

The Barbie Brigade

Let them eat cheesecake!

If you took a break from TV election coverage this past Saturday evening in search of less weighty programming, you may have stumbled across a less depressing and confusing but still subtly spooky little broadcast: the Miss America pageant (forced upon this writer by his girlfriend). If ever there was proof of the dubious cultural ramifications of Free Trade, it is here. It's hard to imagine a more insubstantial, image-orientated, patently unreal media event outside of a royal wedding (in either case there are more tears and taffeta than the average thinking viewer can stomach): several hours of irrelevant musical numbers interrupted by fifty young beauties who somehow manage to tell us what states they are from while maintaining eerily constant grins, all building towards that exciting climax wherein the winner's name is read and her fellow contestants rain congratulations on her tiara-topped tresses in an orgy of group-hugging that is paradoxically reminiscent of some gender-bent version of a Stanley Cup victory locker room celebration. It may not be the blatantly obvious beauty contest it once was, and the winners do promote worthy causes, but the societal values that make these beauty queens such influential symbols are the really frightening thing behind the glitzy spectacle. We encourage women to aspire to unreal ideals, and beauty contests like the Miss America pageant are all-too symptomatic of this.

One look at the contestants confirms the underlying agenda: no canines in this crowd. While they mightn't all be voluptuous amazons, they are all slim, well built, carefully made-up, attractive young ladies. The implied message for would-be contestants is: check your physical imperfections at the door. This unhealthy, unnatural feminine ideal is none-too-subtly reinforced throughout the program. Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman" plays in the background as the young women parade about, and most of the commercials (many of which are announced as sponsors on stage before each commercial) are "beauty" products that encourage women to "fix" their imperfect appearances. "Nice and Easy" promises beautiful hair,

Maybelline promises luscious lips, and Nutrisystem loudly (but cheerfully) asserts that "when you take the weight off you feel great about yourself." The problem with this and these other products is the idea that women need to change the way they look in order to feel good about themselves. The underlying implication is that women should aspire to the

(song and dance) and the Miss America version of "Final Jeopardy" wherein the contestants are asked a big question on stage and are judged on the spontaneous wit and wisdom of their answers. This year's pop quiz consisted of asking our heroines how they felt about being in the pageant; apart from some obligatory words about various worthy causes, the question

yielded such thought-provoking responses as "excited", "thrilled", and "pleased". Deep stuff. Character, apparently, is not of overriding importance. However diverse in scope competitions of this sort may try to appear, they were founded on and remain heavily influenced by the promotion of a contrived, illusory standard of physical beauty.

It's very easy to ignore or even defend Miss America and its ilk on various grounds: tradition, "good clean fun", the aforementioned spirit of healthy competition, and, of course, popular appeal. What we must realize, though, as many people already have, is that however popular these spectacles may appear, and however harmless they may be in themselves, they promote aspirations to feminine ideals that are both unreal and unhealthy for most women. We should move towards valuing women, like all people, for who they are, not what we think they should look like. So long as "beauty pageants" like Miss America exist, we are less likely to recognize and value the true beauty in ourselves and others. That's the ugly truth.

Sean McQuaid
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Barbie-esque beauty ideal embodied by the fifty flawless femme fatales featured in the Miss America festivities, during which these commercials run. The whole thing is an homage to our society's narrow, restrictive perception of beauty, glamorous brainwashing in healthy competition's clothing.

Regarding that healthy competition concept, and in particular the supposedly reduced emphasis on superficial qualities in this contest, make no mistake: this is still a beauty contest. There are other factors in the judging, but the production's priorities are clear in that the bulk of the show's airtime is devoted to gawking at the gals, from their intros to the evening wear to the ever-popular swimsuit segment. Apart from flesh and fashions, the evaluation of the ladies is based largely on the talent competition

**NO PAPER
NEXT WEEK!**

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