

*Beautiful* (2000) Directed by Sally Field, written by John Bernstein)

*Miss Congeniality* (2000) Directed by Donald Petrie, written by Marc Lawrence, Katie Ford, and Caryn Lucas

Beauty pageants should be thrown into history's dustbin except as objects of satire and pedagogy. And maybe even then. Both of these movies poke fun at common pageant stereotypes (the absence of any grey matter and vacuous platitudes about "world peace"). And we learn what losing contestants whisper to the winners when they are "congratulating" them on stage. Finally, both movies espouse a "lesson", but it is a lesson in personal change, not social exposure.

In *Beautiful*, Mona Hibbard (Mini Driver) chases the dream of winning a beauty pageant single-mindedly from the age of seven, mimicking the winners' styles and calculating the ingredients for success. There is nothing likable about Mona. She tells her young daughter, Vanessa (Hallie Eisenberg), that her bff, Ruby (Joey Lauren Adams), is her mother to pursue her compulsion unhindered. She sabotages her competitors in ways that should have had her banned for life. When Ruby is falsely arrested on a charge of mercy killing (she works as a nurse in a geriatric ward), all Mona can think about is that Ruby won't be there to help her win the ultimate pageant, the Miss America Miss. Ruby's contrived arrest is a device to force Mona, reluctantly, into a parenting role. Given what we know of Mona, the most likely scenario is that Vanessa would be pawned off on a nanny if not sold outright.

The cachet of the pageant is on the double "Miss" – beauty queens are supposed to be virgins. There had only ever been one mother who, conceivably, could have qualified – maybe. But that would miss the point *Beautiful* is trying to make. The more beautiful Mona becomes outwardly in her pursuit of pageant glory, the greater the contrast with her inner ugliness which is most pointed in the absence of even the slightest concern about Vanessa except that she be quiet when Mona is practicing her talent.

The story-line, then, revolves around Mona's transformation. It is routinely scripted. Her deeply repressed motherly instinct emerges as a lost memory. Just maybe, someone is more important than she is. As one of the three pageant finalists, Mona is asked on stage what it is that she most likes about herself. She is stunned temporarily into silence and then admits that she doesn't actually like herself at all. Having reached the point where she has to make a choice between winning (being a role model for girls everywhere – heaven help them) or being a mother (a model for one girl in particular), she admits her maternity and carries her daughter off the stage. Now she deserves to win and, of course, despite all probability, she does.

Mona's life-long ambition finally paid off when she discovered that one, missing ingredient. Ironically, while Mona's decision to pull out at the last minute was a purely personal decision, it was interpreted as an act of feminist rebellion. That was a fine moment that highlighted the difference between the motive behind a personal decision and the wider motives that are imputed by others. So, while Mona gained some insight into her own personal failings, she did not provide any kind of critical vision into the nature of the beauty industry and the objectification of women.

*Miss Congeniality* promotes a different kind of transformation. As with *Beautiful*, *Miss Congeniality* also opens with a vignette of the hero, (Sandra Bullock), as a child. Far from being obsessed with beauty, or pageants, or femininity at all, Bullock doesn't even want to be called a "girl". She is tough, tomboyish, and proto-feminist, and grows up to be a career FBI agent who can count the number of dates she's had on her little fingers. When a serial bomber apparently targets the Miss United States contest, Bullock reluctantly goes undercover as a contestant. What follows is a Pygmalian rip-off, as Michael Caine, playing a deliciously gay make-over artiste, teaches Bullock to walk, talk, and look the part of Miss New Jersey. The more enmeshed Bullock becomes in the pageant, the lower her IQ sinks. Fortunately, the other contestants have been in the game even longer and, being appropriately equipped mentally, don't notice how often she gives herself away. There is plenty of opportunity to satirize the beauty contest scene (it's actually a "scholarship" contest) and there are many funny lines, consistent with the sit-com feel of the movie. Fretting before the bathing suit contest, Bullock mutters that she hasn't been this naked in public since she emerged from a uterus. The bombing plot, though, is excruciatingly absurd. With these klutzes as adversaries, Bullock poses the single greatest threat to everyone's well being.

Like Mona Hibbert's rediscovery of her mothering instinct, Bullock's transformation involves finding her "femininity". The FBI agent running the "op", who likes to date impressionable, air-head bimbos from girls' college, is attracted to Bullock more and more the deeper she gets into her pageant role. Shouldn't this have been a warning? Instead, it is Bullock's reward. If you want to get a man, you have to play the feminine game. Bullock is really the loser here. To add icing to the sentimentality, Bullock is chosen Miss Congeniality, giving her the chance to deliver a sappy speech where she renounces her former feminism and embraces the beauty contest concept, even referring to the contestants as intelligent (despite all the evidence to the contrary). It is hardly an auspicious observation for an FBI investigator.

In the end, then, Mona Hibbard is a better mother while Sandra Bullock is diminished. But the real winner of both movies is the beauty pageant itself which emerges remarkably unscathed.