent indicators of this personality. Where the women are concerned, it seems that there is no clear distinction between surface and depth, authenticity and artifice. (Assayag 1999, 80)

For some, Valentina Patruno, “Miss Italia nel mondo 2001,” is a “beautiful girl,” meaning that she “is luscious, that she has buttocks, hips, and chest.” She combines youth and maturity (Borel 1992). On this matter, competition rules vary widely. For Miss Italia, for example, candidates who have not reached the podium are allowed to enter again after an interval of two or more years. More recently (in 1994), young wives and mothers have been allowed to enter. Where maturity is absent, it is constructed in the same way as press photographs: “The tradition of vital statistics and the capacity to ‘age’ young women, giving them the appearance of a more ‘mature’ woman’s maturity and ‘expertise’ reveals this construction of the woman eroticized by and for men” (Baudry 1997, 147).

The beauty queen is sculpted to give her a certain aesthetic perfection.¹³ She becomes an image. At the 1990–2000 competition, Vittorio Sgarbi, a politically engaged art critic and TV personality, dared to compare the winners with female portraits in prestigious paintings from art history.¹⁴ He mentioned Botticelli,



8. Beauty-contest sponsors display the image of Miss Italia 2000 on their advertising boards in the streets of Salsomaggiore (Italy), at the moment the new queen is chosen (September 2001, photo: Anne Monjaret).

le Parmesan, Degas, and others, thus building a bridge between the past and present and making the beauty queen a timeless figure. Paradoxically, the winner is above all linked to the year in which she wins, and will remain so for life. She represents an era. Thus, aesthetic ideals change over time (Hubert 2000).

“Beauty is in the mind of the beholder” (Morris 1978, 278). It is canonical and principally defined by a consensus between judges (both the committee and the general public). According to François Dagognet,

the value of measurement is attributed by the community. Not only does it allow the analysts to exchange and compare results, but it is only possible to know a thing by comparing it to its fellows. It is not possible to understand “specificity” and even less so the “singularity” that surprises. We must therefore learn to compare everything to its fellows (rationality entails relation). (Dagognet 1993, 142)

There is no absolute rule for beauty (Morin 1987, 61). It changes according to fashion, to ongoing or emerging representations of the body, and to moral principles. The competition is therefore above all a moral and physical testing of the girl. The body is the instrument of her transformation into a woman, but also the vehicle for social codes.

- *Healthy Body...*

The contestant must strike a delicate balance between playing on and conforming to the model of beauty, and showing just enough of her personality. “The vital bodily statistics can . . . be a way of persuading others of one’s beauty . . . while still maintaining one’s distance regarding the expected bodily stereotypes” (Duret and Roussel 2003, 61), because every reference to the body is a reference to the private self. Despite this freedom, the contestant receives guidance. The forms she fills in and the questions she is asked by the organizational committee give clues as to the selection criteria that manifest the ideal canon. Thus, among the numerous sections on the morphology of the young women on the Miss France committee’s form (Geneviève de Fontenay, Endemol), available online, one of them demonstrates the importance of aesthetic criteria: “Do you have any physical imperfection? If yes, what is it?” Only by analyzing the questionnaires can we understand the way that the candidates see their own body and the way that they describe their imperfections. This has

yet to be done. However, it can be said that the two bipolar notions of imperfection and perfection of ugliness and beauty applied to the competitors, echo one another and that they themselves are ambiguous. Imperfections can be a lack or an excess. Some can be resolved, others cannot, but in all cases, like perfection, imperfection makes a person unique. It is a cause of exclusion when it results in disharmony, but it can be a reason for selection when this “wound . . . that becomes light” (Ribon 1995, 19) adds to the harmony and grace of person as a whole. In spite of this, the question of ugliness is avoided even more than that of beauty, because it poses an extra problem of definition, due to collective repression and social taboo.

At the very least, the beauty queens must be in good health and neither too fat nor too thin (which implies a balanced diet where indulgence, within reason, is a sign of vitality).¹⁵ In certain competitions, such as Miss World France, the medical conditions are clearly set out in the rules: “Warning, in order to combat anorexia (an unfortunately fashionable illness), we must refuse any candidate with an abnormal weight-to-height ratio, or who looks too thin in her photographs.”¹⁶ Once allowed to compete, the candidate must not be suspected to be ill. Andrea, a masseuse in the Salsomaggiore spas, explains that this situation implies that there are no health professionals on the panel:

It’s not us who prepare the beauty queens, but they must be stressed. We could do something, but compared to others, like the advertisers, we don’t consider ourselves to be beauty experts. We see ourselves more like doctors, and you can’t say that the beauty queens are ill . . . [laughs].

She states this despite the fact that the women’s bodies are frequently prepared through massage. As Sergio Morelli states, “Their bodies are like plasticine.” Today, undoubtedly in response to these decrees of thinness and health, alternative competitions for obese women and transsexuals are emerging.

- . . . *Healthy Mind*

Like the body, the mind is assessed. Physical assets alone do not make a beauty queen. Intellectual merit is also required. Detailed registration forms, where they exist (this is not the case for Miss Italia), are telling in this respect. Qualifications, foreign



9. Miss Italia 2000 on her “throne”: portrait displayed in the lobby of a building of Salsomaggiore (Italy), and on a billboard. Miss Italia is shown dressed in her queen’s finery (September 2001, photo: Anne Monjaret).

Exemplaire

COMITE MISS France Geneviève et Xavier de Fontenay

1, rue de Béarn 92210 Saint-Cloud Tél. 01.47.71.22.25 Fax. 01.47.71.38.87

C.M.F

Pour être valable, ce bulletin doit être signé (Conditions-modalités-droits-obligations) et rempli en lettres capitales

FICHE D'INSCRIPTION

Election de MISS

NOM _____ Prénom _____

Née le _____ à _____ Age : _____ N°S.S _____

Nationalité _____ de naissance _____ naturalisée _____ origine _____

Adresse _____

Ville _____ CP _____ Tél. _____

Tél. Portable _____ Tél. lieu de travail _____

Profession ou études en cours _____

Diplômes obtenus ou en préparation _____

Langues étrangères parlées _____

Profession du père _____ de la mère _____

Loisirs _____

Sports pratiqués _____ si de haut niveau, précisez _____

Pratiquez-vous la danse, si oui depuis combien de temps ? _____

Quelle est votre ambition dans la vie ? _____

Comment avez-vous connu le Comité Miss France ? _____

Avez-vous déjà participé à un concours de beauté ? _____ Avec quelle organisation ? _____

A quelle date ? _____ Où _____ Pour quel Titre ? _____

Que lisez-vous ? _____

Avez-vous déjà voyagé ? Si oui, dans quel pays ? _____

Quelles qualités vous reconnaît-on ? _____

Avez-vous une imperfection physique ? Si oui laquelle ? _____

Fumez-vous ? _____ Pourriez-vous cesser ? _____

Nombre de frères ? _____ de sœurs ? _____

Hauteur sans talons _____ taille mannequin _____ pointure _____

Couleur des yeux _____ couleur des cheveux _____ tour de hanches _____

Tour de taille _____ Buste _____ bonnet _____

Je certifie d'une part l'exactitude des indications ci-dessus et d'autre part avoir pris connaissance et avoir **approuvé** les conditions et modalités de l'élection et les **droits et obligations** qui m'incombent en tant que candidate tels que **figurant au verso**. **Ecrire « Je le certifie »** _____

Si je suis élue Miss _____ je m'engage à participer :

- A l'élection régionale de Miss _____
- A l'élection nationale de MISS FRANCE en décembre prochain dans les **conditions** qui me seront communiquées avant le concours.

Je n'ai jamais participé et je m'interdis formellement de participer à tout autre concours ou manifestations non homologués par le COMITE MISS FRANCE avec des organisateurs utilisant abusivement les mêmes vocables. Je m'engage à NE PAS FAIRE USAGE DE MON TITRE (pour quoi que ce soit) et quelque soit le millésime sans l'AUTORISATION ECRITE DU COMITE MISS FRANCE ou de son ou sa Délégué(e).

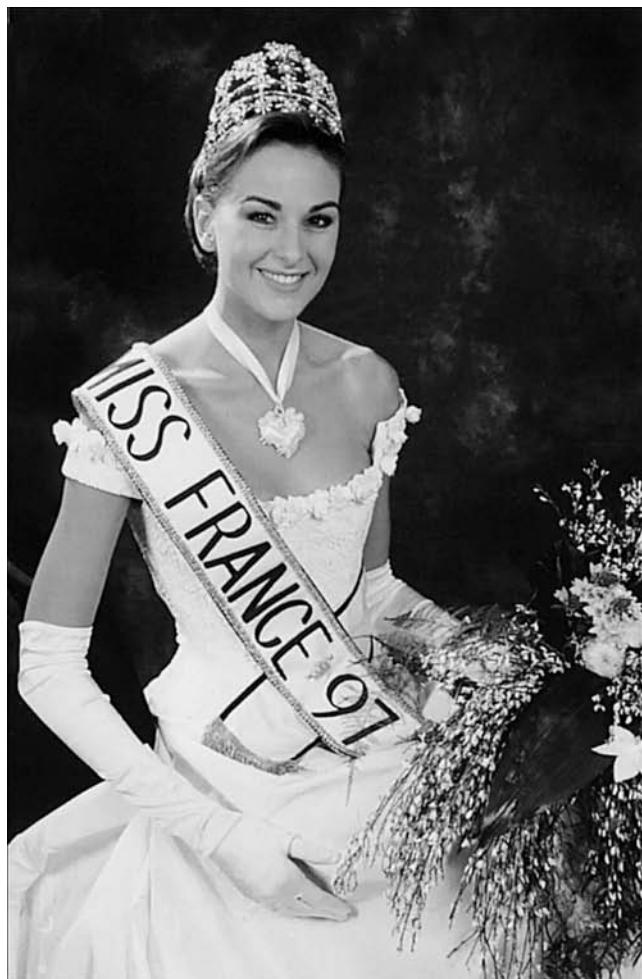
Fait à _____ Le (date) _____

Ecrire de votre main : JE LE CERTIFIE LU ET APPROUVE BON POUR ACCORD _____

Signature de la candidate

Signature des parents en cas de minorité

10. Form available online (until 2004) on the Miss France committee's website, which the pageant candidate must complete (reproduced with the kind permission of Geneviève de Fontenay).



Patricia SPEHAR (Miss Paris 96)

élue MISS FRANCE 97

le 13 décembre 96 en direct sur



Comité Miss France, 1, rue du Béarn 92210 Saint-Cloud

Tél. 01 47 71 22 25 - Fax. 01 47 71 38 87

Robe Cymbeline

Photo Eric Fougère - Imprimerie Périgois - 53400 Craon



Maréva GALANTER (Miss TAHITI 98), élue MISS FRANCE 99, le 12 décembre sur TFI

11. In spite of the transformations that have made the pageants evolve, the “Miss” still embodies emblematic feminine figures, such as the Bride, the Marianne [who symbolizes the French Republic], the Queen, the Star. She bears the symbols of her region and her country; and for a year she becomes an ambassador, connecting the local with the global. Such is the renown of these events that, for example, the Italian jeweler, “Miluna”, has created the crowns for Miss France and Miss Italy on certain occasions.

Official posters of the Misses (1997, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005). (© Miss France Committee and Geneviève and Xavier de Fontenay. Posters reproduced with the kind permission of Geneviève de Fontenay.)

languages, current training, and profession are all mentioned. Pastimes and passions may also feature. The organization or committee then tests the general knowledge of the women, which, in the rules of Miss World France, must “correspond to their age

and their social background.” What are the limits of measuring intellect and intelligence? Will IQ become an admission criterion?

The candidates must not, therefore, appear to be mindless dolls. They must also show “good character”



Sylvie TELLIER (Miss LYON 2001)
élue MISS FRANCE 2002
le 8 décembre 2001 en direct sur



Comité Miss France, Geneviève et Xavier de Fontenay
1, rue du Béarn 92210 Saint-Cloud - Tél. 01 47 71 22 25 - Fax. 01 47 71 38 87
Couronne et Bijoux "Miluna"

Photo Michel JEANNEAU/SIPA PRESS - Imp. Périguis - 33400 Cognac



Corinne COMAN (Miss GUADELOUPE 2002)
élue MISS FRANCE 2003
le 14 décembre 2002 en direct sur



Comité Miss France, Geneviève et Xavier de Fontenay
1, rue du Béarn 92210 Saint-Cloud - Tél. 01 47 71 22 25 - Fax. 01 47 71 38 87
e-mail : gdefontenay.cmf@elma.fr
Couronne et Bijoux "Miluna"

Imp. Périguis - 33400 Cognac

and knowledge, as well as manners. They must not have posed naked for erotic or pornographic photographs. Modesty and propriety are appreciated in the balance between exhibition and covering-up. Aesthetic and moral qualities come together to define the elements of ideal beauty (Hubert 2000, 56). "Chastity is beauty," according to a French proverb. However, "if

moral beauty brings physical beauty, the reverse is not always true" (Loux and Richard 1978, 22). The beauty queen is thus an honest and upstanding woman. After examining this personality data, which is measurable to some degree, the judges choose the winners, in principle without regard for social, religious, or racial criteria.



Laetitia BLEGER (Miss ALSACE 2003)
élue MISS FRANCE 2004
le 13 décembre 2003 en direct de Deauville sur



Comité Miss France, Geneviève et Xavier de Fontenay
1, rue de Béarn 92210 Saint-Cloud - Tél. 01 47 71 22 25 - Fax. 01 55 57 00 65
e-mail : gdefontenay.cmf@elma.fr - www.genevievedefontenay.com
Robe et Couronne ABI NADER

Photo TF1 J.-M. SUREAU - Imp. Périgois - 53400 Craon



Cindy FABRE (Miss NORMANDIE 2004)
élue MISS FRANCE 2005
le 4 décembre 2004 en direct de Tours sur



Comité Miss France, Geneviève et Xavier de Fontenay
1, rue de Béarn 92210 Saint-Cloud - Tél. 01 47 71 22 25 - Fax. 01 55 57 00 65
courriel : gdefontenay.cmf@elma.fr - www.genevievedefontenay.com

Photo : Vincent Boyer
Imp. Périgois - 53400 Craon

• *Beyond the Body . . . a Soul*

In some respects, the body allows scrutiny of the soul and appreciation of that special something, that *je ne sais quoi* that sometimes makes all the difference (Morin 1987, 60-62). It is the lightness of being that emerges, as well as something indefinable that convinces and challenges the judges. "When words are not enough, when language is powerless to describe

reality, the notion of commensurability also finds its limits" (Bernardis and Hagène 1995, 9). After all, is it not simply the personality that emanates from the individual? Her stage presence, her gaze, the sound of her voice: that little something gives a glimpse of her personality or even her temperament.¹⁷ Thus,

harmonious proportions and vital statistics are important, but in order to preserve the girls' personalities,

candidates are not refused on these grounds.”¹⁸ “The body is not just a lifeless silhouette. The gaze of the other does not see its multiple and changing signs. (Bruchon-Schweitzer 1989, 11).

Interplay is the basis of seduction: “Every desire, every pleasure, modifies the perception of the body’s substance, weight, density, and gestures” (Borel 1992, 40). Subjectivity and objectivity both come in to play when selecting the winner, who succeeds in standing out amidst uniformity. The flexibility of expert opinion can leave the public astonished by the final choice, and may cause jealousy. Some enjoy questioning it. There was, for example, an online rumor about the non-conformity of Miss France 2002’s height. Geneviève de Fontenay supposedly asserted “that it was out of the question for Miss France 2002 to be re-measured,” as demanded by one defeated candidate. This begs the question: “Is the correct balance not that which considers measurement as the constantly renewed quest for close knowledge?” (Bernardis and Hagène 1995, 7).

■ Miss Society: Beauty Queens as a Measure of Social Body

The definition of beauty criteria for competitors and consequently for representations of the body takes into account both the measurable and the non-measurable, which interact throughout the event. This gives rise to a special norm (Monjaret and Tamarozzi, forthcoming).

“Be they explicit or implicit, known or secret, norms for beauty do exist. They allow cultures to forge their identity according to a model” (Borel 1992, 31). The body and its norms thus become social yardsticks. “The body is therefore the only indispensable measuring instrument. At once sensitive and sensible, it is that which other instruments require: the measurer and the measured.” (Comte-Sponville 1995, 94). Models of femininity change or recur over

time, according to the values associated with femininity (Fourmaux 2001; Duret and Roussel 2003). Replete or slender, morphology changes with diet (Shorter 1984; Fischler 1993) and causes evolutions of aesthetic norms. The physical body thus allows us to measure the social body and its scales of value: “Ideals and measurements of beauty are always the expression of the state of a society’s libido, a state which necessarily changes. Images of the body are not inflexible: we constantly construct and reconstruct our image” (Borel 1992, 30-31). This is why Desmond Morris (1978) said that the Miss World title was meaningless, that it erased cultural factors, and could contradict local stereotypes (Ballerino Cohen, Wilk, and Stoetje 1996; Assayag 1999).

Today, in national and international beauty pageants, the criteria for the classification of candidates particularly aim to promote canons which, spread by the media, favor the development of the global fashion and beauty markets. Measurement of the body belongs to systems of social (Baudrillard 1970), economic, and undoubtedly political organization.

Measurement, by its very nature, becomes ‘standards.’ . . . Standards are an eminently political phenomenon. They are what allow a group to establish itself as a society. They define the group’s codes, unify them and give them tools for regularization. They are also the reason that we fight, disagree, or clash. They are the things we need to control if we wish to have power and be the master of the norm. The study of modern societies should not tend towards revealing their norms: it ought instead to deploy them according to the multiplicity of constituent societies, in order to study how they negotiate their different applications of the standard. . . . The relationship between norms and democracy has yet to be studied. (Ewald 1995, 84-85)

Beauty contests are therefore useful for observing the formalization of norms, particularly the special norm, which is articulated in the tensions between measurable and non-measurable, universal and cultural, and global and local. ■

I Notes

1. For an analysis of these practices, of anthropometric instruments, and of the emblematic figures in this discipline, (e.g. Alphonse Bertillon, 1853-1914, and Cesare Lombroso, 1835-1909), refer to G. Boëthch and F. Tamarozzi. "L'anthropologue physique au travail: le corps et sa mesure entre science et croyance." Paper presented at the 127th Congrès des Sociétés savantes du CTHS: "Le travail et les hommes," April 2002.

2. Vulgarization of medical knowledge in society has allowed commercial exploitation, among other forms of exploitation. To give an example from another field, the fashion industry in France began a vital-statistics campaign in 2003-2004, aiming to analyze the morphology of the population from five to seventy years old, in order to define new bust, waist, and hip measurements for ready-made clothing.

3. Our thanks to Francine Fourmaux and Denis-Michel Boëll for their attentive reading.

4. By "gynometry," we mean the study of female proportions and of the measurement techniques for the female body.

5. The panel of the Miss Italia finals may include up to sixty members and its composition changes from round to round over one week.

The Miss France competition calls upon twelve selected people for a single evening of voting.

6. A selection of photographs is reproduced in the catalog for the Federico Patellani (1911-1977) exhibition, *La plus belle c'est toi* (March-June 2003), held at the Centre national de la photographie, Paris.

7. In some competitions (such as Miss Asia France and Miss World France), these data may be accompanied by one or more photographs showing the candidate in poses that assist judgment (full-body bikini shots, portraits with their hair pulled back, with or without heels, etc.).

8. Useful sources include the website: <http://www.0plus0.com/article.php?sid=14717/10/02>.

9. F. Patellani's report shows us candidates with hair on their legs, underarms, and bikini line.

10. There are numerous examples, but the case of Catalina swimwear sponsoring Miss America is particularly interesting. Since the 1950s, this swimwear has shaped the silhouette of American beauty, and the competitors from different states continue to wear it long after the end of the competition.

11. See Lothar Schröder's documentary, *Miss Germany à travers les époques*, Germany, 2002, broadcast on French culture channel ARTE on 8 December 2002.

12. The Duchess of Windsor said that a woman cannot be too rich or too thin.

13. It seems that cosmetic surgery is no longer taboo. The girl can change her body so that it "matches the cultural values of the dominant reference group using a process similar to that of other embellishment techniques (hair-styles, clothes, makeup)" (Maisonneuve and Bruchon-Schweitzer 1981, 61).

14. Television program (RAI 1) about beauty queens in 2000.

15. Television program *Strip-tease* on France 3; documentary: *Comme un poisson dans l'eau*, about the run-up to a regional competition in Aix-les-Bains, broadcast in 2003.

16. www.missfrance.tv/pages/inscription/reglement.htm, 17/02/03, or www.missfrance-cophonie.org/pages/inscription/reglement.htm, 23/09/03.

17. Traditional proverbs tell us a lot about physiognomy (Loux, Richard, 1978: 11-42). Certain authors claim that facial expressions or the eyes allow us to "perceive the physical, intellectual and moral value of the human being" (Des Vignes Rouges 1937).

18. Jean-Louis Giordano, extract from the regulations of the Miss France committee. Accessed from: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/comitemissfrance/htmls/regl.tm>, 23/09/03.

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