

Masculinity in men beauty pageant

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*Ritual, by focusing in the making
and remaking of the body,
produces the sociopolitical context
in which it takes place while
also attempting to transform it.*

Catherine Bell

Introduction

Men beauty pageants were the following natural step after women beauty pageants spread almost all over the world. Those who handle this kind of shows knew that male body was also a product they can merchandise as they have been doing with the female body the last thirty years. If this step came slowly it was because the process of reducing the semiotic differences between masculine and feminine was also slow. Masculinity and femininity were two extremes of the gender differences meant to express not only a sex difference but the separation of two worlds and two cultures. Men not only establish their own world as an affirmation of their identity and control, but also as a rejection of a feminine world they always charged with negative connotations, and, consequently, placed at the bottom of the cultural and social scale. Any meaning related to feminine was presented as inferior, and the women body was always seen just as instrument of pleasure and reproduction, even as ornament of a triumphant man. Its mysteries were always source of fears, and, consequently, feminine body had to be controlled and mastered. Seen not as an equal body, women's body had to be under surveillance, and under a process of identification and, by doing so, a process aimed to make women's body different. That is why it was necessary to establish signs able to identify, and to distinguish between masculine and feminine, able to draw where the limits were, in order to mark where feminine values were confined, and where masculine were to dominate.

But those limits were more and more difficult to maintain, since masculine control began to loose ground, and so social differences began to vanish. We have seen, during the last thirty years, a progressive process of rubbing off the marks that always identified where the limits of masculinity and femininity were (Finol 1984). Women started using men's signs, like wearing pants and short hair, and, later smoking and using language normally reserved for men. These changes sometimes frightened a men's society, and it was extremely hard for women to obtain the right to use men's symbols, as it was hard that, after a long battle, women finally conquest their right to be treated as equals in all senses. It was a social as well as a semiotic battle, in a war that still today has some obstacles to be vanquished. At the same time, some female signs were taken by men. Young men

began to use long hair, wear earrings, usually one, and cross their legs in a way usually reserved for women. Finally the ends started coming together. Masculine and feminine were no longer two irreconcilable extremes. But still some grounds hold battle, and the feminine world were in some ways confined to itself. Beauty contests were one of those grounds.

Men Beauty Contests

Men Beauty Contests are relatively recent. In Venezuela, where hundreds of women beauty pageants are held every year, men beauty pageants started as recently as 1996. In 1997 Lupita Jones, Miss Universe 1991, started in México a men beauty contest named El Modelo de México, in which a group of Mexican young men exhibit their best qualities trying to get the title of model of Mexico. Venezuelan men beauty contest is now part of the TV show industry that have made so astonishing strikes with Venezuelan women beauty contests. An industry that proudly shows their magnificent records: Venezuela is the only country having won ten international beauty contests, and twice, at the same time, the two biggest contests, Miss World and Miss Universe. Beautiful girls holding the title of Miss Venezuela have won four times the Miss Universe contest, four times the Miss World contest, and two times the Miss International contest (Finol 1999:105). No wonder why in 1996 Men Beauty Contests were another step to build up a new show based in exhibition of young, handsome boys eager to strike into the world of stardom, models, soap operas, and a world of fame and money, even into a world where politics and power were not so far, as Irene Sáez proved. In fact, the gorgeous Venezuelan girl, after been elected Miss Venezuela and Miss Universe, became elected twice Major of Caracas, was candidate to the Presidency of Venezuela, and recently elected governor of the state of Nueva Esparta in this country. Election of beauty queen, reinas and madrinan (queens and godmothers) comes in Venezuela, and many other Latin American countries, from a costume well extended into different social activities: in school, carnivals, fairs, and sport competitions. As Rogers says, «these examples illustrate one dimension of the beauty queen phenomenon, namely their capacity to serve as emblems of all manner of social groupings» (Rogers 1998:63).

Why did it take so long for men to be placed in beauty pageants? What steps did this «product» take before reaching the TV screen? According to my hypothesis, there were some obstacles to be conquest before men could be exhibited before the TV audience, in a beauty contest, without public rejection. It was necessary to ease the passage into a space strictly forbidden to men. Beauty Pageant is a ritual full of feminine meanings, where no men could be placed, since it was men who had created this space to exhibit women in one of the functions that male society has attributed them: instrument of ornament. It is for men's pleasure that women's body was supposed to be always beautiful and always young. Besides other duties as wife, this was one of the role that family education was supposed to teach young girls: be beautiful, always beautiful. Men had to be strong, smart, hard working, but regarding beauty he had nothing to worry about: it was not among their duties to be handsome. It was then a «negotiated conflict» (Bell 1992:191) that media had to resolve before putting a group of men parading before the cameras as only women used to.

So for men to assume a space traditionally reserved to women was necessary to fulfill some steps. Maybe the most important took place when women decided that

muscles was no longer a realm exclusively for men. So women decided that they also had something to do in body building. Moreover, women decided that they also got a punch in boxing and other «male» sports. Maybe women had much more to look for in male dominions, since they were more excluded than men were. In fact, men had for themselves much more areas of social and body life than women had. Therefore, women had much more semiotic space to conquest than men, since men always had almost everything for them. I think that beauty pageant rituals were for men one of their last steps.

3. Venezuelan Men Beauty Pageant

For the analysis of men beauty contests we have examine the Mr Venezuela 1998, a contest that took place in Caracas, in October 1998. It was the third edition of this annual ritual. This time the show leaders and Venezuelan TV audience were animated by the fact that Mr. Venezuela 1997, Mr. Sandro Finoglio, had won the title of Mr. World in 1998.

As in women beauty pageants (Finol 1999:104), also here we have the same group of actors: a show-woman, in charge of keeping everybody's enthusiasm, and in charge of announcing every presentation during the long two hours the show lasts; the jury, which is in this case entirely composed of women, the spectators present at the show, as well as those who watch the program at home, and the young competitors acting as heroes in a difficult battle.

The ritual is divided in twelve steps:

1. Introduction
2. Singing and dancing
3. Jury Presentation
4. First Parade
5. Singing and dancing
6. Second parade
7. Singing and dancing
8. Third parade
9. Singing and dancing
10. Presentation of Sandro Finoglio, Mr. World 1998
11. Election of Mr. Photogenic and five finalists
12. Election of the winner and two other finalists

These twelve steps, each of which is separated by long advertising intervals, may be reduced in fact to the following basic components: Introduction + Shows of singing and dancing + Jury presentation + Parades + Presentation of Sandro Finoglio + First Election + Final Election + Prizes. These six steps, some of which are repeated, show an astonishing similarity with the test scheme developed by Greimas (1979:131) after Propp (1970), according to which the hero has to accomplish a group of special tasks that will allow him to get his object of desire or l'objet de valeur. In fact, the three parades are tests that the young men have to accomplish, in order to get competence for their final test: the election made by the jury. In that sense, the parades correspond to what Greimas (1977:304) calls qualifying test, which «correspond à l'acquisition de la compétence (ou, plus précisément, des modalités actualisantes du savoir-faire et/ou du pouvoir-faire)». The two elections made by the jury correspond to what Greimas calls decisive test, even though in this case it is not exactly made through a performance, but, instead,

it represents the conjunction with the object of desire. Finally, the «crowning» of the winner is what Greimas calls the glorifying test, which is equivalent to the recognition by the Addresser.

The most important components of this ritual scheme undoubtedly are the three parades. There the candidates will show their body, their way of walking, their smiles.

First parade

In the first parade, the candidates are wearing very tight, sport clothes and dark glasses. Their clothes, designed for the occasion by Carolina Morales, are characterised for having numerous strong colors. Called by the announcer, each of them, wearing big smiles, walk to the front of the stage, where a microphone has been placed, they stop, and, in a rapid movement, they take off their dark glasses, and say the few words that the spectators will be allowed to hear from them: name, age, and college career. Since the beginning, the ritual conductors will make clear that this is not for the young men to talk, they are there to show their body, their young muscle body; they have to know how to walk and smile, how to show what they have as their best body qualities.

Second parade

In the second parade the candidates appear in swim suits. What was covered, even by so tight clothes, is now uncovered. Their bodies have been meticulously shaved, they are lustrous and appealing. This time there are no words, just walking and smiling. Just bodies that walk and smile. They look to the public in front of which the jury have been placed.

Third parade

This time the candidates are dressed in smokings. As in former parades, they walk, one by one, from the back of the stage to the front of it, they approach the public walking in a manner absolutely different from their usual walking manner. This time they do not need to emphasize their body, this time they need to show their elegance, their glamour, their mundane manners, their beauty. They wear smokings for practical reasons: the winner will be already dressed up for the «crowning» ceremony.

Presentation of Mr. World 1998

After some new interruptions with advertising and some new music shows, Venezuelan Sandro Finoglio is called over the stage. He is interviewed for a few moments. He has some difficulties to answer the questions, he is still full of emotions and he insisted that his role during Mr. World 98 was to represent Venezuela in a manner that the country be proud of it. He is the role model for these twenty one young men.

Decisive Test

After the parades and other music shows, it is time to enter to the final steps of this long ritual. First of all, the announcement is made about the selection carried out some days earlier by the Photographer's Association, They had to choose who was Mr Photogenic, title that this time is won by Numa Delgado, who receives this title from Veronica Schneider, Venezuelan candidate in charge of representing her country in the Miss World Beauty Pageant 1999. Immediately, the public is

informed that the jury has reached their first selection: five finalists are called to the front of the stage. A few moments later, the show woman announces in an inverse order the three finalist that will represent the country in three different international contests: Man Hunt, Mr International, and Mr World.

Glorifying Test

The glorifying test is carried out through the presentation of prizes: motorcycles for third and second finalists and a beautiful car for the first finalist. They get their object of value. The former is also called for the crowning ceremony but, instead of receiving a crown as elected misses do in Venezuelan as well as in international contests, our Mr. Venezuela receives a long white scarf. I couldn't avoid to ask myself why not a crown, as a king? Why a crown for her, as a queen, and a scarf for him, just as a gentleman but not as a king? Maybe here lies one of the clues to understand at their deepest level how this ritual work and particularly what are the semiotic values that underlies in this process.

There are several meaningful differences that pervades the ritual process we are talking about. When watching the whole presentation I noticed that the jury was entirely composed of women. In our analysis of the women beauty pageant the jury was composed by men and women. What does this difference mean? A first hypothesis relates to the idea according to which women are the «natural» examiner of men's beauty. Who else? Since women are the «natural» partner of men they have the competence and the right to evaluate the conditions of this handsome young men. But, once again, why in women beauty pageants men and women share the jury task? A second hypothesis, the one I find more reliable, relates to the interest that organizers of the contests have in showing a strong sense of masculinity during the whole ritual. The twenty four young men are evaluated only by women as a way of showing that they are in fact real men, that there is no possibility of any confusion with other sex preference. If we take a look to the social and cultural context, in order to validate our hypothesis, we will see that, in fact, there are still a very strong sense of what has been called machismo in Venezuelan society. It is precisely this fact that has contributed to slow down the necessary cultural changes that would end with the initiation of men beauty pageants in Venezuelan show business. In other words, it would not be seen as «natural» by the public, men and women as well, that a jury composed by men, even partially, will evaluate the beauty of other men. On the contrary, this is not the same situation for women contests where the presence of men in the jury is not seen as anormal. So, women's beauty is a matter of men but also a matter of women. The current language, at least in Venezuelan society, reflect the same situation, since a woman can, at any moment, tell to another woman how beautiful she looks. Instead, among men it is not quite accepted for a man to tell another man the same kind of remarks. In this same direction I will argue that in Venezuelan women beauty contests there are always two hosts, one man, usually, Gilberto Correa, and one woman, usually a former Venezuelan Miss Universe. Both will describe extensively, along the show, the many beauties of the female participants. On the contrary, in our men beauty contests only a woman acts as hostess, able by her gender to speak and describe the many beauties of the male participants, a role that will not fit a masculine host.

Another important sign that supports our hypothesis, is that, as I said before, while the winning Miss receives a crown, the winning Mister receives a scarf. This

differentiation, made by the same people that organize both pageants, is trying to differentiate masculinity from femininity. In Venezuela, where misses were always called reinas (queens), a crown was semiotically related to women and never to men. So, the use of a crown for Mr Venezuela would have given a sense of femininity to a ritual that relies in a strong sense of masculinity in order to make it acceptable for the public, both men and women. Another argument that proves the existence of this ritual semiosphere, where the preservation of masculinity is so carefully guarded, may be found in the fact, commented by some of the participants in our interviews, according to which one of the most difficult requirements asked to them by the organizers, was that they had to shave their entire body, something regarded as feminine in Venezuelan society.

I will also add another important difference that will help to a better understanding of our hypothesis. One of the most important facts of female pageants is the measuring of women's body. Not only they are measured in their stature but particularly in their bust, waist and hip. This is not the case for men pageants. The public will know only about their height but no other measurement will be presented to them. The candidates will be presented, one by one, as entire bodies where muscles have an important role to play even though it is not expected from them the same massive muscle as in body building competitions. At this point maybe it is useful to ask what are the differences between male body building competition and male beauty contests. In fact, it is clear that regarding the first one, muscles are particularly important, they will be measured as a way of having exact comparisons, which is not the case in beauty pageants. Another difference that might be enlightening is that in body building contests as well as in athletes competitions men are shaved. «Triathletes shave their bodies to minimize air and water resistance during their competitions; body-builders do so to make muscles and striations more visible» (Muscle & Fitness, Dec. 94:38). As our quote says, what body building contests are looking for is to show muscles, mass of muscles, it is the especial presence and mass of muscles what makes a winner. On the contrary, in a men beauty contest what make muscles important is not their mass but their beauty, that is why body builders take many different substances designed to increase the mass of muscles.

But of course, beside muscles, there are four other components to be evaluated by the jury in our contest: walking, smiling, dancing, and dressing. Bodies under evaluation are mere bodies, at most bodies in movement. They are not allow to express any other personal condition regarding, for instance, knowledge, spirituality, hobbies, mind or ideas. They are just bodies, bodies that walk, smile, dance and dress up.

Conclusions

As we have seen, male beauty pageants are a recent phenomena in Venezuelan society and I would say the same thing for most Latin American countries. This time, twenty four young men, from the different states of the country, are together to exhibit their best body qualities in order to get the attention of the jury. We know nothing about them. The public has only one chance of hearing their voices. During a few seconds, in their first parade, in front of the cameras and lights, they will be allowed to state just their name, age, and what kind of studies they are following at college. Just a few words, no more. They will be just showing their body, their smile, their captivating way of parading. Just bodies that march and smile.

What this ritual is trying to establish, in the first place, is a sense of masculinity congruent with what Venezuelan macho culture may accept. In the same sense that «femininity is not a natural property of women, but a cultural construct» (Bignell 1997:61), masculinity is also a cultural product made in an effort to represent a certain ideological view of what the media ritual creates. So the question, at this point is what sense of masculinity this ritual is trying to present? First of all, the organizers are trying to separate, clearly, between femininity and masculinity. That is why, even though they are using the very same ritual process, some clue meanings, expressed by presence or absence of some actors and some signs, are presented in order to reinforce the difference between a Miss and a Mr. More over, the ritual process is not only taking clear steps away from femininity but also from other sexual preferences that might «tarnish» the strong sense of masculinity attached to the whole ritual. Certainly the sense of masculinity presented here is far away from any similarity with homosexuality. This is probably the main connotation our ritual is trying to avoid since the smallest approach to the sense of homosexuality would be rejected by the audience and even by the competitors themselves, as some of them told me. At its deepest level, the men beauty contest ritual is an expression, as many rituals are, of the social myth of masculinity, a myth rooted in Latin American macho culture. At its deepest level, the ritual is trying to make sure that the sense of manhood conveyed by every action is presented in a congruent manner with the social and cultural context, since no ritual can overlook values and cultural structures long ago established. Even if it is proper to say that this myth and the social conducts attached to it has been smoothed now a days, it still remains as part of a reality that rituals, even powerful media rituals, cannot overlook.

Another important reflexion that emerges from the analysis of new rituals is how they come to life. And here we touch at the core of a theoretical area regarding the construction of new ritual experiences that, as in our case, are derived from other similar rituals. Men beauty pageants are in the middle of two other rituals: women beauty pageants and body builder contests. It takes components and features of both rituals in order to create a new one. Women beauty pageants have a very long history in human culture, their origin correspond to a particular type of society dominated by men. But men beauty pageants are a new expression that has to cope with pre existent values that have to be changed for the ritual to be succesfully accepted by the society, and by the culture this society live in. How are new rituals created? In this case we have seen how this new ritual takes the same scheme women beauty pageants have. Actors, actions and steps are almost identical but some important semiotic contents are different, and these differences come from the fact that different values are invested in every action. Masculinity and femininity are perceived and acted upon in a different way. The masculine body is perceived by society as fundamentally different from feminine body. Another aspect regarding creation of new rituals is that this process has to follow a long series of steps, of changes that will reduce the contradictions and confrontations between micro components of a same culture.

Another theoretical question that arises from the analysis of rituals in contemporary societies is the powerful presence of the new technologies. Media, television as well as cinema, are a new instance that today has substituted the public place, and has assume, as its proper realm, the public opinion and its rituals. But, is the power of media enough to create and impose upon society new secular rituals and new

values? Certainly the answer to this question is beyond our research. Nevertheless, some provisional conclusions, regarding this question, might be drafted for further discussion. First of all, I will suggest that despite the overwhelming power of media, no value or meaning can be imposed over society if, at least some of its members do not open the possibility of change. Society is far from being homogenous. So any ideology will always be under critic and surveillance. There is no power able of imposing a uniform and consensual myth. Certainly the power of media, their capacity to be present every where, especially at home, make them a factory of meanings not only by the message they are able to transmit but also by their own presence as a prestigious technology. Secular rituals are placed in a different cultural position than sacred rituals. The former are embedded in a closed religious system, the latter in an open social system where opposition and criticism are a main component. For media to impose changes on a cultural system they have to ²connect² with it through the pre existent cultural values and find there a place. This process will suppose to identify positions already taken by other former values, and then place this new values in a harmonic, however conflicting, way. For men beauty pageants to be accepted they had to place themselves in the middle of other rituals that had already taken positions. In other words, men beauty pageants to fit in Latin American cultural system had to take into account a diachronic process in which not only already women beauty pageants existed, but also bodybuilding contests like Mr., Ms. and Master Mr. Olympia, among others. They also had to wait for a progressive change on the irreconcilable differences of what was traditionary understood as male and female, as masculinity and femininity.

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