
CROWNING MISS SWEDEN – CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER, RACE AND NATION IN BEAUTY PAGEANTS

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Introduction

Beauty pageants are puzzling events. Beauty pageants are often considered as commercial and degrading to women or even as vulgar spectacular events by their opponents. To the indifferent, beauty pageants seem simple and trivial, “What you see is what you get”. Beauty pageants and popular culture have often been seen as too ‘low’ or too obvious to be taken seriously by academic researchers (for studies on beauty pageants see Banet-Weiser, 1999, Cohen et al, 1996, Giroux, 1998, Lavenda, 1988, Russell, 1997). Cohen et al (1996) point to the fact that researchers have tended to neglect beauty contests as “...*trivial, frivolous, or vulgar.*” (Cohen et al, p.5) and there is thus a risk of taking for granted the operation of power (cf. Russell, 1997) in these kinds of events.

Yet, national and international beauty pageants attract enthusiastic competitors and initiated audiences from many corners of the world. They attract financial support and media attention, just as they also stir up political debates. Generally upholding liberal ideals of individualism and commercialism (Benet-Weiser, 1999), beauty pageants have also surprisingly been uniting two, seemingly antagonistic, resistance groups – “fundamentalist Muslims” and “western feminists” in their critic of the competitions. Bear in mind for example, the tragic events in Nigeria 2002 when 200 persons were killed in violence sparked off by the pageant Miss World (http://www.channel4.co.uk/news/2003/special_reports/uworld_nigeria.html, 24th July, 2003).

Moreover, national beauty pageants, like Miss Sweden or Miss America, involve interesting constructions of identities. The Miss Sweden contest can be seen as embodying a national

discourse, via a set of inter-woven events, practises and discourses. All together, these create a specific arena, a place, where the imagined community Sweden as a nation is constructed and affirmed. According to Banet-Weiser (1999) national beauty contests constitute a civic ritual where a particular group of people, with Clifford Gertz words, can “tell stories to themselves about themselves” (Quoted in Banet-Weiser, p. 3).

But, the popular event of national beauty pageants also proves to be a highly visible performance of intertwined identities. The most obvious is the twofold connotation of the crowning title ‘Miss Sweden’, thus implicating, at the same time, a gendered *and* national symbolism. But this gendered symbol of the nation also involves constructions of race, as well as regional identities, sexuality and class. Thus, the crowning of Miss Sweden forms an arena where nationality is linked to femininity, Whiteness, middle and upper class values and heteronormativity in various ways. The aim of this paper is to analyse how national beauty pageants, in particular Miss Sweden, can be understood in relation to social constructions of gender, race and nation.

Notes on Methodology

The first Miss Sweden contest was organised in 1949 by the weekly magazine *Veckorevyn* and its editor Michael Katz. The empirical material for this paper covers the period of 1949-1960, the first 12 years of the competition’s existence when the competition and its institutional practices took shape. The material consists of all the published material on the contest in the magazine *Veckorevyn* during the period, in all 450 articles, stories, and photos.

The publication *Veckorevyn* started in 1935 and it was at the time a weekly paper attuned to an imagined audience of families according to Sköld (2003). She notes, however, that the advertising material was primarily directed towards female consumers. The content consisted of photographic documentary stories, serial stories, stories on local and international (Hollywood) celebrities, ‘agony aunts’, recipes, cartoons and advertisements. According to Anja Hirdman (2001) *Veckorevyn* in the 1960s was a magazine who turn primarily to women. In 1958 *Veckorevyn* sold around 450 000 issues of the magazine per week, which is an impressive figure, if one bear in mind that the national population in 1958 was 7.4 million (SCB).

The crowning of Miss Sweden provided the magazine with a 'selling story'. During the period, *Veckorevyn* gave a wide coverage of the competition in the magazine, through a series of articles, stories and photographic material. The contest makes up a recurring theme in the paper, especially during the period when the competition is running. First, the contest is advertised, if there are regional competitions these are (sometimes) covered carefully in several stories, the national candidates are presented and the readers are asked to vote for their favourite. Then, the national contest and the winner are presented. This is followed by personal stories on the winning girl and her family, and stories on the preparation of the winner for the upcoming international contest; which often involves a long journey. Lastly, *Veckorevyn* follows the crowned Miss Sweden, as well as the first and second runners up, to different international competitions and international trips. There are also stories about Miss Sweden visiting different cities in Sweden. In addition to these stories, there are also 'flashbacks' and 'follow up stories' of previous Misses Sweden and their life stories. Often, the contest and its competitors are shown on the first page, for example in 7 out of 52 covers of the magazine in 1953.

The method used to analyse the material on the Miss Sweden beauty pageant is discourse analysis. In order to facilitate the analysis of the material, we have followed a model for critical textual analysis developed by Hellspong & Ledin (1997). We have previously used this model in our individual research (Mattsson, 2001, Pettersson, 2002). The model of discourse analysis has two main focuses. The first deals with the *situational context* of the Miss Sweden contest, i. e. the procedures and rules of the contest, its separate yet interlocking elements: regional, national, international competitions, as well as the financial and commercial dimensions. The second focus is on the *contents of ideas* expressed in the discourses of Miss Sweden. For example how the competition and its competitors are described and characterised in texts and photos, the themes and propositions made about the Miss Sweden contest in the articles, the presuppositions these statements rely on and so on. It may be important, though, to point out that this model of analysis primarily serves to order the different phases of the interpretation. The interpretations of the materials are, of course, also highly dependent on our theoretical perspectives.

At this stage the analysis is to be considered as preliminary, as a more extensive and detailed reading and interpretation of the material will follow. We also plan to collect complementary material from the period, such as interviews with key informants, filmed material and other written sources, such as national and local newspapers.

Mapping Miss Sweden: 1949- 1960

We would like to consider the Miss Sweden contest, as a “seismograph” of societal change of Sweden in the 1950’s, not the least since this period involves radical changes in gender relations. Sweden in the 1950s was a society more and more influenced by a modernist ideology centred on the Swedish Welfare State. The gender relations, at the time, implied that men were seen as breadwinners and women as housewives. In the aftermath of the 2nd World War, Swedish prosperity was accompanied by a shortage of labour. Consequently, the 1950’s were marked by an increase of the participation of women in paid labour, from 790 000 in 1950 to 900 000 in 1960 (Hirdman, Y. 2001, p.13) and a substantial immigration of workers from southern Europe. However, whereas young unmarried women increasingly engaged in paid work, married women were primarily engaged in unpaid housework. The concept “gainfully employed house wives” [*yrkesarbetande husmödrar*] in the official statistics indicates that the home and family were considered as the primary responsibility of women.

In the 1950s, the prosperous economy also paved the way for an increased consumption, and as Sköld (2003) points out, this can be noticed in an increase of advertisement in the popular press, specifically addressing women. The family was important as a unit of reproduction and consumption, although the importance of the family, compared to in the earlier agricultural society, had been weakened. Sköld (2003) argues that family ‘happiness’ were increasingly related to consumption of cars, and later trips abroad, TV-sets and summerhouses. The construction of Sweden as a modern country thus involves a changing pattern of consumption.

For women this pattern involves an increasing consumption of fashionable clothes, underwear, make-up, and various kinds of health- and sanitary products, and the Miss Sweden contest reflects this changing pattern of consumption. In some years, *Veckorevyn* administrated the selling of products like clothes that are directly advertised by the participators of the beauty pageant in the magazine. In other years, the clothes worn by the crowned Miss Sweden are described in detail, including information about prices and where to buy them. At times, Miss Sweden even figures in advertisements for products like soap. Thus, the commercial gains derived from the contest for the magazine *Veckorevyn* were manifold. It also strengthened the ability of the magazine to attract readers and advertisements. In certain years *Veckorevyn* co-operated with various local people’s amusements parks [*folkparker*] and local newspapers, thus attracting attention to and

advertising the magazine itself. Other commercial themes of the contest were the sponsoring of trips, prizes, clothes and hotels.

Body, Beauty and Identity

Beauty pageants construct and reproduce beauty ideals and body norms. In human geography, Adrienne Rich's phrase "*the body is the geography closest in*" (Rich 1986, p. 212, in Valentine, 1999, p. 49) has acquired a life of its' own in the renewed interest for bodies and bodily practises within the discipline. The body is in geographical terms, the 'first space' which human beings experience and through which they encounter the world. Bodies and body parts – as well as material extensions of the body such as clothes, make-up, and so on – are filled with meaning, values and symbolism and are also used to express and practise group identity (Sibley, 1995).

Hence, there is a constant interplay between the body of flesh and blood and the body of ideas and symbolism. This interplay can be perceived as a kind of *ontological transformation* whereby meaning is attributed to matter and, vice versa, matter is interpreted and read through a cultural lens (cf. Olsson, 1991; Gren, 1994). Meaning is also transformed in to matter, since powerful body ideals serve as ideals and models for individuals to live up to. Through culturally learned body instructions we are taught, or "programmed", how to reshape and reproduce our own bodies in order to keep up with bodily norms.

According to McDowell (1999) studies of the discursive construction of bodies in different geographical contexts facilitate a theoretical interpretation of bodies as flexible and adaptable spaces. Body norms and beauty ideals vary from one historical and geographical context to another. Thus, what kind of body look is perceived of as worth striving for equally varies over time and between places. At the same time, Western body norms and body ideals have been especially dominant and have attained global hegemonic status in relation to beauty ideals created in other contexts. Not least through the network of symbolic and visual communication technologies as well as their racialised and gendered lenses. Images and photos of thin, young, middleclass, white and blond, apparently heterosexual, female bodies are represented extensively in public spaces, even though only a small minority of the population can reasonably live up to these standards.

The positions – Swedishness/Whiteness (a Swedish/white norm), femininity (a masculine norm) and heteronormativity (a heterosexual norm) – coincide and interplay to constitute what Key Anderson (1996) defines as “...the *multiplicity and mobility* of subject positionings” (1996, p. 197, emphasis in original). The hegemonic constructions of femininity marginalize and classify large proportions of women – ‘ugly’, large, old, working-class, brown skinned, brown haired and/or homosexual – as inadequate and non-feminine. Thus, hegemonic body norms demarcate and exclude several peripheral ‘others’ through the powerful definition of the norm.

Beauty pageants are highly visible spectacular events. According to Banet-Weiser, beauty pageant “is also a highly visible performance of gender, where the disciplinary practices that construct women as feminine are palpable, on display, and positioned is unproblematic desirable.” (Banet-Weiser, 1999, p. 3.) Yet as Judith Butler (1993) has pointed out, the separation of everyday performances of gender from more spectacular performances within art or show business, more ordinarily understood as performances per se, is fictive. The construction of gendered identities in everyday life is no more ‘real’ or less performed than in beauty pageants or drag shows. According to Butler (1993), female and male bodies do not exist by nature, but are performed. Thus, we become female and male by repeatedly dressing, talking, moving and acting as women and men are expected to by dominant heterosexual standards. Similarly, racial and national identities are equally performed in everyday situations through taken-for-granted and “daily affirmation of nation identification” (Sharp: 1996, p. 98) or, as Essed (1991) has showed, in everyday forms of racial practise, just as much as in more spectacular arenas (cf. Mattsson & Tesfahuney, 2002).

Mother Svea – Symbols of the Nation

Every nation has a need for national mythologies in order to construct its *imagined community* (Anderson, B. 1993). In national mythologies the idea of the nation and its whereabouts, its history and its future, are reproduced (Sharp, 1996, Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1993). The myths establish an idea of a distinct set of people with a distinct set of characteristics – irrespective of whether the uniting characteristics are language, religion, cultural practises or physical appearances (Penrose, 1993, Jackson & Penrose, 1993). All these ways of defining the national population subsume the idea of the nation as a natural and non-changeable unit.

Sharp explores the ways in which national identification and national symbolism is gendered: “*Women are not equal to the nation but symbolic of it.*” (p. 99). Nations have repeatedly been imagined as women and mothers of the nations, which is reflected in terms like ‘the Motherland’ and ‘the mother tongue’. Sharp also mentions Britannia (Great Britain), Marianne (France) and Mother Russia as clearly feminine symbolic epithets of the nation. Mother Svea [*Moder Svea*], the female image of the Swedish Nation, is yet another example.

In national beauty contests, one female body of flesh and blood is chosen to represent the imaginative national body, seemingly stating; “you are not this body any more, but something else”. There are examples of passages in the analysed material where competitors from other countries than Sweden are referred to as ‘France’ or ‘Japan’ and not by their given names. The women are thus clearly representatives of their respective nations rather than ‘themselves’. The women taking part in the pageants are for example wearing banners, with the name of the state/country they represent. The women are also photographed waving their respective countries’ flags and performing in their national costumes on different occasions. Thus the beauty queens are associated with a whole range of ideas and values to one individual body. In other words, the pageants transform the body of the winner into a powerful sign and symbol of the nation that signifies attractive Swedishness.

The gendered symbolic of nationalism puts women in a specific position such that they symbolise the honour and glory of the nation, which must be protected from external intruders by its male ‘protectors’. According to McClintock women are therefore “*denied any direct relation to national agency*” (1993, p. 62). The dual national and gendered symbolism is also scripted into the title *Miss Sweden*. The title reflects the unmarried status, and supposed virginity and honour, of this gendered symbol. According to the rules, participants, even today, must be unmarried, between 18 and 25 years, and they cannot have children. Thus, *Miss Sweden* carries values such as purity and virginity, which are central to the national symbolic. Such an interpretation can be connected to Johnson’s (1998) ideas of how women are constructed differently from men, in nation building practices. She points out that women have served as biological reproducers of the nation’s members, as well as reproducing the boundaries of the national group. The unmarried status and presumed virginity of *Miss Sweden* (and the candidates to this title) can be seen as stipulations making sure that she is an ‘untouched’ and ‘pure’ possible reproducer of the nation Sweden and its people. She has thus (presumably) not had any ‘interracial’ or ‘inter-ethnic’ relationships, i. e., extra-national relationship (cf. Ferber, 1998a, 1998b, Frankenberg, 1993).

Representing National Space

National mythologies often reproduce the idea of the nation as a distinct territory and a natural region, to which the national ‘folk’ has a natural bond. They are imaginatively ‘rooted’ in the territory and that the people and the national space are seen as a united entity (Penrose, 1993). But as Sharp has stated, the nation has not been created in one original moment and is not reproduced as a cultural essence of its members, but rather through the everyday repetition of national symbols:

“Each drawing of maps of nation-state territory, each playing of the national anthem or laying of wreaths at war memorials, every spectatorship of national sports events and so on represents this daily affirmation of national identification.” (Sharp, 1996, p. 98).

Through the daily affirmation of national identities, these also become naturalised and taken for granted. The Miss Sweden contest in the 1950s served as one such arena where the imagined bond between the Swedish people and the national space is affirmed and naturalised. The way the Miss Sweden contest is organised involves a powerful spatial metaphor, as the crowned Miss Sweden is literally combed for in ‘every corner of the country’, thus imaginatively sweeping the national space and all of its women, in the search for the ideal representative of the nation. The crowning of Miss Sweden is in some years preceded by regional beauty contests in different amusement parks [*folkparker*] around the country and in several cases local newspapers co-operated with *Veckorevyn* on these occasions. In 1950 and 1951 a photographer and two assistants, in *Veckorevyn* called the ‘patrol’, visited up to 26 cities in different parts of the country “in the search for Miss Sweden”.

Advertisements for the Miss Sweden contests in *Veckorevyn* often request readers to send in photos of a ‘pretty girl’ they know, which re-enforces the idea of Miss Sweden as possibly any girl you know. The cover of *Veckorevyn* (No 6) from 1958 announcing the contest of the year, for example, reads: “WANTED: MISS SWEDEN 1958, MAYBE YOU KNOW HER?”. At once familiar and unique, Miss Sweden is repeatedly characterised as ‘the girl of the people’ or ‘the girl next door’:

“The 10th competition of the title Miss Sweden has now started. All of you who have a pretty friend or sister or daughter – send in her photo to us! Maybe she will have

the chance to be this year's Swedish representative in Long Beach." (*Veckorevyn*, 1958, No 7, p. 6)

The implication of this seems to be to stress Miss Sweden as an 'ordinary Swedish girl' [*en "vanlig svensk flicka"*], which establishes an imaginative relation between her and the nation's members. While important and valid constructions of identities in the national setting of the contest Miss Sweden, the regional identities are not relevant positionings in the international beauty contests like Miss Universe, Miss Europe and Miss World whereas national characteristics are emphasized. At the same time, it implies that Swedishness is such that it is present in all of the national space, and moreover that the next Miss Universe maybe just around the corner!

The Racialised "National Soul"

'The national soul' is often thought of as a deeply rooted national consciousness or trait, shared by many or all of the nation's members. According to Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1993:41), the idea of Englishness in a cultural sense is closely linked to a nationalistic idea of "a deep England" and a genuinely English look, a space of identity to which neither foreigners nor immigrants (will) have access.

The Miss Sweden contest is also an instance of the interconnection between national and racial characteristics. In a national competition of 'racial types' that took place in 1922 under the auspices of the newspaper *Stockholms Dagblad*, this norm of the 'natural soul of the people' (*den naturliga folksjälen*) was evident. The competition was a direct response to an article written by the head of the Institute of Racial Biology, professor Herman Lundborg. In the article "The Survival of the Swedish Racial Type" ["Den svenska rastypen och dess bevarande"], Lundborg called for a strong reawakened racial consciousness, and the competition in "The Swedish Ideal Type" was launched with this explicit aim.

In the 1950's as well as in today's Miss Sweden pageant, whiteness and racialised standards of beauty set the limits of national belonging. Thus, notions of what constitutes typically "Swedish" features – tall, white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes – is expressed. In the 1950's girls with these features are referred to as genuinely Swedish girls and are said to possess a "real Swedish look" ["ett äktsvenskt utseende"]. Blonde and blue eyed girls are signified as "real Swedish Blondes" ["äktsvensk blondin"] and "a Swedish blond and blue eyed type"

[“svensk blond- och blåögatyp”]. Thus, blond hair and blue eyes were considered as Swedish characteristics and national attributes of beauty.

But the historical context is of importance. While the idea of including “non-Swedish” competitors was not even a question on the agenda in 1950s’, recent Miss Sweden pageants include one or a few girls with “non-Swedish origin”. It is however important to state that this does not imply that the competition is free from racialisation, rather that processes of racialisation are played out in a different, sometimes more explicit, way today. Indeed, whiteness plays a crucial role in the a more general shared image of national belonging even today (Sawyer, 2000, Mattsson, 2003, Frankenberg, 1993).

The idea of a ‘national soul’ also implies a set of characteristic national traits. In the very first Miss Sweden contest in 1949, the *Veckorevyn* stated that they were looking for “the sporty, healthy ideal Swedish girl” (“den friska, sportiga svenska ideal flickan”, *Veckorevyn*, 1949, No 28, p.9.). It then became a concrete national role model for the women of the nation to imitate and strive for. Which qualities were looked for in the first Miss Sweden are clearly stated in the texts in *Veckorevyn*, illustrated by photos of young girls performing different kinds of sports in a natural setting:

“But we want our Miss Sweden to be a beauty queen of a whole new kind – not any artificial, banal glamour-girl, but simply the healthy, sporty, Swedish ideal girl. And we are sure that such a girl has the right prerequisites in the European beauty competition. She appears in thousands in our, when it comes to female beauty, well-endowed country. The well-trained, smiling girl who in perfect balance manages the steep mountains in downhill skiing. The suntanned sailing girl who is both a belle of the boat and a first class hand. The long legged, resilient girl who we meet on walks in the woods or on biking holidays. Our perfect gymnasts, our triumphant athletic girls. Among them, the *real* Miss Sweden is to be found, who can honourably represent Sweden.” (*Veckorevyn*, 1949, No. 28, p. 9, emphasis in the original, our translation).

Hence, the Miss Sweden contest clearly involves the signification of other values than beauty and body standards, even though these are prevalent. Crowning Miss Sweden also involves notions of the Swedish people as a sporty, healthy and nature-loving people, characteristics that were prevalent in the racialised national ideology at that time.

Performing Swedish Femininity

However, the natural body of Miss Sweden rarely seems to be good enough to serve as such a national role model. The competition involves a major material transformation of the body of Miss Sweden, through a set of bodily practises, before she can perform attractive Swedish femininity. In each of the years during the 1950s there is a recurrent story in *Veckorevyn* where the winner Miss Sweden is, under the surveillance of *Veckorevyn*, preparing for her American voyage, to New York and the Miss Universe pageant in Long Beach. The preparations are primarily described in terms of tailoring the candidate, outfitting her with a new wardrobe and sometimes her training making her hair, teaching her how to put on a make-up, walk properly and so on. In the different phases of the beauty pageant, Miss Sweden undergoes a series of *transformations* to be a more “feminine woman”.

The various bodily investments serve to turn a cute, but rather ordinary, girl into a ‘modern’ and feminine woman representing Sweden in the international arena. At the beginning of each year’s competition, she is just any woman of the people and in the next phase she is one of nine (or so) chosen finalists. And eventually she has been transformed into the feminine woman – ‘the princess’ – who represents Sweden in the international pageant Miss Universe. In 1949 Miss Sweden, Kerstin Ringberg, represented Sweden in the final of Miss Europe, in Palermo, Italy. She is presented in a white evening gown made, of ‘thick French brocade’, which floats out around the sitting Kerstin, on the cover of number 37 of *Veckorevyn* 1949. A sporty and fit girl is transformed into a princess:

“I have to pinch my arm in order to notice that I don’t dream, said Kerstin, when she was standing in the dressing room in front of the mirror and saw something between a queen and a fairy princess in the mirror. Is this really me!” (*Veckorevyn*, 1949, No. 37, p. 45, our translation)

In 1953 Ulla Sandklef from Gothenburg is chosen to represent Sweden in the Miss Universe-final in Long Beach, USA. She is presented as the winner of the Miss Sweden pageant in *Veckorevyn* (1953, No. 26) in a set of photographs, with a natural environment: She sitting on a stone by the sea shore, dipping her toes in the water, with the wind gently foundling her hair. She is photographed as ‘a flower among flowers’ and she is said to resemble one of John

Bauer's¹ fairy princesses sitting by a pond looking at her mirror-image in the water. On the pictures Ulla is dressed in a swimsuit and a dotted cotton dress.

In the following issue of *Veckorevyn* (1953, No. 27) Miss Sweden Ulla Sandklef appears on the cover dressed in a white cocktail dress. She looks gently, but straight, into the camera and her hair is firmly done. Inside the issue of *Veckorevyn* the headline reads: "*Is it a princess, mum?*" which is said to have been the remark by a five year old boy when he saw Ulla dressed in her "dreamlike evening gown made of white organza". In the magazines' captions, Miss Sweden's "metamorphosis" is also underlined: "*Ulla became a slender and delicate ballerina in this short evening gown.*" Hence, the ontological play between meaning and matter in the Miss Sweden pageant transforms an ordinary, natural and nature-loving girl into a well-prepared, attractive and feminine girl, embarking on the journey to USA.

The dominant visual regime of white heterosexual masculinism is, according to Rose (1993, p. 88), a feminisation of what is looked at; 'women appear', while 'men act'. Women become objects to be looked upon – actively, pleasurably, sexually and possessively from a masculine position. The concept of the male gaze (seemingly coined by Berger, 1974), primarily concerns the taken-for-granted look on nude women in Western art, but finds even more wider resonance as the dominant societal norm that defines what is desirable from a masculinistic perspective.

In *Veckorevyn* the male gaze suffuses the illustrations of Miss Sweden and other beauty misses. The stories concerning the Miss Sweden pageant in *Veckorevyn* are illustrated by photographs of the Misses in different settings, poses and with different clothing. In many cases the photographic material covers much more space than the text. The implication being that *the gaze*, looking at this visual material, are important features in the construction of notions of the feminine, beauty, race and nation. In some of the photographic material men are looking at the woman (eg. Miss Sweden), which can be interpreted as a sign of her attractiveness and desirability. It is no coincidence that descriptions of male voyeurism, i. e. men staring and peeping at Miss Sweden are common:

"Once the aeroplane of beauty with all the Miss Europe-candidates had landed, the eyes of the men folk of Stockholm were rekindled." (*Veckorevyn*, 1956, No.21, p.18, our translation)

¹ A well-known Swedish painter, who painted trolls and fairy princesses in mythical nature settings.

“Boys turn around and make a appreciative whistle for the blonde Carola with the long and shapely legs.” (*Veckorevyn*, 1959, No. 20, p. 40, our translation)

The pageant Miss Sweden can also, in this perspective, be interpreted as an actual stage where women are symbolically represented as Miss *Sweden*. After the crowning of Miss Sweden, which is administrated by *Veckorevyn*, the winner, the first and second runners-up, and sometimes all of the ten (former) candidates are exhibited on stages and on television (in the show ‘Hylands hörna’ from 1957 and onwards), in amusement parks. Women thus appear on stage, devoid of agency, in order to be gazed at. Such performances were very popular events and, for example, in one case 1954, 50 000 persons are said to have visited Kungsträdgården in Stockholm to see Miss Sweden (*Veckorevyn*, 1954, No. 27, p.17).

The construction of the male gaze in the context of the beauty contest Miss Sweden is also expressed more implicitly, than in the examples stated above, in the material analysed. We would like to argue that the male gaze is closely linked to the creation of stories about the nation Sweden and ‘Swedes’ (cf. Banet-Weiser, 1999), since the overall setting and performance of the pageant is created in line with a masculinist visual regime. What is gazed at is thus a passive feminised symbol of the nation, and the beauty pageant can be seen as one of the high moments for the enactment of national masculinity.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to analyse how the national beauty pageant Miss Sweden can be understood in relation to constructions of gender, race and nation. We have shown that the Miss Sweden contest is a discourse about the fears and hopes of the nation, where norms for what constitutes attractive characteristics of the “Swedish people” are (re)affirmed, national myths are (re)enacted and questions of national belonging are worked out. We have suggested that beauty pageants in general, and Miss Sweden in particular, involves an ontological transformation whereby ‘any girl’ or ‘the girl next door’ is changed into the epitome of Swedish femininity.

The conclusions made in this paper are, as stated above, to be developed further, for example by expanding the material analysed. There are interesting theoretical questions which will be developed further, for example, analyses of how the heterosexual norm and middle and upper

class values are inter-tangled with constructions of nation, race and gender in the Miss Sweden beauty contest (cf. Butler, 1990, Binnie & Valentine, 1999). Moreover, regional identities and belongings also play a crucial role, as the regional beauty queens are depicted as symbols of the local society and its characteristics. These complex interplays of various identities in the Miss Sweden contest should be treated as contextual in our future research. They are not equally valid and actualised in all social and geographical contexts, but rather highly context dependent.

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